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Framing the Center: Belize and Panamá Within the Central American Imagined Community

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of Belize and Panamá's exclusion from the Central American "imagined community" – that is, the definition of which countries comprise "Central America." While there are seven countries that geographically exist in the region, not all seven are always classified as belonging to Central America due to factors such as differences in histories, racial distribution, and cultural expressions, among others. The aim of this article is to more fully explore and analyze the many reasons behind these exclusions and to propose a reconsideration of the narrative, thereby creating the possibility of an expanded and more inclusive "Central America."

Introduction: Who is “Central America”?



Figure 1 Map of Central America

Central America is a region with a difficult and tumultuous history, filled with shifting alliances and constant intra-regional warfare. It has long struggled to create a lasting, coherent identity for itself, in the way that many other regions throughout the world, such as Western Europe or the Middle East, have purportedly achieved. Despite sharing many commonalities with each other – including colonial histories and cultural traits – Central America does not seem to have one single definition of *who* it is. Since the colonial era, from the 16th century and on, the region has been unsure of which nations in the isthmus are included in “Central America.” Indeed, there are even debates over whether México ought to be considered a Central American state. At the center of this debate are Belize and Panamá, two Central American republics that have long been outliers in the region’s history. Meanwhile, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua, who will be referred to throughout the paper as “the Core Five,” have a profound history of interconnectedness and cultural overlap that has unified them in ways that Belize and Panamá have never experienced.

This paper explores the historical and contemporary exclusion of Belize and Panamá from the Central American “imagined community” — that is, the definition of “Central America,” accepted by any number of domestic and international parties — with the aim to more fully comprehend the many reasons behind this exclusion and to create a framework for addressing issues raised by the current definition. This paper will not argue in favor of creating a formal, internationally recognized regional organization, such as the European

Union. Rather, it aims to promote a re-visioning of whom the Central American imagined community is with the purposeful inclusion of Belize and Panamá, more in the vein of the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), as an approach for the strengthening of the overall regional identity.

