

## **Americans create hybrid spaces in Costa Rica: a framework for exploring cultural and linguistic integration**

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This study explores the ways in which English-speaking immigrants negotiate new linguistic and cultural landscapes. I examine immigration and intercultural communication in a more complex and nuanced manner by researching the ways in which expatriates or 'high-end' immigrants relocate and interact with host cultures. I conducted 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork and 40 in-depth interviews in Costa Rica to explore this phenomenon. I employ critical discourse analysis to analyze the data in the theoretical framework of hybridity as the participants create interesting linguistic and cultural spaces in Costa Rica. In these moments of contingency and conflict we are forced to renegotiate the concept of immigration and construction of immigrant. This study illustrates both practical and theoretical intercultural implications as relatively affluent English-speaking migrants have begun to move outside their homelands. This movement of people creates a need for scholars to rethink definitions of immigrants as non-traditional immigrants relocate to new cultural and linguistic terrains.

Este estudio explora los medios en los cuales los inmigrantes anglo-hablantes negocian su nuevo paisaje lingüístico y cultural. Yo examino la inmigración y la comunicación intercultural en una forma más compleja y detallada para investigar las formas en las cuales los expatriados o inmigrantes 'high-end' se trasladan e interactúan con las culturas predominantes. Por once meses conduje investigaciones de etnografía y realicé 40 entrevistas en Costa Rica para explorar este fenómeno. Yo utilizo el análisis crítico del discurso para analizar los datos, bajo de la estructura de la teoría de hibridez en la cual los participantes crean espacios interesantes de cultura y lingüística en Costa Rica. Estos son los momentos de contingencia y conflicto que requieren renegociar el concepto de inmigración y la construcción de inmigrantes. Este estudio muestra ambas implicaciones interculturales en la práctica y la teoría, tal y como los migrantes anglo-hablantes con los recursos financieros han empezando a trasladarse de sus tierras natales. Este movimiento de gente implica una necesidad para que los académicos redefinan el concepto de inmigrantes mientras los inmigrantes que no sean tradicionales se trasladen a nuevas tierras culturales y lingüísticas.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication; immigration; language contact; discourse; ethnography; power relations

The mixtures, clashes, and messy eruptions between immigrants and a host culture form unique fissures in cultural landscapes. These intercultural interactions create bridges across cultural boundaries. The concept of immigration and movement of

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peoples in a globalized society has become more complex and problematic in the twenty-first century as relatively affluent English-speaking migrants have begun to move outside their homelands (Benson, 2010; Gu, 2010; Huber & O'Reilly, 2004; Kim, 2008; O'Reilly, 2002; Truly, 2002). This movement of people creates a need for scholars to rethink the definitions of immigrant as non-traditional immigrants relocate to new cultural and linguistic terrains.

In the USA the term immigrant has gained specific connotations that refer to someone from a poor country looking for better financial and/or political opportunities in the wealthier country. We traditionally view immigrants as people who leave their home country, documented or undocumented, to pursue a better quality of life; in this sense, immigrants are often poor, marginalized wage seekers (Cornelius & Rosenblum, 2005). Discourses surrounding immigration tend to focus on individuals and groups as poor, unemployed, seeking jobs, and the difficulties they often encounter while communicating in their new society. Common sense discourses about immigration usually focus on issues of race and class that relate to the divide between the global North and the global South, with 'immigrant' from the South immigrating to the North (Santa Ana, 1999); thus, 'immigrant' triggers signifiers of 'poverty,' 'unemployment,' and 'undocumented.'

In this research I explore immigration and intercultural communication in a more complex and nuanced manner by researching the ways in which expatriates or 'high-end' immigrants relocate and interact with host cultures. Specifically, I analyze the intercultural interactions of English-speaking Americans as they create hybrid linguistic and cultural spaces in Costa Rica.

Costa Rica is a Central American republic which has become famous in travel shows and has become a recent favorite of American tourists. The country is small in terms of both land mass and population. According to the Costa Rican Embassy in Washington, DC, unpublished census numbers report a population of 4,325,838 (M. Garcia, personal communication, May 11, 2006). No one knows for certain how many expatriates, long-term tourists, retirees, and other high-end immigrants live in the country. In the seminal social and historical book *The Ticos: Culture and Social Change in Costa Rica* (Biesanz, Biesanz, & Biesanz, 1999), the authors state that at least 20,000 North Americans live in Costa Rica. However, according to the preeminent English-language newspaper in Costa Rica, *The Tico Times*, there are approximately 70,000 US citizens and Canadians who reside in the country (Kimitch, 2006). Of course these estimates do not include the large numbers of undocumented short- or long-term tourists and students who reside in the country at any given time.

