

Urban fractures: The Internal "Other" in San José, Costa Rica

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Urban fractures: The Internal “Other” in San José, Costa Rica

Abstract:

In this article I argue that a rise in intra-regional immigration in Costa Rica has contributed to growing social schisms within this small Central American country. This problem is particularly evident in the nation's capital, San José, where the growth of *precarios* or precarious neighborhoods is frequently attributed to the arrival of immigrants. In this study I focus on one such community; La Carpio, which is located just west of the nation's capitol and is predominantly inhabited by Nicaraguans. Based on evidence from fieldwork in La Carpio, I contend that social divisions in San José are constructed and maintained through a process of "othering" in which the urban poor and migrants are cemented into the urban psyche as inferior members of Costa Rican society.

Keywords: Central America, Intra-regional migration, race, ethnicity, urban poor and othering.

7th of March, 2009

La Carpio, Costa Rica

I followed Don Roberto out the kitchen door, which I had to crouch down awkwardly to pass through. Once outside I continued to walk in a stooped position in order to avoid getting caught up in the multiple white and red electricity wires running between the main house and the make-shift bathroom to my right. As Don Roberto opened the principal door—which consists of a large piece of tin nailed to several planks of wood—he must have caught sight of my struggle because suddenly he turned towards me with a smile and said, "The house is very simple but it's ours." The sincerity of Don Roberto's words stuck with me as we began walking through the community, which according to the State of Costa Rica, is illegally occupied by thousands of "squatters," many of whom are suspected to be undocumented immigrants from Nicaragua.

With the door pulled tight behind us, Don Roberto and I began walking slowly toward the sixth bus stop, which was not labeled as such but rather was the most convenient place for the bus driver to park while he waited for enough passengers to appear to justify a trip into nearby San José. As we meandered along the dusty road, Don Roberto took the time to answer my persistent questions and address issues in the community that I had yet to perceive. "Behind us is the city dump and to our right is the new Catholic Church, which is the largest in the community," he explained as we approached the corner, which was lined with four or five neon green buses. "See those buses? They begin running at four in the morning and they go

late into the night. If you get up early enough you will see the long lines of workers waiting to get on the buses. Its not like they say, sure the community has its problems but most of us are hard workers with families. It is our work that keeps San José running." As we ventured further into the heart of La Carpio, Don Roberto's words slowly began to reveal the heterogeneous make-up of a community considered by most Costa Ricans to be a homogenous black hole of social turmoil.

I.) Introduction

The italicized text from above is an extract from my first day of field notes in La Carpio, a marginalized community located on the periphery of San José, Costa Rica. Don Roberto and his family, though veiled by pseudonyms, are part of a larger population of Nicaraguan immigrants who live in Costa Rica. Many of these individuals reside in the shadows of the nation's capital, subsiding as best they can in communities like La Carpio. Costa Ricans colloquially refer to these communities as *precarios* or "precarious communities." Still, as noted above, this depreciatory label masks what are often highly heterogeneous neighborhoods.

The tendency to homogenize resource-poor communities with pejorative labels is not exclusive to Costa Rica. Throughout Latin America, economically deprived communities are frequently condensed to mere labels. In Argentina, for example, the urban poor are reduced to *villas de miseria*, in Chile *callampas*, in Peru *barriadas*, in Brazil *favelas* and in Mexico *ciudades perdidas* or *colonias paracaídas*. In each case, the effect is the same: whole communities are reduced to a generic social tag charged with negative connotations. In this manner, individual and group differences are veiled beneath the homogenizing rhetoric of external social forces. The goal of the present study is to unveil one such community, La

Carpio, as a means of revealing the complex social forces that contribute to the construction of social “others” in contemporary Latin America.

II.) Migration and the Urban Poor in Costa Rica

Over the last thirty years, a great deal of academic work has focused on the situation of the urban poor in Latin America. Early research carried out in rapidly growing urban centers throughout the region revealed the heterogeneous make-up of resource-poor neighborhoods (Stokes, 1962; Turner, 1968; Portes, 1971; Cornelius, 1975), a tendency that has been built upon by contemporary authors (Prévot Schapira, 1996; Auyero, 2001; Caggiano, 2005; Sandoval 2005; Cravino, 2006; 2009). Inherent to this literature is a focus on the urban socialization of internal migrants displaced by major shifts in the political economy of developing nations. For most of the twentieth century, internal migrants made the largest contribution to urban population growth in Latin America. In turn, transnational immigrants were largely associated with migration networks connected to developed countries in Europe and North America. In recent decades, however, intra-regional immigration (IRI) has increased across the Latin America region.