Divergent Histories: Overview of Regional History

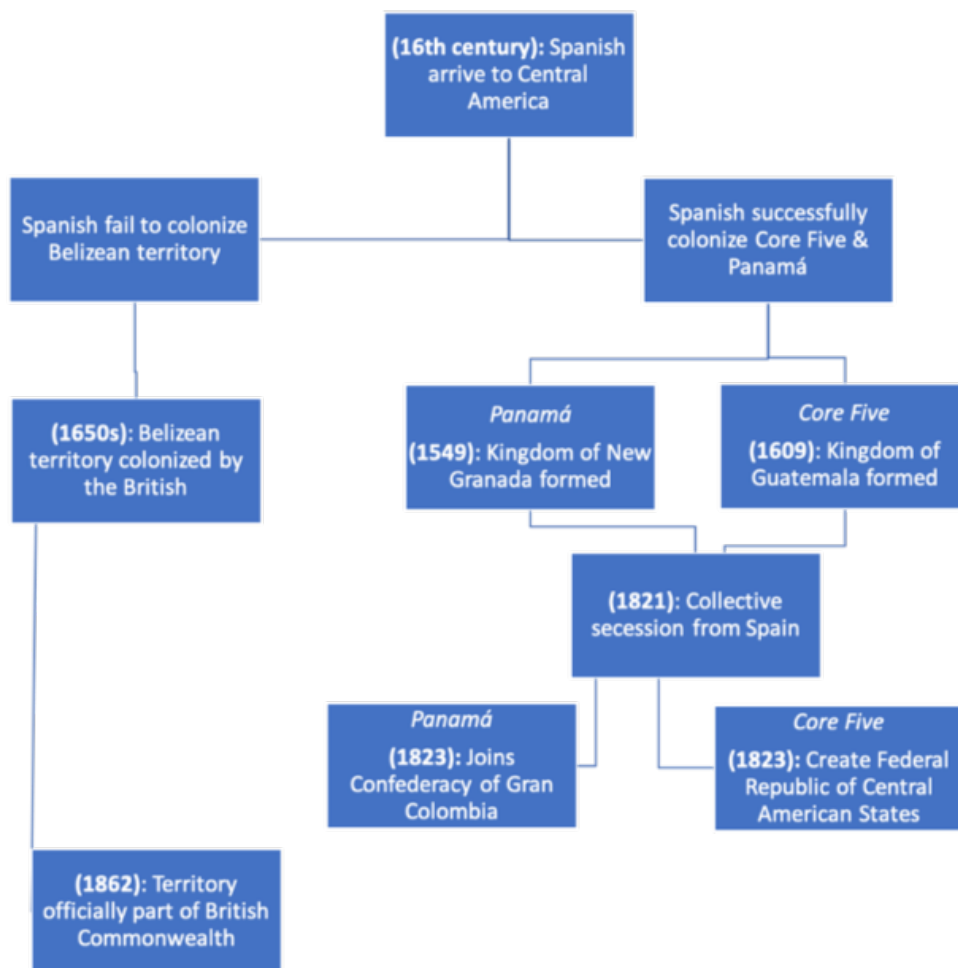


Figure 2 Outline of major colonial events 1500s - 1800s

In *A Brief History of Central America* (1989), Costa Rican scholar Hector Perez-Brignoli covers the main events of the region's formation, beginning with 16th century colonial history and spanning the late 1900s. What is fascinating about Perez-Brignoli's version of Central America's regional history is that he, quite purposefully, does *not* include Belize and Panamá:

In 1985 Belize and Panamá[á] became part of the region under the perspective we [the author and his readers] will adopt. Their membership arises barely a decade ago, however. Up until the Torrijos regime (1968-1981), Panamá[á] as an independent state hardly participated in Central American politics. The same could be said of Belize [...] For these reasons we have left aside any consideration of both countries' internal development. (p. xii)

The author notes that he will mention Belizean and Panamanian influence where relevant to the region's overall story, but that, ultimately, they do not fit into his definition. Perez-Brignoli's selectivity with Belize and Panamá's histories demonstrates plainly how peoples' perspectives affect their chosen definitions of "Central America," and how any combination of histories, political views, and cultural beliefs culminates in the understanding an individual might have of what constitutes Central America.

The contemporary exclusion of Belize and Panamá from the Central American imagined community arguably has deep historical roots that date back to the colonial era, when European conquistadores were carving out swaths of North and South American land and settling there. The Spanish colonized Central American soil, defining what would become the contemporary Core Five and Panamá during the 16th and 17th centuries. The only exception was Belize: an attempt was made by the Spanish to colonize this territory like the rest of the region, and though they experienced some degree of success, the indigenous Maya population resisted control and eventually drove the Spanish out in the mid-1500s. It was not until the 1650s that Belize saw another attempt at colonization, this time by the British, who settled the territory and officially claimed it as a colony of the Empire in 1862, dubbing it British Honduras. Panamá shares similar colonial roots with the Core Five, having been settled by Spanish explorers in 1510. However, the Panamanian republic's history diverges from theirs in the 18th century, when the Viceroyalty of New Andaluçia (later New Granada, then Gran Colombia) was established, including Panamá as well as present-day Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. At this time, the Core Five were members of the Kingdom of Guatemala, which was formed in 1609 under the Spanish Empire. The establishment of these colonial boundaries would serve as future lines of separation when considering nation-to-nation sympathies and alliances.

Bearing these differing origins in mind, the defining point for Central America as a completely unified region—or, as a region that could be potentially unified—was the collective secession in 1821. In 1821, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panamá all declared their separation from Spain; but here, again, there is a divergence from the Core Five. In 1823, these five states joined together to create the Federal Republic of Central American States. William F. Slade (1917) delves into the formation of the Federal Republic

of Central American States, providing an analyzed overview of the timeline of events that culminated in the creation of the Federation in 1823. In his analysis of the Federation, Slade (1917) seems to posit the idea that the Central American union (consisting of the Core Five states) was doomed to fail before it was even formed and supports this claim by laying out a story of disunity that characterized the region. According to him, the main issue lay in each state's desire to be the one in charge: "No republic seemed altogether willing to enter into a federation unless it could be the dominant force" (p. 104). The Federation of Central American States lasted for sixteen strenuous years before disbanding in 1839. Panamá took a different route by not joining the Federation when it seceded, instead opting to become a part of the confederacy of Gran Colombia (formerly New Andalusia or New Granada) with Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Perú, and Bolivia. The confederacy dissolved in 1830, and Panamá was absorbed into Colombia, where it stayed until 1903. The Federation was the first attempt at regional unification, but not the last by far. What is relevant to note from this first instance of unification is how Belize and Panamá were not a part of the Federation, clearly born from distinctive colonial legacies—but more importantly, how this set a trend for how the region would function as a unit in the future. It is from these historical roots that "Central America" was created, a definition that has persisted into the modern day understanding of the region.

