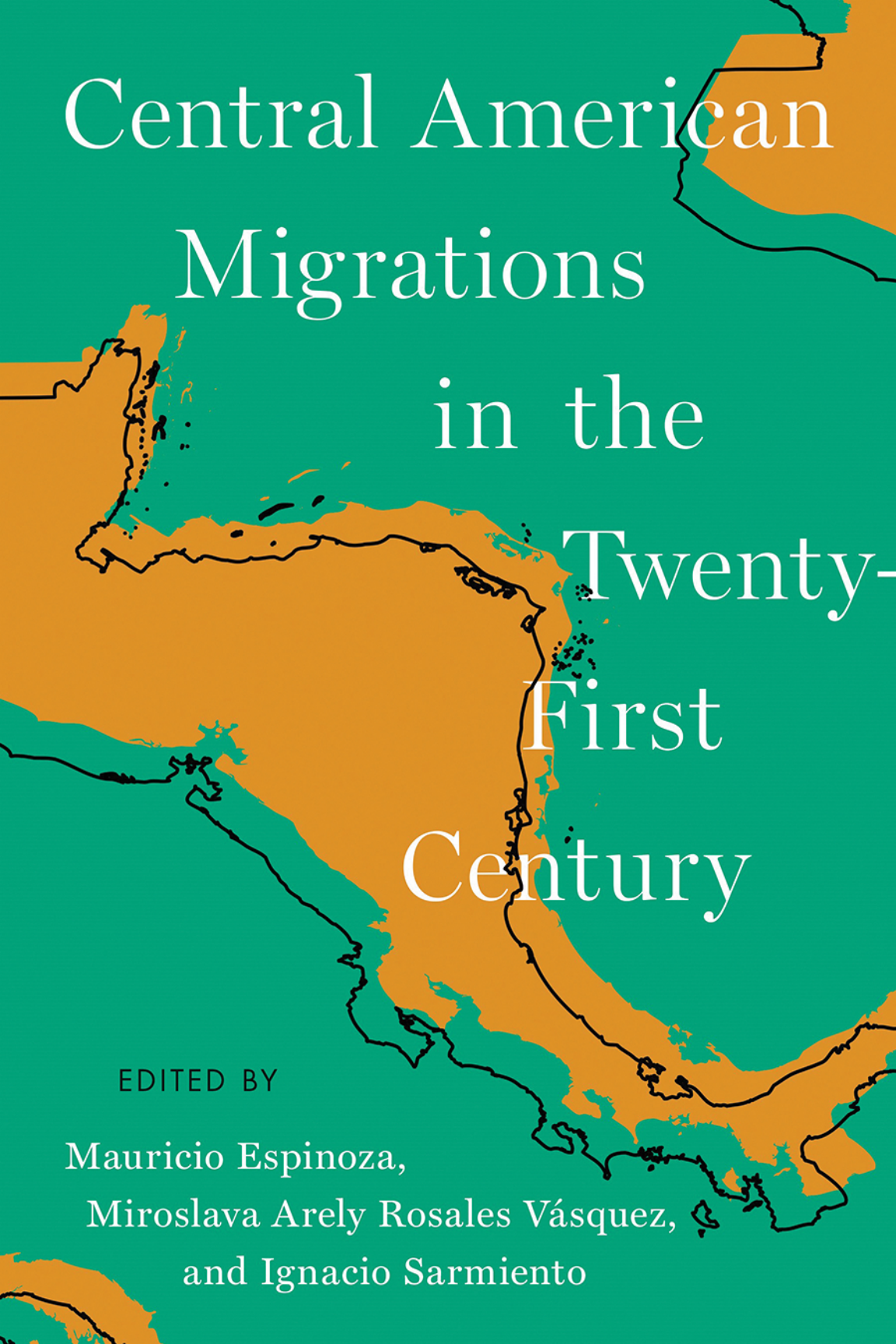




Central American Migrations in the Twenty- First Century

EDITED BY

Mauricio Espinoza,
Miroslava Arely Rosales Vásquez,
and Ignacio Sarmiento

**CENTRAL AMERICAN
MIGRATIONS IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

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MAURICIO ESPINOZA,
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AND IGNACIO SARMIENTO