IRI, though always present in region, has increased rapidly over the last several decades due to the emergence of entrenched economic inequalities between Latin American nations. This is particularly evident in Costa Rica, which has experienced relative economic prosperity and social stability in comparison to its northern neighbor, Nicaragua. As a result of these disparities, Costa Rica has witnessed an increase in Nicaraguan immigrants over the last twenty years, which has contributed to the growth of resource-poor communities in the canton of San José (Castro-Verde, 1999; Sandoval, 2002 and Morales, 2006). As a result, an interesting paradox has emerged in which resource-poor neighborhoods like La Carpio are

internally more heterogeneous than ever and yet externally they are perceived as more homogenous due to increasingly strong xenophobic sentiments evident within wider society. In the present essay I dissect this paradox via an ethnographic case study of La Carpio, which is located on the periphery of San José, Costa Rica. Based on evidence from the field, I contend that social divisions in San José are constructed and maintained through a process of "othering" in which the urban poor and migrants are cemented into the urban psyche as an inferior member of Costa Rican society.¹

III.) Methods

This write-up is based on fieldwork I conducted over the course of seven weeks in the Costa Rican community, La Carpio. In addition, my work is informed by interviews I conducted in Costa Rica and Nicaragua during a five-month period in the field beginning in January 2009. My work is also influenced by nearly a dozen shorter trips to these two countries during the period 2009-2013. During the time I spent in La Carpio I had the opportunity to live with a Nicaraguan family that arrived when the community was just beginning to emerge in 1993. It is worth noting that I originally went to La Carpio with the intention of conducting a series of focused questionnaires that I could later use to compare and contrast both quantitatively and qualitatively. However, a comment made by Doña Luz, the owner of the house I lived in, made me reconsider my position quite literally the day my research began. In my first interview in La Carpio Doña Luz stated the following:

Seeing the information and the news that they covered in reports, we decided to take a stand. We decided we were not going to permit this anymore. La Carpio, to a certain point, is like an immense laboratory. They [researchers] come and they take ideas and request interviews. Here they come to look for everything and in the end they use it against us. So

we said no, that's enough. So we decided that we were going to end all the interviews because they were always used against our community (NICATICA; #1, 35:50).

As a consequence of Doña Luz's comments I decided, at the last minute, to put up the questionnaires and conduct my research via participant-observation and semi-directed interviews. My goal shifted towards capturing the lived experiences of immigrants residing in La Carpio. Thus, the work presented here is rooted in the oral history of the individuals I interviewed. The subjects of my study were identified through the social-networks of five unconnected sources living both in La Carpio and San José. In this sense, interviews developed in a chain like manner, in which subjects were identified via recommendations from previous interviewees. In this sense, my work does not capture a generalizable tendency across resource-poor communities but rather evokes the lived experiences of one such community located in the canton of San José.

I carried my recorder to all of my interviews but I only recorded 12 of the more than 40 interviews I conducted. Nearly half of the interviews I recorded were with teachers, social workers, and local experts. The remaining interviews correspond to community members. In addition to scheduled interviews, the work presented below is informed by countless conversations with community members I met during my stay in La Carpio. The majority of my interviews with individuals living in the community were unrecorded due to the fact that community members often expressed a high level of apprehension when asked if I could tape-record our conversation. All interviewees, however, permitted me to take field notes. Deciding whether or not to recorder an interview was a last minute call. There were instances, for example, in which pulling out the recorder might have broken the flow of a good discussion and therefore I just left it in my pocket. Nonetheless, during unrecorded

interviews I took extensive field notes in small pocket notebooks that I carried with me. Prior to recorded interviews or note taking I always made a point of asking the individual for his or her permission to document the information that was being relayed to me. At night I reviewed my notebooks and transferred the information into my master journal. My field notes were composed of deep descriptions and sociological interpretations. Each night I wrote anywhere from five to eight pages in my field journal. I have since transferred my field notes to a Word document. During the process of transferring the information it was not uncommon for me to add to my interpretations, which I separated from descriptions and interview text by inserting them in parenthesis and writing in italics. For this project, I transferred my master field notes and transcribed interviews to the qualitative data analysis program ATLAS.ti 6. Within ATLAS.ti I coded my transcriptions and field notes for reoccurring themes.