Regionalism & the Imagining of "Central America"

Benedict Anderson defines an imagined community as a "political community, both inherently limited and sovereign," describing it as "imagined" because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). It is a community that ignores physical realities and imagines itself as united, brought together by collective experience, identity, or custom (Fawcett, 2004, p. 432). But the central question to consider when discussing imagined communities is, "Who is doing the imagining?" That is, through whose perception is the community being perpetuated and reinforced? Without agents of imagination, there is no imagined community. If there is any lesson to be learned from the turbulent history of Central America, it is that a shared or similar history does not an imagined community make. So, who, then, is doing the imagining that creates the popular idea of contemporary "Central America," particularly the version that excludes Belize and Panamá? The foremost answer to this is Central Americans themselves. An example of this domestic imagining is found in the case of Belize's venture for independence, where the country appealed to the UN for its independence from Great Britain. Of the six other Central American states, only one supported Belize's independence: Panamá. Among the other states, there is a definite manifestation of the popular imagined community, and it pointedly did

not include Belize. Eventually, the rest of the region did back Belize's appeal, and this later acceptance into the fold through certain efforts demonstrates that there is flexibility in how the Central American community can be defined (see "Historical Tension" section). An imagined community is an entity that is created from a "deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson, 1983, p. 15-16), meaning a relationship where all members are recognized and appreciated equally, a comradeship that was displayed through Panamá's public support of Belize.

While an imagined community relies more upon shared characteristics and less on physical realities, geography can still play a vital role in solidifying a sense of community. Peoples inhabiting a shared area or region together are more likely to form similar characteristics to base a community around. "Regionalism" is the idea that distinct sovereign states in a region can form a united identity and is a key point when illustrating the current "Central America" and how it may be improved in the sense of seeking a more coherent, complete, and supportive interstate community. Regionalism can be understood in many ways, the most popular including geographical realities (states physically sharing a border), zones where people share similar behavioral patterns, and in the context of an imagined community, "states or peoples held together by a common experience and identity, custom and practice" (Fawcett, 2004, p. 432).

Somewhat in contrast to Fawcett's definition, which still centers culture and customs, Fredrik Söderbaum (2013) claims that contemporary regionalism has emerged in response to globalization, posing the question, 'For whom and for what purpose are regional activities carried out?' (p. 17), as the answers to those questions form the basis for regional unity. Söderbaum's research focuses on Southern Africa, a regional body that has been constructed around "corporations and capital interests in the formal economy" (p. 13); Southern Africa's regional identity is contingent on economic unity as well as geographical circumstance. Central America is also often seen primarily through a geopolitical lens because of its strategic location and its usefulness for outsourcing cheap manufacturing and labor (Chaverri, 1985). This is particularly true of the United States, whose influence has been pivotal in shaping the region into how it is perceived today. It can be argued that, just as leftovers from the colonial era have crafted the Central American identity, US American involvement has considerably defined who Central America is, both domestically and internationally. This can even be seen dating back to the 1800s attempt at unification: "The formation of a powerful independent Central American Federation was not palatable to the Cabinet at Washington, for the principal reason, that the monopoly of the Isthmus would no longer be in the hands of the Americans, but be open to the world" (Slade, p. 130). The Federation did not fit the United States' agenda, and it, therefore, found it necessary to redefine the Central American community so that it fell within the parameters of a geopolitically advantageous region. This is exactly similar to how the US intervened in 1903 to ensure Panamá's independence so that they might stake a claim to the

Canal. This shows a tenacious history of the US asserting its influence over Central America to craft the imagined community into a profitable body by ensuring the Central American republics were, and are, so reliant on US econopolitics that they have no choice but to conform to that perception. Though regionalism is generally thought of in terms of economic and political factors that tie independent states together, framing regionalism through an imagined community lens is no less legitimate and can be just as powerful an adhesive as economic interdependence, if not more so.

One of the main issues that arises when establishing an imagined community, or even a region, is legitimization, as this is typically achieved through international recognition. Although those involved in the community themselves will always have the most important perspective on who is included in that formation, much of the imagining is done through foreign agents. More often than not, this influence has a negative impact on how a community is created, especially in Central America, who has been the victim of Global Northern influence through the entirety of its recorded history. The Northern Triangle, for example, consists of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, and has been politically imagined due to their shared experience with civil war, violence, and drug trafficking—certainly, this is not a community that has chosen itself; rather, it has been defined by the international community. Why, then, can't the international community be persuaded to reimagine the current conception of Central America to include Belize and Panamá?