### Defining terms

In this study I use the term American to refer to people of US origin because this is how they refer to themselves, especially when located in diasporic and tourist groups outside of their own country. It is important to note that 'American' itself is a contested term outside the USA. Costa Ricans believe they have just as much right to use the term as they were born in the American Hemisphere. When speaking Spanish, however, Costa Ricans primarily refer to an American by using the word *Gringo* for a man and *Gringa* for a woman. The term *Gringo* also carries political and ideological connotations in much of the Spanish-speaking world. In Costa Rica this is not the case (Biesanz et al., 1999). I have personally witnessed Americans in Costa Rica refer to themselves as *Gringos*. The correct term in Spanish for Costa Rican is

*Costarricense*; however, Costa Ricans most often call themselves *Ticos*. This name exhibits cultural and linguistic pride for Costa Ricans as common lore explains the term to originate from the way Costa Ricans construct the diminutive form in Spanish.

In the following pages I first explore the background of hybridity and explain how this theoretical lens enables scholars to explore the phenomenon of high-end immigration in Costa Rica. Next, I provide an overview of the method of data collection and describe the site and participants. Finally, I explicate the findings and their importance in regards to both the context of intercultural communication and the theoretical implications they present.

## Background

The phenomenon of a high-end immigrant is relatively new in our time and place in history. Even less understood is the success of these expatriates, sojourners, and high-end immigrants in integration into a host culture. Very often these groups of people come to live and work in a country where the power dynamics of race, language, and culture inherently place them in a position of power and/or prestige. Maletzky (2008) investigated this phenomenon by examining German workers in Mexico and found they often faced difficulties of integrating due to those same power structures. High-end Spanish-speaking immigrants have integrated successfully into mainstream American society, such as the Cuban diaspora which relocated from Havana to Miami in the early 1960s after the Cuban revolution. Longitudinal data exist to indicate that 'white' Cuban immigrants tended to enjoy more financial success in the USA (Woltman & Newbold, 2009). However, these affluent asylum seekers have been viewed as immigrants and not expatriates or sojourners in contemporary US society as opposed to English speakers and to lesser degree German speakers who are viewed more as recreational visitors or long-term tourists.

While retirees have traditionally been understood to seek out new and often warmer climates, current migration research has expanded to explore the mobility of younger, mobile people (Geoffroy, 2007). Many of these immigrants first come to know a new locale as a tourist and decide to live in this new linguistic and/or cultural environment. Images of tropical and 'exotic' locations in the Caribbean islands, Mexico, and the Central American republics beckon exploration and subsequent relocation for many US tourists. Costa Rica is among these symbolic places of tropical escape. These images are so seductive that some visitors elect to stay in the tropics, but this decision is one that will require them to navigate a new system of cultural and linguistic norms.

The English speakers who stay in Costa Rica, creating a burgeoning North American community in this Central American nation, are the subject of this research. The casual observer views a hybrid mixing of cultural symbols throughout the country. In Costa Rica, one can speak *Gringo*, order *gallo pinto* (national dish made of rice and beans) at Burger King and indulge in *pura vida*, a Costa Rican construction of the good life. Americans attempt to successfully navigate the new language and culture while understanding they cannot fully integrate into Costa Rican society. The following statement from an American expatriate verbalizes the limits she and others encounter as they seek acceptance into Costa Rican host culture. Sara describes Costa Rican culture in terms of a closed family circle that excludes her and other American expatriates:

**Sara:** I think it is a very like almost like tribal. It is family first; and outside of your family, maybe extended. I am an outsider. I am nothing. I am never going to be more than a white person to them.

Partly because Costa Ricans do not fully embrace American expatriates (immigrants) as their own and partly because Americans cannot overcome language and cultural barriers, foreigners negotiate a hybrid space in Costa Rica. Sara typifies the attitude of American expatriates who live a full and productive life in Costa Rica. This participant is atypical as she speaks highly functional Spanish, has an advanced university degree, and works full time as a legal employee. She fully embraces a hybrid existence personally negotiated through intercultural experiences. While Sara notes the limitations of her hybrid space, she tells me she does not desire complete integration. Hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) allows scholars to investigate these in-between linguistic and cultural spaces high-end immigrants create as they interact with the host culture. Most expatriates achieve the greatest levels of intercultural satisfaction when they succeed in creating their own spaces. Sara clearly recognizes Costa Ricans will never fully embrace her as an in-group member, but this does not impede her leading a fulfilling life. This participant exemplifies successful integration into a hybrid cultural space that is neither American nor Costa Rican but an in-between space which allows her to navigate the host culture.

### Hybridity

I use hybridity as a theoretical lens to illustrate the ways Americans and *Ticos* negotiate cultural identities. Because hybridity theorizes processes of in-betweenness, of blurred boundaries and cultural bridges, and relieves the pressure to articulate intercultural phenomena in 'either/or terms,' it allows for an appropriate approach to understanding intercultural interactions, negotiation, and integration. In this analysis I attempt to detect and recognize the differences in power between language usage and cultural influences while remaining as objective as possible in describing, interpreting, and analyzing the processes of negotiating a hybrid space.