Though this study was informed by previous work on urban Latin America, it is largely inductive in method. The inductive method is particularly powerful in this case because it allows for the extraction of the internal worldviews that define social boundaries particular to La Carpio. This approach permits for a more holistic depiction of the formation of inequitable social boundaries in the canton of San José, which I call "othering." This process is very similar to "boundary work," as described by author Michele Lamont in *The Dignity of Working Men*. Like Lamont, I believe that "groups that find themselves in relatively similar structural positions can draw very different [social] lines" and that in this respect, "social exclusion takes different forms" depending on the particular "sets of cultural tools" available to the group (Lamont, 2000: 7). In this study I employ the inductive method as a means of illuminating the status distinctions that underpin the formation process of otherness—or *otredad* as it is referred to among Latin American academics—from the point

of view of Nicaraguan immigrants and the urban poor in the community of La Carpio. The product of this analysis is described in the paragraphs that follow.

IV.) La Carpio

I begin with a short description of the community to help situate the reader. La Carpio is located just south of the capitol in *la Uruca* district, which forms part of the San José valley. The community emerged between 1993 and 1994 when a Costa Rican man by the name of Marco Aurelio Carpio organized the division and sale of a series of lots owned by *la Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social* (CCSS). Prior to being owned by the State, La Carpio pertained to a North American man who maintained a small coffee plantation on the once fertile plateau. When he passed away the property was returned to the State. Government ownership was initially managed by CCSS; however, in 2002 the *Instituto Mixto de Ayuda Social* (IMAS) bought the land for 294,000,000 colones or roughly \$534,545 dollars. Today La Carpio is composed of 57 hectares (just over 140 acres). The area is geographically set apart from surrounding communities by two rivers, *el Virilla* and *el Torres*, which form the troughs of two deep ravines running alongside each side of the community. In turn, the west end of the community is occupied by San José's largest dump, which is administered by the Canadian company Ebi, a subsidiary of the Canadian group Berthierville. It is worth noting that Ebi provides the community with a small percentage of its earnings in the form of a communal tax, which amounts to one of La Carpio's few sources of income available for communal development.² The physical layout of La Carpio is on display in Map 1.

[Map 1 About Here]

I purposefully chose La Carpio for this study for three reasons: (1) the community's formation coincides with the peak of Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica, which allows for a

rich analysis of the interaction between Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans, (2) the community's relatively high concentration of Nicaraguan migrants permits me to focus on one particular group of intra-regional immigrants and finally (3) the inhabitants of La Carpio face a high degree of discrimination outside of their district due to the fact that their community has come to be associated with the arrival of thousands of Nicaraguan migrants to the canton of San José.

Though a handful of communities are associated with Nicaraguan immigrants, La Carpio has come to epitomize what many Costa Ricans allege to be social ills directly tied to immigration from Nicaragua, including: increased violence, promiscuity, the illegal occupation of land, the deterioration of a once renowned Welfare State and a growing population of unemployed. Although the community's population is nearly evenly divided between Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans, it is widely depicted as a "Nicaraguan" community. In fact, the community is colloquially referred to as "Managuita" or "Little Managua." For example, one Costa Rican woman I interviewed in San José quickly refuted the claim that half of the community is composed of Costa Ricans; claiming that, "the other half is made up of children of Nicaraguans and they are just as much "Nica" as their parents, even if they happen to be born in Costa Rica." During my time in San José countless other Costa Ricans used a similar logic, frequently describing "Nicas" as a distinct *raza* or race.

Immutable notions of nationality, as evidenced in the previous quote and encapsulated in the term "Nica," imply hard, nearly genetic divisions between Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans. Strong xenophobic sentiments in Costa Rica are at least partially accounted for by the country's particularly strong nationalist zeal, which is rooted in a historic depiction of the country as the region's lone exception to the social unrest suffered by other Central American nations. Often referred to as the "Switzerland of Central

America,” Costa Rica has long been identified as a country built upon democratic norms and social equity. It is argued that the country’s unique model of colonialism, which was rooted in small farming plots and political inclusiveness, has permitted the country to experience economic prosperity while at the same time promoting social equality and the growth of a middle class (Paige, 1997). This point is summarized well by historian Lowell Gudmundson, who contends that the Costa Rican national ideology is “one of the most attractive and widely disseminated national mythologies in any Latin American nation” (Gudmundson, 1986: 1).