Motivators for Exclusion

Central America has a long legacy of attempted unification as a region, through several bids at merging a myriad of different country combinations under a varied list of leaders. There were eight efforts between 1842 and 1862 alone, often with a new mix of the Core Five nations (Slade, 1917, p. 102). However, as Perez-Brignoli phrases it, all attempts at a unified region ended in essentially the same manner: “wars, destruction, and death” (p. 92). Understanding that the Core Five have struggled to find common ground, regardless of all their shared history, is crucial to framing the question of Belize and Panamá.

I. Colonial Legacy

It is particularly easy to separate Belize from Central America based on the effects of its divergent colonial history. Having been colonized by the British, Belize is the only republic whose official language is English rather than Spanish. For many, that linguistic characteristic alone is enough to draw a distinct line around the imagined community, with Belizeans on the outside. This trait may also be applied to Panamá, who also maintains a high level of English proficiency due to its close relations with the United States and other English-speaking

countries that have Canal-related business interests. Although Spanish remains Panamá's official language, such a prevalence of English creates a similar disconnect to that experienced by Belize. In this same vein, Belize and Panamá's relationships with their respective colonizer states (in this context, meaning the United States for Panamá, rather than Spain) remain strong. Although the Core Five may have retained tangential relations with Spain, it in no way compares to the close ties Belize has with Britain and Panamá with the United States.

Panamá's relationship may be almost entirely based on economic relevance but dismissing it as merely that ignores the actual depth of their shared Central American history. When Panamá separated from Colombia in 1903 and declared independence, it was with the support of the United States fleet (Perez-Brignoli, p. 123). Since that event, the US has been directly involved in shaping Panamá into the Canal-focused business haven that, for better or worse, it is today. Despite later pushes to gain autonomy from the US, the US still remains a powerful influence in Panamá, resulting in intriguing Panamanian sympathies toward the US and its citizens, at least compared to the rest of the region (Theodossopoulos, 2010). Belize's relationship with the UK is equally as significant. Belize gained independence from Britain in 1981, nearly 200 years later than the rest of the region. Despite their national independence, they remain part of the English Commonwealth realm, resulting in continued British interest and involvement. This is especially evidenced by British willingness to deploy troops to defend Belizean territory from outside threats, namely from Guatemala, an action that has been taken numerous times throughout Belize's pre- and post-independence history (Bolland, 1988).

II. Historical Tension

The Guatemala-Belize tension is a significant factor for exclusion. Guatemala has an extensive history of claiming Belize as its own territory, dating back 150 years, when Guatemala claimed Belize as its twenty-third department. This claim was purportedly resolved with a treaty in 1859 between Guatemala and Britain, but Guatemala contested the treaty in the latter part of the 1800s, and the dispute has been ongoing since. When Belize first made its push toward independence in 1975, every single Central American nation voted "no" during the UN resolution to grant Belize's nationhood, likely in support of Guatemala's claims to the territory. Notably, the first Central American country to reach out to Belize after the vote was Panamá: in 1976, the two countries' leaders met at a summit meeting, at the end of which Panamá threw its support behind Belize. During the next UN vote in 1980, Belize won the rest of Central America's votes – aside from Guatemala, who continued to refuse to recognize its independence in 1981 (Young and Young, 1988). Although Belize won support from the republics by 1980, their initial reaction to support Guatemala is significant—it demonstrates how, to them, the Central American imagined community did not, and would not, include Belize.

III. Racial Prejudice



Figure 3 Distribution of the Black population in Central America (Source: CIA, 2018)

The distribution of Black people throughout Central America offers another reason behind who can be included in “Central America.” Racism and colorism are extremely pervasive throughout Central America, just like any other part of the world, and particularly those with fierce colonial histories that demanded colonized land be reshaped into sanctums for whiteness. The legacy of fierce racism, in its quest to establish a safe place for white Europeans and their descendants, is not something easily grown out of: “Racial prejudice never ceased to be a fundamental mechanism in the forging of the *Patria Criolla* (Creole Nation) [in Central America]. [...] The exclusion of Indians and [B]lacks was an inviable social norm[.] This exclusion found its echo well into the twentieth century in many segregation practices, both tacit and open, and in outright prohibitions” (Perez-Brignoli, p. 9). In other words, the Creole Nation developed from a social hierarchy based on the European conception of race, which prioritized whiteness.