Hybridity is not a process with an end, but rather the constant renegotiation of the self in relation to the host culture. According to Bhabha (1994, p. 296) 'the margin of hybridity, where cultural differences contingently and conflictually touch, becomes the moment of panic which reveals the borderline experience.' In these moments of contingency and conflict we are forced to renegotiate the way we construct the self, as it intersects with the culture of others we meet.

In recent years hybridity has become a popular theoretical lens to understand communication between and among peoples of different ethnic and/or linguistic backgrounds (Dean & Leibsohn, 2003; Kraidy, 1999, 2005). Werbner (1997) explains how hybridity as a cultural theory was born during the shift from the modernist to the postmodernist perspective. Dean and Leibsohn build on Werbner's definition of hybridity as a cultural theory, particularly as it relates to a framework of understanding Latin American culture.

The descriptive term 'hybrid' therefore performs a double move: it homogenizes things European and sets them in opposition to similarly homogenized non-European conventions. In short, hybridity is not so much the natural by-product of an 'us' meeting a 'them', but rather the recognition – or creation – of an 'us' and a 'them'. (Dean & Leibsohn, 2003, p. 6)

These cultural spaces often go unrecognized and underappreciated as they relate to communication. In the postmodern world, García-Canclini (1995/2005) implores researchers to understand the ways various cultural forces establish hybrid cultural bases. These various cultural influences allow us to understand the diverse forces which create these 'heterogeneous and hybrid cultural bases.' His work is particularly significant in that it combines the contributions of various disciplines to promote dialogue on hybridity.

Kraidy (2005) examines the issue of cultural integration through the lens of hybridity in the process he deems 'a transcultural function.' This entails a brokerage, a cultural give-and-take in a process that creates a new product slightly different from the two fused together previously. Kraidy draws on three theoretical proposals on which to advance the theory: first, hybridity must be understood historically in three contexts: (a) the development of vocabularies of racial and cultural mixture; (b) the historical basis of contemporary identities; and (c) the juncture at which the language of hybridity entered the study of international communication. Second, hybridity must be understood as a rhetorical notion. And, finally hybridity must be operationalized in case studies.

In order to analyze this relationship in my study, I operationalize hybridity in accordance with the boundaries set by Kraidy (2005) to include the linguistic and cultural mixings from two or more parent cultures. The two categories of identity under analysis in this project include the American and *Tico* identities. Every American who participated in this study self-identified as white and was perceived by Costa Ricans to be white. The ascription of whiteness carries ideological as well as racial implications (Martin, Krizek, Nakayama, & Bradford, 1996). It is imperative I acknowledge the importance of a white, American identity utilized in this study.

### Research question

This feeling of being caught between mainstream US and Costa Rican identities is the concept I will explore further in this study. This is also the key area for theory development. The above-mentioned scholars have thoroughly, though not yet exhaustively, explored how host and immigrant populations find themselves identifying with multiple cultures. Thus, I pose the following research question:

*RQ:* How do American immigrants in Costa Rica create hybrid linguistic and cultural spaces?

### Method

I employ qualitative methods to gather, analyze, and interpret data which emerged from interviews, ethnographic observations, and supplementary texts. Interpretive methods provide scholars with a way of exploring the world through complex accounts of a phenomenon. Ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews are methods particularly well suited for exploring a social phenomenon in great detail and depth (Briggs, 1986; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; O'Reilly, 2004; Spradley & McCurdy, 1988) as we strive to understand and record a 'thick description' of our setting. According to Geertz (1973, p. 9):

What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to is obscured because most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea or whatever is *insinuated* as background information before the thing itself is directly examined. (Emphasis added)

It was my goal to obtain a 'thick description' as I conducted observations in Costa Rica for 11 months beginning in September 2006 and ending July 2007. I placed the highest importance on the 'background information' Geertz advocates to be integral. In addition to understanding the intercultural interactions between *Gringos* and *Ticos*, I attempt to place those interactions in context and understand them within the larger ideological forces which structure and often impede the interactions to more accurately frame the findings and problematize the data within a framework of hybridity. Participant observation allows an investigator to engage in complex and extended relationships with subjects in their natural surroundings to pursue unique and important scientific investigations (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Ethnography allows researchers to understand the intersections between culture and communicative acts.

### ***Hybridity and ethnography***

The in-between cultural space(s) these participants create constitute unique positions in the Costa Rican cultural and linguistic milieu. Americans, and to a lesser extent Canadians and Europeans, have chosen to take themselves out of their home culture and navigate a new system of beliefs, cultural norms, and language. In his ethnographic work with Maronite youth in Lebanon, Kraidy (1999) advocates an approach to research he calls 'native ethnography' understood as 'the articulation of local practices with global discourses' (p. 457). This brings up the question of who is qualified to be a 'native' of a hybrid space. Traditionally native ethnographic research disrupts the paradigm of ethnographer/observer by producing a situation in which the ethnographer is a member of the group observed.