In addition to political and economic factors, the strong sense of nationalism displayed by many Costa Ricans is firmly rooted in the historic notions of racial superiority. Take, for example, the following excerpt published in a 1939 article titled, “White Settlement in Costa Rica” by Leo Waibel:

Yet in this little Central American State of less than 20,000 square miles a preponderantly white population has flourished; in the course of 400 years a little band of Spanish immigrants has increased to a community of more than 400,000 white inhabitants, about 70 percent of the entire population of the State. By far the largest number of these white Costa Ricans live on their own plots of land, which are worked by the members of their families, and grow, in addition to food for their own needs, a few cash crops, chiefly coffee. Each has some cattle and his own team and occasionally a riding horse and lives in a small cottage in the center of his holding. In Costa Rica we have a native-born white population of small farmers.

Social and economic differences are relatively negligible—at least they are smaller than in any other part of Latin America. The non-white inhabitants live predominantly in the lowlands; the whites are concentrated in the central highlands, where they form the core of both culture and population. This physical separation of races leaves the

highland districts virtually free of racial problems. *Racial, economic, and social solidarity has given the country its relatively peaceful political development, its economic progress, and its relatively high level of intellectual life* (Waibel, Leo, 1939: 529).

As this excerpt illustrates, ideas of economic, political and social stability are deeply intertwined with notions of white superiority. Given these historical precedents, it is not difficult to comprehend why Nicaraguan immigrants residing in the canton of San José—the very heart of Costa Rican jingoism—have faced such strong anti-immigrant sentiments.

Increases in Nicaraguan immigration to San José, have led to the uncomfortable juxtaposition of the Costa Rican myth of regional exceptionalism with resource-poor migrant communities, like La Carpio. In this respect, the emergence of the Nicaraguan immigrant as a distinct “other” in the canton of San José is to be partially attributed to the social contrasts cast between Costa Ricans, who self-identity as middle class, democratic, egalitarian and “white” with Nicaraguans, who are depicted by Costa Ricans as non-democratic, violent, poor and dark-skinned (Sandoval, 2002: xvi). Still, while the historic constructs discussed here shed light on the manifestation of immutable notions of nationality, they do little to explain the continuity—and implied maintenance—of such constructs within the canton of San José.

The reproduction of the *Nicaragüense* as a social pariah is an active process most evident at the communal level. This activity is best described as “othering,” which can be defined as the process through which a series of social boundaries are constructed and maintained, and in time cemented into the social psyche as distinct mental schemas.³ “Othering” is particularly apparent in La Carpio, where “otherness” is maintained through the interaction of a host of variables, including: government agencies and agendas, housing structure, nationality, non-traditional resources, and land rights, to name but a few. This

process is best thought of as a dichotomy between negative perceptions of the community, which are highly external to the community, and positive perceptions, which are most notably internal.

The most fitting beginning to this discussion does not concern questions of social disadvantages but rather social opportunities. Though life on the periphery of San José is no doubt hard, as Don Roberto reveals in the vignette that opened this essay, La Carpio provides its residents with the opportunity to access a form of ownership. Don Roberto, for example, though not the legal owner of the land his house sits on, self-identifies as the proud "owner" of his house and lot. This apparent contradiction was sustained in a separate interview I conducted with Don Roberto's wife, Doña Alba Luz:

Author: ¿Is this your house?

Doña Alba: *Yes this is our house.* It is very simple but it is our own and that is the important part.

Author: ¿And are there titles to all the land in La Carpio now?

Doña Alba: No because that is a completely different story. Better put, that is what we are working towards now..."

Author: So at the moment you do not have titles to your land?

Doña Alba: No one does. No one does. The community just like the migrants is in an irregular status. Up until recently, until last year, La Carpio and the community of Pavas [a neighboring community to the south] were priorities in the government agenda and then towards the end of last year something happened that is not clear to anyone yet..."

Don Roberto and his wife's claim to ownership is supported by the community's surprisingly routine real estate market. Within La Carpio land and dwellings are frequently bought, sold and rented. Don Roberto and Doña Alba, for example, purchased their house with a loan from the Lutheran Church, which they are currently in the processes of paying

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off through monthly installments. Their house and land is plotted and as proof of purchase they received a bill of sale, which was processed by a lawyer. This course of action, which is standard within the settlement, reinforces the community's sense of entitlement for the dwellings they live in and the land upon which they sit.