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**CENTRAL AMERICAN
MIGRATIONS IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

INTRODUCTION

Central American Migrations, the Never-Ending Journey

MAURICIO ESPINOZA, MIROSLAVA ARELY ROSALES
VÁSQUEZ, AND IGNACIO SARMIENTO

IN JULY 2021, the name of a young athlete was heard by almost every Guatemalan with internet or TV access: Luis Grijalva. A twenty-two-year-old undocumented Guatemalan immigrant in the United States, Grijalva participated in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games. On August 6, he became the first Guatemalan to run in the track and field 5000m final, where he finished in twelfth place and established a new Guatemalan record. Grijalva came to the United States at the age of one, when his parents decided to leave Guatemala City and migrate (irregularly) to New York. After a couple of years, the family relocated to Fairfield, California. In 2012, Grijalva became a beneficiary of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which allows some young undocumented immigrants to legally study and work in the United States. Thanks to this program and to his talent, Grijalva was admitted with a full scholarship to Northern Arizona University in 2018.

In June 2021, Grijalva secured a spot in the Olympic Games, becoming the last athlete to join Team Guatemala. Nevertheless, qualifying for the Olympic Games was not the hardest challenge Grijalva faced—his participation was in jeopardy because of his undocumented status. Like any other undocumented immigrant, Grijalva would be able to leave the country at the cost of having his entrance back into the United States

prohibited for ten years. Grijalva paid more than \$1,000 to file a special petition to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and obtain a permit that would allow him to reenter the country following participation in the Olympic Games. After several anxious weeks of waiting, on July 27 his petition was accepted and Grijalva made history in Japan.¹

Grijalva's story brings together some of the numerous difficulties faced by the 3.8 million Central Americans living in the United States—1.9 million of whom are believed to be in this country without papers (Babich and Batalova).² For example, his legal permanence in the country where he has lived his entire life exclusively depends on the existence of the DACA program, which was in jeopardy when former president Donald Trump tried to cancel it during his first year in office. Fortunately for Grijalva and the other hundreds of thousands of DACA beneficiaries, the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately ruled that the president did not have legal authority to rescind the program (Totenberg 2020). However, while Grijalva is able to work and study in the United States as long as DACA—which does not offer any path to residency or citizenship—is in effect, his parents are at constant risk of deportation.

Not all stories are the same for the more than 5 million migrants from the isthmus living (with or without documents) around the world. Privileged Central Americans also face forced displacement from their home countries—and not all end up in the United States. Two well-known recent cases are Nicaraguan authors Sergio Ramírez and Gioconda Belli. In September 2021, Ramírez (the 2017 Cervantes Prize winner and Nicaraguan vice president during the Sandinista government between 1985 and 1990) announced on social media that he had been forced into a second exile as a result of his open opposition to the oppressive Daniel Ortega-Rosario Murillo regime in his home country. At the time of this writing (2023), the eighty-year-old man was living in Spain, dealing with the hardships of his new reality (*DW* 2021). In one interview (given in Costa Rica, where he first fled), the writer addressed the heartbreak that this situation has caused him and which has affected thousands of his compatriots since the violently repressed protests against the current Nicaraguan government took place starting April 2018: “I am one of the 40,000 Nicaraguans exiled in Costa Rica, and I represent them because I have a voice that is heard, but exile is very hard. My house, my books collected during my entire life are there, and the idea that I may never

find myself in that place of refuge that I have had for my writing is also very hard” (Santacecilia 2021; our translation). A similar situation has been faced by poet and novelist Gioconda Belli, also a former Sandinista militant, who in October 2021, at the age of seventy-two, was forced to abandon her home country (Barranco 2021). Her poem “No tengo dónde vivir” (I don’t have a place to live) reflects the anguish of having left everything behind (Belli 2021). In February 2023, Belli, Ramírez, and ninety-two other people were stripped of their Nicaraguan nationality by Ortega’s regime.