Kraidy addresses how this can be conducted in a hybrid environment by drawing on the work of Abu-Lughod who coined the term *halfies* to refer to people of a mixed heritage or background due to migration, overseas education, or parentage. In the context of my research I do consider myself a *halfy*. I have lived in Costa Rica and worked as a journalist in both the USA and Costa Rica. For this particular group I consider myself capable of understanding this unique cultural mix. Much of the time I spent exclusively with Costa Ricans, other times I remained in the linguistic/cultural domain of the English speakers. I mixed easily with both groups; in essence creating my own unique space as a *halfy*. I was neither Costa Rican nor did I fully live as an American. The space I created for myself was a unique space because of my own experiences yet it was a similar space many other people inhabit in Costa Rica.

### ***Participants***

From December 2006 to July 2007, I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with English-speaking foreign residents and Costa Ricans; 20 Costa Rican citizens and 20 North American English-speakers. Of these 20 participants, 18 identified solely as US citizens. One claimed dual US and Canadian citizenship and one solely Canadian

citizenship. All interviewees were over the age of 18. All Costa Ricans gave consent to use their names; all but three of the English speakers consented to their names being used. In order to provide a degree of anonymity I only use participants' first names when reporting their data. For the three who did not provide consent for their names to be used I refer to them as anonymous participants.

I chose English-speaking participants based on the amount of time they spent in Costa Rica. I only interviewed expatriates who had lived at least 1 year in Costa Rica. I stratified my sample by including various age groups (19–65) and seeking participants with varied career and professional interests. Many participants were retirees who were working a second job or opening a business in the country. Many of the younger participants were college students and/or recent college graduates who wanted a life-changing experience. I included Costa Rican participants who had experience interacting with foreigners. I also sought out participants who displayed a genuine interest in this research. My goal was not to make generalizations about this phenomenon but to gain insight into this particular intercultural exchange between English-speaking expatriates and Spanish-speaking Costa Ricans.

### **Site**

The entire country was my communication laboratory. I specifically focused on Costa Rica's Central Valley as this is where large populations of English-speaking residents can be observed and interviewed. I was in the Central Valley from September 2006 to July 2007. Each interaction in the doctor's office, barbershop, and grocery store all contributed to my knowledge of the intercultural exchanges. I was able to enter my 'site' as soon as I opened my apartment door and strolled through the neighborhood.

### **Data analysis**

I have analyzed these ethnographic observations and interview transcripts by conducting a systemic analysis of the major themes which emerged from my corpus of data. According to Fairclough (1992) scholars should examine themes and links for a critical analysis of language and discourse, particularly relating to hegemonic structures (Gramsci, 1971/2005). I carefully and systematically examined the themes which emerged from observations and interviews through critical discourse analysis (CDA). In developing a critical science of language, Blommaert (2005) recommends five principles to follow. They include understanding: what a language means to users, how language operates differently in different environments, why the unit of analysis should not be abstract but the actual forms of language which occurs in society, how language users have various repertoires, and finally the ways communication events are influenced by world systems. These axioms allow researchers to focus simultaneously on linguistic forms and their social environments. In my data analysis I combine the dialogic perspective of language (Bakhtin, 1981) with CDA as Pietikäinen and Dufva (2006) advocate to theorize language in structuralist terms and remain aware of individual perspectives within those structures. I find the cultural rich points (Geertz, 1973) at the intersections of personal perspective and systemic structures to dissect inequalities between speakers. Blommaert (2005) urges researchers to understand and translate those inequalities. I recognize no two people even from the same cultural background will have an

identical version of their experience; however, the following interview data allow me to articulate and theorize the complex negotiations between Americans and Costa Ricans.

### Findings

The expatriate typically has more money than his or her Costa Rican counterpart. This financial disparity establishes an uneven economic relationship between Americans and Costa Ricans. In the following pages I highlight the perceptions from both perspectives to better explicate the ‘messiness’ of this cultural integration and explore the hybrid spaces these interactions produce through linguistic and intercultural interactions.

#### *Culture integration through the American lens*

On the surface most *Gringos* perceive this intercultural relationship between expatriates and Costa Ricans as very pleasant and mutually agreeable. It is for the most part. However, in these exchanges, typically the English speakers expect the Costa Ricans to accommodate them more than those same English speakers are willing to adapt. This is not always the case; however, this unbalanced burden of adaptation does evidence itself in multiple social settings. Darlene and her husband Harold are retired and in their sixties. They have lived in Costa Rica for 3 years. Both made attempts to learn Spanish and believe they speak the language with a poor to fair level of fluency. That, however, is not enough progress to bring them to a level to which they feel integrated into the local culture. For them integration is a daily undertaking.