Thus, although extra-legal in nature, La Carpio offers its residents access to quasi-ownership. As revealed, the perception of land rights in the community is deeply embedded within the routine nature of real estate transactions. The perception of ownership, in turn, endorses an active rental market within the community. Up and down La Carpio's narrow streets owners hang out signs advertising rooms and even whole houses that are for rent. Most often, rentals are occupied by *recien llegados* or "the recently arrived," which leads to frequent price gouging. According to several residents I spoke with, it is common for the more established Nicaraguan immigrants in the community to take advantage of the new arrivals. The case of Yader, a young immigrant from Matagalpa, Nicaragua exemplifies what I came to realize is a quite routine process for new immigrants. Yader arrived to San José in early February of 2009. Upon arrival he took a late evening bus to Pavas, a neighboring community, where he hoped to find a place to rent. Unfortunately, three men robbed him and took the little bit of cash he was carrying with him. When I met him, five days later, he was working full-time in a nearby factory for roughly \$25,000 colones or \$43 dollars a week. In turn, he was paying nearly \$90 a month to his Nicaraguan landlord in La Carpio for a one room, wood plank shack attached to the owner's house.

La Carpio's active real estate and rental markets underpin distinct social divisions within the community, including: *owners*, *landlords* and *renters*. These same attributes have been documented by other academics conducting research in resource-poor neighborhoods throughout Latin America (Portes, 1971; Cornelius, 1975; Prévot Schapira, 1996; Auyero,

2001; Caggiano, 2005; Sandoval, 2005 and Cravino, 2006). Still, despite a relatively high level of internal heterogeneity, La Carpio is recognized externally for its homogenous composition. Though other factors such as the media and public opinion influence this perception, it is the government's management of La Carpio that does the most to maintain the community's negative image. For example, while ownership is internally recognized as a attribute, it is externally discarded by the Costa Rican government. Similarly, immigration restrictions—namely fees and bureaucratic hurdles—make it difficult for many Nicaraguan immigrants residing in La Carpio to obtain *papeles* or legal documents. Don Juan and his wife Doña Gloria explained this complex reality to me in an interview conducted in mid-February of 2009.

I interviewed Don Juan and Doña Gloria in their home in *las Gradass*, which is one of the poorest areas in La Carpio. Their house is located on the hillside between La Carpio and the Virilla river below. From their house one can make out the large row of trees on the other side of the river that were planted to block the view of La Carpio from the luxurious Double Tree Hotel and Vista Verde Town Houses and Golf Course (see Map 2.1). The couple's home is literally within driving distance from the golf courses' lush fairways.⁴ Doña Gloria was born in Rivas, Nicaragua and although she came to Costa Rica over eighteen years ago she has never had the opportunity to go back to her country of origin. Her husband Juan is from Granada, Nicaragua and similarly he has yet to return to his home country despite residing in Costa Rica for nearly twenty years. Both have worked on and off over the years harvesting coffee in the verdant hills surrounding San José. As they explained to me, during harvest season companies send large buses to the community each morning in order to gather cheap labor for *la cosecha* or the harvest. At the moment of our interview neither had a steady source of work. The couple has five children in all, the majority of

whom huddled together on a tattered couch in the corner while I interviewed their parents. Don Juan confessed that neither he nor his wife were in Costa Rica legally despite their long residency in the country. The main reason they had failed to get their *papeles* was the cost associated with obtaining them and the need to travel back to Nicaragua. Don Juan went on to explain that he had never invested much money in his property because he knew that if the government were ever to hand out land titles in La Carpio, he would not be eligible for one due to his residency status and the fact that his land plot is located on a rather steep hillside that is prone to mudslides. Instead, as he explained, he would be forced to find a new place to live, even though he had paid for the land he built his house upon. As a consequence, for the better part of two decades the couple had been living in a state of uncertainty, and at the time of my interview, it did not appear that their situation would change in the near future.

As one of the community leaders for *las Gradass* explained to me in an interview conducted in the days following my interview with Doña Gloria and her husband, “As long as the community is illegal it is as if it did not exist for the government”. In this respect, Nicaraguan immigrants and Costa Ricans living in the community are woven into the ongoing national narrative as illegal residents, illegally occupying State land and thus, illegally claiming membership to Costa Rica's imagined political community. The overarching effects of this situation are blatantly obvious. At the individual level, as in the case of Doña Gloria and Don Juan, immigrants frequently lose hope and slip into a general state of apathy. In turn, at the communal level, the official illegality of the community and many of its inhabitants provides the State with an excuse to deny public assistance to its residents.