This hierarchy is still in place and impacts contemporary Central American social structure and regional relationships, presenting a new perspective for understanding the exclusion of Belize and Panamá from the Central American community. Belize and Panamá have the highest Black/Afro-descendant populations in Central America, at 32% and 16%

respectively. The next highest percentage resides in Nicaragua, at 9%. From there, the numbers dwindle significantly until Guatemala's 0.5% and El Salvador's mere 0.1% (See Figure 2). Considering the influence of European notions of racial superiority, the comparatively significant presence of Black populations in Belize and Panamá may correlate to their exclusion from the Central American community. The racial hierarchy that was implemented in each republic can be expanded to fit a regional lens, placing Belize and Panamá at the bottom. The topic of slavery is hardly even spoken of in Salvadoran schools, undoubtedly due to the lack of Black history in their country (Euraque and García, 2013, p. 35). Exposure to Blackness in society is critical to shaping how Black people are perceived and treated.

The Garífuna are an Afro-indigenous group descended from the Carib people of the Caribbean and Africans who escaped slavery. The Garífuna arrived in Belize by way of Honduras from as early as 1802 and have since lived in Belize along the Caribbean coast, making up about 6% of the country's total population. The Garífuna are principally discriminated against for their race and for their culture, even within their home countries, let alone in other republics in the region. This discrimination is created out of colonial legacy, putting light-skinned / white people at the top of the social hierarchy, and dark-skinned / Black people at the bottom (Bonner, 1999). Although both Afro-descendant Creoles and the Afro-indigenous Garífuna are Black, because of Creoles' of European descent, they are higher on the social hierarchy than the Garífuna, who are much closer to their African roots. Returning to the Belize-Guatemala conflict, one can see the role racism plays through an explicit example against the Garífuna. In 1971, a Guatemalan playwright wrote a production called *Goodbye, Belize* that was based on the long-standing border dispute between Guatemala and Belize. The play features actors in Blackface—a racist tradition in theatre originating in the 19th century, where non-Black actors darkly color their skin in order to caricaturize Black people—dressed in traditional Garífuna clothes and dancing to Garífuna music. The most recent performance of this play was in 2018, presented in light of Guatemala's newest bid at claiming Belize's territory. This pointed ridicule of an Afro-indigenous group that only makes up a small portion of Belize's Black population makes it obvious that Guatemala perceives Belize as a Black country and considers that a shameful trait.

Slade asserts that perhaps the "seeds of separation" and disunion were sown during the colonial era (p. 79), meaning that it is impossible to disconnect Central America's struggle for unity from its difficult history as colonized land, almost putting the blame entirely on the Europeans. Though this argument does have some credence, stressing that these attitudes grew from the circumstances the countries were placed in through colonization, it would be irresponsible to let current discriminatory actions and ideals go unchallenged simply because of their roots.

IV. A Case for Self-Exclusion

Both domestic (Central America) and international agents (the US and UK, among other Global Northern entities) have had a hand in creating any number of imaginations of the Central American community. However, not all of the exclusion can be wholly attributed to the actions (or inactions) of the Core Five nor the Global North: there is also something to be said about self-exclusion on the part of Belize and Panamá from the Central American imagined community.

Panamá's self-exclusion is heavily related to the aforementioned consequence of US intervention. With an annual GDP per capita of \$15,575, Panamá is the wealthiest republic in the isthmus (International Monetary Fund, 2018a) – it is followed by Costa Rica at \$12,094 per capita (2018b), then the gap widens significantly, with the third highest GDP being Belize's \$4,862 (2018c). Panamá has, perhaps, the most positive international perception, or at least the most neutral, when compared to its regional counterparts. Rather than violence being its identifier, Panamá is more quickly associated with economic prosperity. It may be asserted that, from this economic strength, a sort of egoism has developed within the country, a self-importance that causes Panamá to disparage the rest of the region. Such close connection with major Global Northern powers like the United States and England could possibly lead to a dismissal of any need for those in Central America, who do not possess much econopolitical pull within the international context.