**Darlene:** We integrate and get along very well. I think their attempt to learn the language which is now required to graduate from high school is certainly more than me taking Spanish lessons. They’re coming this way more towards the Americans or the *Gringos* than the *Gringos* are going towards the Spanish at least that is how I see it.

Both Harold and Darlene acknowledge a perceived and often very real resentment many Costa Ricans feel toward foreigners who do not bother to learn Spanish or fit into the host culture. But they also distinctly see themselves as an ‘other’ in relation to the Costa Ricans, noting ‘they’ vs. ‘we.’ These pronouns explicitly denote the way Harold and Darlene perceive themselves as out-group members compared to the mainstream Costa Rican culture.

**Harold:** I think there’s less resentment than is usually imagined because of us, us *Gringos*.

**Researcher:** Do you think it is fair, or can you even describe it as fair or unfair if they’re coming towards you and you are not going towards them, [pause] linguistically.

**Harold:** Oh, I think it is dependent on us to learn their language. We are in their country.

**Researcher:** But, according to what you just said that is not what’s happening, as you see it.

**Darlene:** For me, I see that they’re coming to learn more about me in their country than I am learning about their culture in their country that is wrong for me to do.

**Researcher:** Do you guys consider yourselves immigrants?

**Darlene:** [long pause] Immigrant. I guess I am an immigrant [pause] in Costa Rica.

**Harold:** Well not until now [laughter] until that question. Now I don’t know what to do.



No, I hadn't thought of myself as an immigrant. I think I always thought of myself as an American living in another country.

Neither Harold nor Darlene can find an adequate way to describe their status. They both view themselves as meeting the criteria of an immigrant. Yet, they do not accept the traditionally negative connotations of the term immigrant – that is dark, poor, illiterate, and unwanted – applied to them. These participants are articulate and open-minded to exploring a new life, but they struggle with their own immigrant identity.

As our interview progresses I notice a shift in the attitudes Harold and Darlene espouse regarding immigration. They and other interviewees begin to reexamine their own positions within Costa Rican society. These expatriates actually begin to cognitively be aware they are immigrants and struggle with what that entails. We then begin to discuss the 'other' immigrants to Costa Rica, particularly the other Spanish-language immigrants and how they are viewed as low-end immigrants.

**Researcher:** What about the Colombians and Nicaraguans who live here. Are they immigrants? Are they expatriates?

**Harold:** I think they are our version of Mexicans.

**Darlene:** I agree. Our version of Mexico.

**Researcher:** So, if they come here to live for a better life and you come here to live for a better life, why are you not all immigrants?

**Harold:** Obviously we should be.

Through this discourse Darlene and Harold establish their viewpoint of low-end immigration through the ideological framework established in the USA equating Nicaraguans as 'our version of Mexicans.' This statement clearly demarcates the Costa Rican vision of Nicaraguans as low-end laborers who flee Nicaragua both legally and illegally to obtain employment in Costa Rica. This conversation succinctly illustrates the differences between high- and low-end immigrants in Costa Rica.

As explained earlier, hybridity refers to those in-between spaces created as groups of different cultural backgrounds interact. High-end and 'traditional' immigrants create their own spaces; Costa Ricans view the white and English-speaking spaces as more important than the other (not Costa Rican) Latino spaces created here.

Another retired couple who have lived in Costa Rica for 12 years spoke with me on the condition of anonymity. Both the husband and wife are retired. He is 70 and she is 59 years of age. She rates her Spanish ability as poor, while he considers his good. To protect their identities I refer to them simply as Anonymous Woman and Man. Much like the couple profiled above, these participants say they enjoy living in Costa Rica and acknowledge both Costa Ricans and Americans benefit from the relationship. They feel the inherent pressures to integrate and like many other Americans who do make an attempt they acknowledge the burden associated with belonging to a group with a reputation of not making an effort. They further address hostilities and prejudice some, but not all, the English-speaking residents feel for Costa Ricans:

**Anonymous Woman:** I can judge by the Americans and Canadians we have run into in this section of the country and the countryside where we lived for the first year. And, I think it was one of the foreigners saying it was one of we don't have the language but

we have the money and the land and the houses and we hire these people. It was almost like a servant/employer relationship. Some of them we recall were quite nasty.

Since the anonymous woman recognized the inequity between expatriates and Costa Ricans, noting the 'servant/employer' relationship I decided to ask about the possibility for Americans to integrate into Costa Rican society. According to these long-term expatriates the motivation to integrate predicated the success many residents achieve to varying degrees.

**Researcher:** How well have you seen them integrate into Costa Rican society and become not necessarily become *Ticos*, because that is not necessarily their aim, but become where they can navigate this society in this bigger *Tico* world?