The government's refusal to recognize property rights directly affects the community in two ways. First, the community is ineligible for government funding for investment in

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3 social infrastructure. As a result, the community itself is left to assume the responsibility of
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5 developing infrastructure such as schools, healthcare clinics, recreation centers, roads,
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7 sidewalks, and gutters. Second, and closely related to the first factor, the community suffers
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9 from severe underdevelopment in the areas of community space, education, health care and
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11 security. As my research shows, these realities are painfully evident to the community's
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13 residents. Don Luis, another community leader I met during my time in the community,
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15 made this point most clear to me in an interview conducted on the steep cement steps that
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17 descend towards the river on the northern end of the community. What follows is a cleaned
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19 up version of what I was able to jot down from our interview in my field notes:
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26 This is the "other" Costa Rica. The one tourists and middleclass Costa Ricans
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28 never see. Here overpopulation and lack of investment in social
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30 infrastructure are the community's largest issues. In La Carpio people live in
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32 subhuman conditions. People live quite literally on top of each other. There
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34 are no public spaces or recreation centers and for that reason children are left
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36 to play in the filthy streets while their parents are out working or looking for
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38 work. There are some daycare centers but like the schools, they are
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40 inadequate. In this respect, community members are forced to live in primal
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42 conditions and the results are, well, what you see. Imagine if you take 10 pigs
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44 and put them in a large, open space. In this case they would co-habitat
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46 peacefully. If, however, you take the same 10 pigs and stuff them into a six-
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48 by-six room, they begin to eat each other. The situation here is not all that
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50 different.
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52 Don Luis' matter-of-fact language clearly resonates with the social practice of "othering." In
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54 particular, he illustrates quite vividly the factors that underpin La Carpio as "the other Costa
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56 Rica," hidden from the view of foreigners and more privileged Costa Ricans. Most alarming
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is his "primal" depiction of the effects that "othering" has in his community. Don Luis' account helps situate the community's limited opportunities (such as access to ownership and legal residency) within the harsh reality common to all *precarios* in the canton of San José. In this sense, while the findings presented here are particular to La Carpio, they are in many ways representative of the social divisions evident in other resource-poor neighborhoods in Costa Rica and Latin America.

V.) Conclusions

In this essay I have argued that social divisions in San José are constructed and maintained through a process of "othering" in which the urban poor and migrants are cemented into the urban psyche as an inferior members of Costa Rican society. The depth of these mental schemas is evidenced in the previous section through a review of interviews conducted in La Carpio. This ethnographic snapshot of one of San José's most notorious *precarios* demonstrates the role of historic legacies and official government policies in ostracizing inhabitants of La Carpio from the rest of Costa Rican society. Still, as Max Weber's work reminds us, "Status distinctions are guaranteed not merely by conventions and laws, but also by *rituals*" (Gerth and Mills 1970: 188). With this in mind, I find it fitting to conclude this essay with a brief excerpt from my field notes, which I believe clearly captures the pernicious nature of social distinctions in the canton of San José:

Just then I caught sight of a young man standing on the street corner next to the Lutheran Church. He had on a pair of baggy shorts, a jet-black Miami Heat jersey and a large gold chain around his neck and he was rapping out to three young girls who had caught his eye. With his eyes set firmly on

the midsections of the three women, he rapped out "Mami soy Rottweiler y te quiero tocar" or "Mama I'm a Rottweiler and I want to touch you." He repeated his catcall several times but the women simply kept their eyes down and walked silently toward their destination. Likewise, Don Roberto, who was accompanying me this particular evening, proceeded as if he had not heard the young man. In an attempt to recapture my attention, he began telling me about CODECA, which is the organization that oversees the distribution of a small tax that La Carpio receives from the Canadian run garbage dump located just to the south of the community. It was clear to me that he had purposefully redirected my attention towards a positive attribute of the community. A certain part of me felt obligated to ignore what I had just witnessed and thus, like Don Roberto, I simply proceed on as if I had never heard a word.