Belize's possible self-exclusion has a much different origin from that of Panamá: Belize's is a prejudice that has been referred to as "Hispanophobia," discrimination against Spanish-speakers. This is most likely born out of the history of the border dispute with Guatemala. Spanish-speaking Central Americans often receive pitiable treatment in Belize, forced into poor-paying jobs, very obviously marginalized within Belizean society: "Many Belizeans, particularly the Creoles of Belize City, refer to these people as "aliens" or "Spanish" and view them as something of a scapegoat for the nation's problems" (Bolland, 1988, p. 208). There is a fear of "Spanish takeover" in the country (Bolland, 1988, p. 215), which, again, has likely grown due to the Guatemalan claims. It is, therefore, in a sense, understandable that Belize may have some reservations of being involved in a community that has very openly displayed its willingness to exclude it.

While these examples of self-exclusion are, arguably, manifested from the circumstances that the Core Five or the Global North placed them in, it remains sensible to highlight them. By doing so, more avenues may be identified that Belize and Panamá could take in order to be included within the community. There are many definitions of Central Americas within Central America, each formed from their own characteristic and situational histories, and each perpetuated through a different imagining. Some of these have more strength than others in projecting what ought to be the accepted version of Central America, many of them conflicting,

especially when bearing in mind Panamá and Belize's own self-exclusion from the imagined community. Still, it is important to note that these imaginings are created from very specific circumstances and have remained the norm because they have gone unchallenged. Were there to be a push toward proper inclusion, in a way that is attractive for Belizeans and Panamanians as well as those in the Core Five, it may lead to the beginning of a reimagining. What is essential is that there be that push toward reimagining, rather than continuing to accept the established norm. Chaverri (1985) frames the situation by presenting us with an option: *"Habría que preguntarse si el legado del pasado es todavía tan grande como para excluir Panamá y Belice de Centroamérica, o si el peso de un accidente natural es razón suficiente para incluirlos [We should ask ourselves if the legacy of the past is still so important as to exclude Panamá and Belize from Central America, or if the weight of a natural accident is enough reason to include them]"* (Chaverri, p. 60).

Struggle for a Unified Region: Possible Futures for "Central America"

It is imperative to remember that, while there have been and continue to be efforts toward the creation of a "unified" Central America, more often than not, these attempts do not include Belize nor Panamá. This is why the need to reimagine "Central America" remains so crucial. Should the rest of the region successfully unite and continue on a path toward peace and development, where does that leave the excluded? While it could be argued that they have aid from their respective paternalistic colonizer states, and therefore have no real need for economic nor political support from their regional neighbors, it must again be reiterated that econopolitical factors are not—or should not—be the sole defining motivators for forming international relationships.

Within regional contexts, building positive relationships with your neighbors is critical and such relationships ought to be pursued for the mere sake of being surrounded by supporters, or even friends. As observed by Benedicte Bull, the contemporary push for regional integration already shifted its focus away from a genuine desire to create a community, and toward being economically useful for external markets – "[A]fter being reduced to a stepping stone in the process of integration into the global economy, the relevance of the integration process became dependent on the need to ensure the member states' commitment to the 'open' economic policies" (Bull, 1999, p. 967). With this being the driving force, the community will be built by evaluating economic usefulness, a characteristic that may be particularly troublesome for Belize, who has never been a notable economic powerhouse. Interestingly, the European Union has supported the region's struggle toward unification,

consistently holding talks with SICA (Central American Integration System) member states to discuss how the EU can support the SICA process and negotiations of Central American exports receiving preferential treatment (Bull, 1999, p. 963). Although it is evident the EU is likely offering its support with the end goal of economic gains for their own regional organization rather than for the best interests of the Central American states themselves, it is still worth noting how a unified Central America could have a significant—perhaps even influential—international impact. Strengthening their economic viability within the global market may have the positive consequence of supporting domestic development, as well as possibly demonstrating the benefits of maintaining good relations across the region, leading to deeper mutual appreciation, understanding, and inclusion.

Perez-Brignoli, too, suggests that a reimagining of the community is a necessary precursor to the region's overall recovery: "To overcome this [current political and economic] crisis implies that development options be reoriented, [such as] a radical redefinition of regional integration including other countries within the Caribbean basin" (p. 154). The Caribbean basin, among many other countries, includes both Belize and Panamá. Recalling Perez-Brignoli's original definition of Central American, which deliberately excluded Belize and Panamá, it is significant to note his observation that the region's continued existence may indeed lie in their future inclusion.