**Anonymous Man:** Some of them in fact don't do well at all and some of them are fine. It depends on their outlook.

**Anonymous Woman:** I think most maintain separateness, there's sort of a ghetto complication to it all.

**Researcher:** But, a very high-end ghetto complication, right?

**Anonymous Woman:** Umm. Yes, absolutely.

What this expatriate denotes is a privileged construction of the term 'ghetto.' The use of the term ghetto as it relates to high-end immigration resonates with the way Harold and Darlene struggle with identifying as immigrants but as Americans living abroad. This concept of high-end 'ghettoization' forces Americans to reinvent, reshape, and shift language to describe their new hybrid cultural and linguistic spaces. The term accurately denotes the often forced concept of ghetto by a lack of total acceptance on the part of the host culture.

### *Gender and hybrid cultural spaces*

Another fundamental cultural difference to negotiating an acceptable hybrid space of identity between integration and separation is the concept of machismo. Not self-imposed by the *Gringos*, however, it is an extremely difficult hurdle to overcome. Although machismo is prevalent in many Latin American countries, it seems to manifest itself in a particularly difficult form in Costa Rica. It is very common to hear men scream *rica* (good looking), *mi reina* (my queen), *mi amor* (my love), and a number of other seemingly endearing professions of love which often become offensive due to the manner in which they are uttered. The seemingly innocuous words attain demeaning connotations when accompanied by hisses and shouting.

Twenty-nine-year-old Emily works part time as an English teacher in the suburbs outside of San José. At work and in her daily interactions, Emily speaks Spanish at a very proficient level. She is one American woman who could literally speak for hundreds and even thousands of others when she describes the way she feels as the object of unwanted attention. Costa Rican men seek out female expatriates because of their physical appearance and the associated meaning of whiteness. Often these *piropos* (romantic advances) incorporate a word particular to Costa Rican Spanish usage: *macha* (blonde woman).

**Emily:** There are definitely cultural differences with how men on the street act towards females here and how men on the street act with females in the US.

**Researcher:** How do men treat females here, from the female perspective?

**Emily:** I think men here treat females horribly. I mean on the most part if you are not

their mother or their sister you are just a piece of ass walking down the street and they will say vulgar things to you. I mean constantly. Constant machismo and that has been the worst part of Costa Rican culture and my experience here.

It was extremely difficult for Emily to tell me this story. Many female expatriates recounted similar tales. I chose Emily's version of the phenomenon because she simply and eloquently summed up the difficulties of being a white woman in a *machista* society. Her story is a good example of this phenomenon. She told me her story because she explicitly wanted others to understand what she and other women, including Costa Rican women, face on a daily basis each time they leave their homes. While the discomfort felt by Emily and many other *gringas* is very real it is also an example of a cultural fissure to explore. Most of these advances are uttered with good intentions and many Costa Rican women are not bothered by them. However, the *piropo* often becomes a point of intercultural contestation for the American woman who is both unused to them and may receive additional attention because of the way she is marked both physically and linguistically.

Traditionally, the white expatriate is the person who maintains power in intercultural interactions with *Ticos*. It is at the intersection of race and gender we find the power dynamics change. In the case of Emily and other white women they find themselves disempowered. Although these white American women have money and resources, in the situation of walking down the street, their gender puts them at the mercy of Costa Rican men and their advances.

### *Cultural integration through the Costa Rican lens*

While the American perspective of these hybrid spaces is not one-dimensional and can be examined through multiple voices and perspectives, what I term the Costa Rican perspective is also extremely dialogic. However, for the sake of understanding the Spanish-speaking viewpoint I have also grouped these perspectives into various themes and topics which illustrate how many Costa Ricans interpret the exchanges.

Many years of working in a bar frequented by tourists and local *Gringos* alike have provided 32-year-old Ruth with ample evidence to comment on the ways in which she and many other Costa Ricans view Americans. I asked her how she viewed the burgeoning immigration landscape in her country. Her reply was a succinct *pésima*, which can be interpreted as heavy or as in the case she intended, grievous. The question and its subsequent reply take into account the entire foreign-born population she encounters which as I mentioned earlier includes Nicaraguans, Colombians, and Americans. However, she is quick to clarify that the American case is a special one.

**Ruth:** The American is not so bad because very seldom does the *Gringo* come without money.

Even though the American is excused as a special class of foreigner for his/her wealth or perceived wealth, which in itself implies certain cultural baggage of which the foreigner may or may not be aware.

**Ruth:** The Gringo is foolish. That is how I view it.

**Researcher:** Why?

**Ruth:** Because unfortunately, I feel they are not prepared, that the foreigner [American] is not prepared to visit a country which is not his or her own. So, they do not even have an understanding of the currency. Someone orders a beer which costs one thousand *colones* [Costa Rican currency] and pays with ten thousand *colones* and if the person [Costa Rican employee] is not typical they may not even return the money.

Ruth is not unique in her perception of Americans as armed heavily with both large quantities of money and naiveté. This theme emerges throughout various formal interviews and countless informal interactions in which I participated with Costa Ricans of all socioeconomic levels and age groups. In another structured interview I found the topic of conversation strike the same theme. Forty-three-year-old Reina works as a cashier in San José and interacts daily with tourists and non-native Costa Rican residents on a regular basis. Her point of view, while slightly more sympathetic than Ruth's, reflects the same understandings of cultural exchanges through Americans' hard currency.