This excerpt exposes the active practice of "othering" in the most unlikely of places, La Carpio. Inscribed in the young rapper's sexual advance is a reference to the gruesome death of Nicaraguan migrant Natividad Canda Mairena, who was eaten alive in 2005 by two Rottweilers as he tried to break in to the house of a Costa Rican man in San José. Following the attempted robbery, the owner and police stood by for more than an hour as the dogs devoured Natividad. In the days and months that followed the incident, jokes concerning his death began to circulate in the form of e-mails, text messages and conversations. One such e-mail edited a photo of Costa Rican national hero Juan Santamaría and superimposed the image of a Rottweiler flanked by two Costa Rican flags and the caption, "Salute Our National Hero" (Masís and Paniagua, 2008: 348). This depiction is reproduced in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 About Here]

It is hard to imagine a more tangible example of the tension between the Nicaraguan "other" and the mythological construct of Costa Rica as a regional exception. In turn, the fact that this jingoistic narrative was actively reconstructed within La Carpio is evidence of the pervasive nature of "othering" as a social practice. In this respect, the depth of social distinctions within the canton of San José are as much a product of external forces as they are of ways of thinking internalized by the "other" and maintained through social-cultural rituals such as the one described above.

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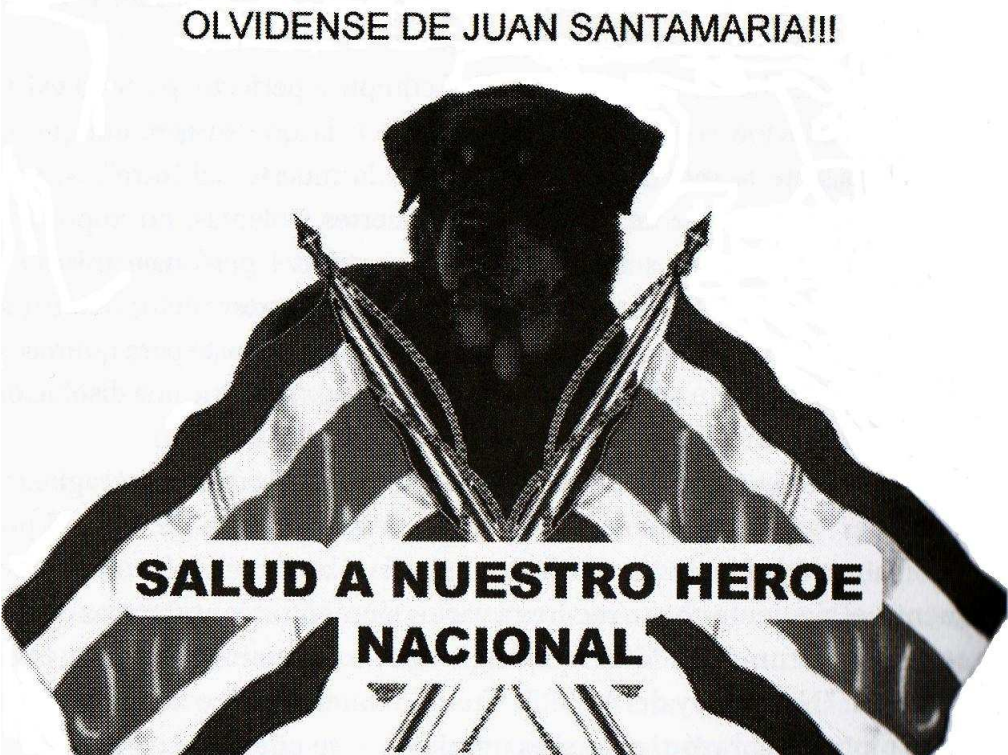
UN; <http://www.un.org/es/>

Map 1 La Carpio



Source: Google Earth, accessed on 11/10/2009

Figure 1 Salute Our National Hero



Source: Masís and Paniagua, 348.

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²In compiling this brief history I relied on personal interviews/talks with Doña Alba Luz, Don Humberto, Don Luis, the CODECA board, Francela, and Dr. Carlos Sandoval. I also took the care to review the dates and facts that I compiled with Carlos Sandoval's 2005 article titled, "La Carpio. La experiencia de segregación urbana y estigmatización social".

³For more on mental schemas as they relate to urban segregation please see: Douglas Massey's 2007 book *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York, NY.

⁴At present, townhouses in *Vista Verde* go for as high as US\$100,000, while a room for two in the Cariari's Double Tree Hotel begin at US\$104.25 and run up to US\$423.00 per night. In contrast, an average month's rent in La Carpio is no more than US\$80.00-90.00 (www.resortvacationstogo.com; accessed on 11/10/09).