A repeated attempt at creating the Federal Republic of Central American states is not what is needed, as it is evident that an official organized body such as the Federation, which requires a single leader from one of the seven states to precede over the other states, is not a viable model. Indeed, while the European Union and other unions like it could serve as an adequate model to follow for the creation of a modern unified region, it too is likely not sufficient. Rather, Central America needs to recognize and value the individuality of each of its states, holding them all in equal regard without the added stress of meeting political and economic needs: "[P]eace is lasting only if it is based on strategies of social coexistence that are more equitable for everyone" (Perez-Brignoli, 1989, p. 178). So long as there is a possibility for one of the republics to rule over the other six, there will likely continue to be an unbeatable volatility throughout the entire isthmus. Perhaps there is the need for a mutualistic and supportive solidarity in place of a new Federal Republic. There is no simple solution to this deeply rooted issue. It is easy to continue viewing Central America as "*una cadena de repúblicas independientes* [a chain of independent republics]" and nothing more, united only by geographic circumstance (Chaverri, p. 64). Perhaps there is a fundamental incompatibility, the margins of difference between Belize and Panamá and the Core Five far too significant, similar to the gaps between Turkey and the EU. Regardless, there assuredly lies an abundance of possibility within the future of Central America. While it is easy to frame the dozens of failed unification attempts as indicative that achieving a regional community is a "utopian" dream

(Perez-Brignoli, p. 124), it might be better to consider the continued efforts as evidence that there is a real desire to come together.

Conclusion: Re-imagining the Imagined

Beneath the façade of a close-knit community of five countries reveals a history of constant conflict and ever-changing alliances. Although it remains obvious that much of the exclusion is borne from historical roots and contemporary choice based on those roots, perhaps the biggest reason behind the exclusion is simply an inability to unite at all.

The next step in this exploration into the Central American imagined community would be to pose the question to Central Americans themselves, especially Belizeans and Panamanians: Who, to you, is Central America? Do you feel included, and if not, why? Self-identification is even more important to constructing an imagined community than the collective abstractions of others. Perhaps it ought to be considered that most Belizeans and Panamanians are satisfied with the current status quo, having found community in other regions. Community, after all, is built from a sense of belonging together (Chavez, 1994), and if that is not found between the Core Five and their excluded kin, then there is no hope for connection. I, myself, am half-Belizean, and have felt firsthand the dissonance between Belizeans and the rest of the Central American community; it was my personal experience in finding comradeship with Panamanians on the fringes that inspired this investigation into the question of *why*? But I have also experienced the community beginning to reach out to Belizeans, including us in discourse about issues that impact Central Americans and weaving us into the regional narrative, solidifying our sense of belonging and strengthening the overall community. Witnessing these narrative shifts occur on a micro level bolsters my belief that communal unity is achievable on the macro level and has the potential to impact us all positively.

The topic of regionalism is arguably extremely Eurocentric, likely due to the European Union (the EU) being the most well-known and oft-researched example of a functioning multinational, regional body (Söderbaum, 2014, p. 14). The majority of sources I found throughout my research for this paper primarily talked about the European Union with few references to other world regions. Comparatively, finding sources about Central America often proves to be an arduous task, let alone papers covering topics relevant to this research question. The need to investigate and understand Central America and other regions in the world, and to platform researchers *from* those regions, is essential for the continued growth of academia: the academic community, too, can benefit from re-imagining itself.

In February of 1885, Guatemalan Liberal leader Justo Rufino Barrios declared, “Divided and isolated we are nothing, united we can become something and united we shall be.”

Although he spoke this in the context of unifying the region into a single Federal Republic, the sentiment still maintains the passion that lay beneath a desire for a connected Central America. The point is to have that desire expanded to fit Belize and Panamá within what it means to be “Central American.” The European Union, problematic as their history may be, would never have come together to form the relatively reliable regional body it is without first having the notion to imagine themselves as a linked community. Regions are fluid entities that change definitions depending on context and circumstance. The quest for an inclusive Central America has hundreds of years of precedent, and is not one that should be, or will be, so easily thrown away. A framework that cultivates cultural and historical connection, rather than centering on political and economic value, is essential for pursuing this idealized imagined community. Perhaps through this redefined community, Central America could grow from republics united by geographic circumstance and into a holistic region of interdependent, cooperative neighbors.

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Notes

¹ The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a region that constitutes over fifty countries. These countries are united by shared characteristics like language (Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, Turkish), religion (Islam), economy (oil and gas industries), and historical backgrounds. Unlike the EU, it is not an official regional body, but rather a regional community tied together by these common traits.