**Reina:** Generally the *Gringos* are taken advantage of.

**Researcher:** The *Gringos* take advantage of the *Ticos*?

**Reina:** No, the other way around.

**Reina:** They [*Gringos*] are living very isolated, very much alone in the mountains and the beaches.

**Researcher:** Do they speak Spanish well?

**Reina:** No, no it does not interest them.

What does interest many if not most of the Americans who live in Costa Rica is the better life they seek in the tropics. A better way of life for many is a more relaxed pace of everyday living; for others it is a chance to see new places and learn about a new culture and language, and for others it is the economic incentives by uprooting themselves and living in a place which has many of the amenities to which they are accustomed but often at a fraction of the cost they normally pay for housing, food, entertainment, etc. Many expatriates come to Costa Rica because their dollars stretch farther in the local economy than back home. As a result, previously unattainable luxuries such as servants, a beach house, and higher standard of living become a reality for the expatriates. For many high-end immigrants the 'American dream' of material riches is no longer attainable in the USA and for this reason they immigrate.

Thirty-three-year-old Yessenia has worked for several expatriates as a domestic employee at a Gringo-owned apartment complex in a San José suburb. Most, though not all of the residents are English-speaking *Gringos*. Outside of our recorded interviews Yessenia recounts many stories of linguistic confusions; some of them are rather racy. In her daily routine she mainly functions with her limited English-language skills. This is more out of necessity rather than choice, as many if not most residents cannot adequately communicate in Spanish. Oftentimes what emerges is a *Spanglish* mixture. She views the interactions between the cultures as both good and bad. She has made many friends with *Gringos* over the course of her employment history. Yet, as sympathetic and kind as she is toward her new-found friends, the socioeconomic inequities mentioned throughout the various discourses in Costa Rican interviews emerge. Having money, specifically dollars, is a distinct advantage.

**Researcher:** Do the *Gringos* here have advantages that the *Ticos* do not have?

**Yessenia:** Yes.

**Researcher:** What are the advantages they have?

**Yessenia:** One of these is money. They bring dollars and the money multiplies in *colones*.

**Researcher:** If someone has dollars that creates more advantages?

**Yessenia:** Yes.

Yessenia discusses the advantages Americans have in her country due to the financial benefits of having access to dollars. While the Costa Rican *colón* has made small yet significant gains recently in value, the American dollar is still the currency of choice for both buying power and perceived prestige. What Yessenia clearly interprets as a cultural distinction is one which is structural in nature; that of economic systems and the power they carry in perception of wealth.

Consonant with the data provided by Yessenia, Choi and Murphy (2000, pp. 70–71) further clarify the cultural perspective of hybridity by stating: ‘Advocates of multiculturalism want to avoid the usual reification of society that occurs when praxis is subordinated to structural imperatives.’ Hybridity provides a very fluid lens for scholars and participants alike to view cultural exchange. It redistributes the power in cultural negotiation and takes terminology out of a traditional hierarchical structure. This approach eliminates biases of viewing parent concepts as more pure or better than the cultures they produce. This redistribution of power structures and changes in the way hierarchy is examined in cultural negotiation certainly does not eliminate prejudices or preferences for one culture over others in the hybrid milieu; however, this perspective does allow cultural products and influences to be seen as having equal importance despite the heritage of their origins.

## Discussion

Participants from both cultural groups admit it is difficult, if not impossible to fully integrate. Instead, expatriates generally create a separate space which allows them to function to varying degrees of effectiveness in mainstream Costa Rican society.

After living in Costa Rica more than 30 years one participant admits he has never fully adapted to the Costa Rican host culture, nor does he desire to completely become like his neighbors. He does, however, make his life completely in the country and anticipates staying in Costa Rica. He does not strive for a full level of integration as he has functionally integrated, meaning he can live a full life, maintain his business, and has a circle of friends who are also English speakers. For personal reasons he asked that I not use his name. He believes Costa Ricans have set up an invisible barrier to allowing *Gringos* into their private spheres because there has been very little incentive to invest in long-term relationships with the foreigners.

**Anonymous:** I think one reason the *Ticos* feel that way is so many of the Americans who come down here they’re already in their 60s and their 70s so they don’t see them as making a long-term commitment to the country.

For many years, the retirees have made up the majority of long-term foreign English-speaking residents in Costa Rica. The simplest way to live legally in Costa Rica is to immigrate as a retiree (*pensionado*). Expatriates can obtain this type of residency if they can demonstrate a monthly income of \$600 which they must arrange to have deposited in a Costa Rican bank account in *colones* (van Rheenen, 2004). Age of immigrants is certainly a demographic factor to explore in future integration intercultural studies as the participants over the age of 50 appeared to have a lower

linguistic integration than their younger counterparts. Even though the landscape of English speakers in Costa Rica has changed, the perception and historical legacy around the outsider remain. Many Americans now feel they continue to remain the guests outside of the mainstream population.