² When referencing the Maya people, I use “Maya” in place of “Mayan” because, in my experience, both in-country in Belize and in US diaspora spaces, it is how Maya people refer to themselves. “Mayan” is typically only used in reference to the language family.

³ Belize’s territory was also included in the original Kingdom of Guatemala, but given that the Spanish paid little attention to this part of the territory, resulting in the British contesting Spanish rule over the land and claiming it for their own soon after, it has no real pertinence to the argument at hand.

⁴ The “Global North” is an alternative term for “the West” (or “First World” countries), popularized in recent decades by people in the Global South (“Third World” countries) who called for terms that were more equalizing and did not put the Global South at the bottom of the global political and economic hierarchy. The Global North includes colonizing European countries (England, Spain) and the United States, among other G8 countries that are not relevant to the context of this paper.

⁵ The Panamá Canal was built between 1881 – 1914, connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans with a waterway straight across the Panamanian territory. The Canal is the center of Panamá’s economy, providing the country with jobs both directly related to the Canal (such as its maintenance, mitigating its effects on the environment, etc.) and tangentially related (such as hotels for people visiting for Canal-related business).

⁶ The Commonwealth of Nations was officially established in 1926 and consists of 53 states, almost all of them colonized by the British Empire during the height of 19th century colonization.

⁷ A department (*un departamento*) is equivalent to a province or a state.

⁸ I opt to write capital-B “Black” rather than lowercase-b “black” because, to quote author Lori L. Tharps, “Black with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lowercase black is simply a color.” It is a recognition of a collective population whose experiences, as diverse as they are and as distanced from one another as they may be, can be appreciated with as much weight as any nationality.

⁹ Prejudice based on lightness or darkness of skin; colorism has clear roots in racism, but the difference is that people of the same race could potentially receive different treatment due to their skin tone’s shade.

¹⁰ Belize: 25.9% Creole, 6.1% Garifuna; Panamá: 9.2% Black (self-identified), 6.8% mulatto. Both from 2010 census estimates.

¹¹ 2015 Nicaraguan census estimate.

¹² 2001 Guatemalan census estimate; 2007 Salvadoran census estimate

¹³ I separate “light-skinned” from “white people” and “dark-skinned” from “Black people” in order to acknowledge that not all light-skinned people are racially white, nor are all dark-skinned people racially Black. I do this also to maintain space for addressing the impact of colorism: light-skinned Black people and other light-skinned people of color tend to receive better social treatment (more access to social opportunities such as jobs and housing, as well as less public harassment or racial profiling) than their darker-skinned counterparts, even if they are of the same race or ethnicity.

¹⁴ Calculated off the World Bank’s population total of 4,176,873 as of 2018.

¹⁵ 2018 population total: 4,999,441.

¹⁶ 2019 population total: 408,487. Given that Belize’s population is so small compared to Panamá and Costa Rica’s, it may be helpful to see the fourth highest GDP: with a population of 17,263,239, Guatemala’s 2018 GDP was \$4,582 (2018d).

¹⁷ “Hispanophobia” draws on the word “Hispanic,” which simply denotes someone who can speak Spanish and does not refer to a particular race, ethnicity, or nationality. Someone who is Spanish is a person who is from, or whose family is from, Spain—it is a nationality, not or a race or ethnicity. Both Spanish and Hispanic is different from being Latine/Latinx (Latine/

Latinx is the gender-neutral form of Latino/a). Someone who is Latine is from a country in Central or South America (with some debate over whether this includes Belize and other non-Spanish/Portuguese-speaking countries). A person can be Latine without being Hispanic—perhaps they are Salvadoran but do not speak Spanish. Hispanic, Spanish, and Latine/Latinx are terms that are easily confused and understanding their usage is critical.

¹⁸ Presumed to mean a fear of Spanish-speakers, both Belizean and non-Belizean, “stealing jobs” from English-speaking Belizeans.

¹⁹ The specific crisis Perez-Brignoli is referring to here is the Central American Common Market buckling under the pressure of the worldwide recession during the 1980s, and the impact this had on the Core Five’s economic and political stability.

²⁰ Some scholars argue that a reason why Turkey has been barred from the EU after decades of application and active campaign for membership is because of cultural and religious identities that are inherently conflicting with those of the EU members.