**Researcher:** Describe the relationship between Costa Ricans and foreigners. How do you see this relationship in general?

[long pause]

**Richard:** Well, I don't have any Costa Rican friends. Umm. It's really difficult. How do I see? I think they don't like foreigners and they take advantage of us as far as the money goes.

This discussion of financial inequities is integral to understanding how hybrid groups form, especially when these groups often collide culturally and linguistically. Essentially Gringos feel their money both makes it unnecessary to integrate and simultaneously prohibits their integration.

### **Implications**

The research question I proposed in this study intended to examine the ways in which Americans created hybrid cultural and linguistic spaces in Costa Rica. This study revealed how neither group considers the relationship to be equal. All participants perceive financial inequities; they all agree Americans have more money or at least are perceived as having more money. Neither Americans nor Costa Ricans thought Americans to be immigrants.

However, when questioned about the constructions of immigrant characteristics both groups eventually admitted Americans met the criteria. Yet it was still difficult for them to envision people who have sufficient financial resources to be immigrants. On this basis, I propose the need to create a new category of immigrant to refer to this type of group which I term high-end immigration. Those are the immigrants who take with them their financial resources and easily cross borders to construct new lives. There is no adequate terminology in the existing body of literature to classify these contemporary immigrants, who most often refer to themselves as expatriates, in Costa Rica who do not share any of the usual characteristics of disenfranchised immigrants. Thus, I have created a term to further both my own scholarship and add precision to the existing body of literature as we enter the most mobile time in our world's history. I term English-speaking, mostly white, wealthy newcomers 'high-end immigrants.' This term is not meant to be offensive or reify social norms or prejudices; I employ the term to clarify the type of immigrant involved in this study based on their phenotypes, native language, and relatively well-off financial status.

Truly (2002) noted North American retirees in Mexico tend to bring aspects of their life and culture with them and replicate those cultural frames in their new environment. A similar cultural replication occurs in varying degrees regarding those Americans who come to live in Costa Rica. The men and women who participated in this study do not feel they need to assimilate or adapt to enjoy their life in Costa Rica. In fact, they have come to the realization that it is a matter of finding personal hybrid spaces which allows them to function in society and negotiate happiness and quality of life in their own terms; complete cultural assimilation is unlikely.

These social inequities and cultural barriers determine the hybrid spaces English-speaking Americans create in Costa Rica. Hybridity allows scholars to explicate and

interrogate the boundaries which emerge as the ‘messiness’ in intercultural interactions. These qualities, which do not fit neatly into set boundary conditions and axioms very often, provide the most important aspects of cultural exchange and negotiation. Pieterse (2001) acknowledges hybrid zones of influence based on language and culture. Thus, I propose English-speaking high-end immigrants illustrate an evolving hybrid space.

Learning to navigate a new linguistic and cultural terrain is never easy. It is in fact a difficult and at times painful process. Americans realize they are physically and linguistically marked as different. These white, English-speaking transnationals act within their cultural framework and often reenact and essentially perform the identity Costa Ricans perceive and generally expect from them. Hall (2007) asserts performance of identity is inherently connected to the understanding of hybrid cultural spaces. As Americans reflect upon their linguistic and cultural performances they experience intercultural frustrations, which often hinder their integration into the host culture. It is through these difficulties we experience growth and change. As high-end immigrants understand and contest the ideological constraints, which impede their cultural mixing, they are able to contest those impediments and integrate more successfully.

Americans who want to integrate to a functional level in the everyday life of a host culture can do so if they make the effort. Costa Ricans greatly appreciate the efforts many of these high-end immigrants make to become a part of the cultural and social fabric of their nation. Participants from both cultures acknowledge that efforts to completely assimilate are not only impractical but also do not create a comfortable environment in these hybrid spaces. What they instead advocate is to recognize and understand the in-betweenness of American and Costa Rican cultural spaces to more effectively navigate the host culture while residing more comfortably in these hybrid spaces created in the cultural mixing.

### Notes on contributor

Anthony Spencer is an assistant professor at West Texas A&M University. He primarily teaches intercultural and international communication and communication theory at the undergraduate level and communication theory and qualitative research methods in the graduate program. He received a bachelor's in broadcast journalism from the University of Texas at Austin in 1995, a master's in media studies from the University of North Texas in 2003, and a Ph.D. in intercultural/international communication from the University of Oklahoma in 2008. Dr Spencer maintains an active research agenda with a focus on culture and communication. His primary area of research explores language, culture, and identity. Dr Spencer primarily conducts research in Central America. However, he has also investigated intercultural communication in the United States, Cuba, France, and Spain.

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