Belli’s and Ramírez’s experiences are far from being the only ones among Central American authors and creators. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, many people in the world of arts and letters have suffered exile from taking part in political struggles to confront authoritarian governments, or they have left because of a lack of scholarships and financial support to survive and devote themselves completely to their artistic endeavors or as a result of a precarious cultural infrastructure in their home countries.

Life for most Central American migrants is marked by violence, especially for those who venture to the United States through Mexico. Thousands of migrants are injured, killed, raped, mutilated, attacked, or disappeared every year. Among the most atrocious events surrounding Central American forced mobilities, especially undocumented migration to the United States, are the massacres that routinely take place in Mexico. In 2010, at the so-called Tamaulipas Massacre, seventy-two migrants were slaughtered in this Northern Mexico state.³ Most of them were of Central American origin. More recently, in January 2021, sixteen Guatemalan migrants were killed in Tamaulipas. Over the last few decades, thousands of Central Americans have died or disappeared during their migratory journey. According to the Missing Migrants Project, nearly 1,500 Central American migrants disappeared—and presumably died—between 2014 and 2021 alone. Violence against Central American migrants is nothing new—and neither is the Mexican, U.S., and Central American governments’ indolence in the face of these tragedies. By the end of the twentieth century, this was already an extended phenomenon that no national authority bothered to address. Because of this reality, as early as 1999, a group of Hondurans whose relatives had disappeared during their journey toward the United States organized the Committee of Relatives of

Disappeared Migrants of El Progreso, Honduras (COFAMIPRO)—one of the first civil society organizations created specifically to seek missing migrants and to demand collaboration between Mexico, the United States, and Central American governments in this process. During the last few decades, dozens of similar organizations have emerged in different countries; today they continue the arduous task of seeking their disappeared loved ones through various means, such as caravans, public demonstrations, and social media.

As the previous examples portray, the history and reality of Central American migrations is broad, diverse, multidirectional, uncertain, and full of sadness and despair. But these migrations also display hope, resistance, rage, affection, solidarity, and a sense of community. The Central American migrations do not follow one single pattern or one specific mobility strategy. People are forced to leave their home countries as a consequence of extreme poverty, lack of economic opportunities, gang violence, family abandonment and abuse, political persecution, gender violence, natural disasters, climate change—or a combination of all these factors.⁴

REPRESENTING CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATIONS: A CULTURAL APPROACH

One of the largest showcases of Central American migration today is mass media. Television, social media, and newspaper reports are perhaps the most widespread sources of information about this phenomenon, but they are far from being the only ones. Arts, literature, film, and many other forms of cultural expression are also a privileged place to explore Central American migrations. They often portray places of resistance, stress events not always covered in mainstream media, and explore scenarios, possibilities, and alternatives that cannot always be found from nonartistic or non-humanities-based perspectives. All these expressions, in many cases, have helped to humanize and give a face to migrants beyond statistics and official reports. Individual stories demonstrate that behind the numbers are lives deserving dignity, people experiencing fear, and groups and individuals demonstrating resilience.

Cultural representations of Central American migration are not a new occurrence. More than eighty years ago, Miguel Ángel Espino published

his powerful novel *Hombres contra la muerte* (1942), where he explored migration from Central American countries and the Caribbean to Belize to take part in the logging industry. A few decades later, Roque Dalton's "Poema de amor" (1974) expressed his sorrow for those Salvadorans who have been forced to migrate to places as distant as California and Panama, "the ones no one ever knows where they're from / . . . the ones who were stitched by bullets crossing the border" (Murguía and Paschke 1983, 36; our translation).

It must also be noted that much of Central America's literary production has been created and published beyond the region's borders. This includes the work of writers such as Rubén Darío, Eunice Odio, Enrique Gómez Carrillo, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Consuelo Suncín, Alaíde Foppa, Joaquín Gutiérrez, Roque Dalton, Roberto Armijo, and Claribel Alegría. In this sense, Alexandra Ortiz Wallner (2012, 11) claims that Central American literature is characterized by nomadism, becoming what she calls—following Ottmar Ette's reflection—a literature "without fixed borders." Since the time of the literary movement known as Modernismo (led by Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), Ortiz Wallner identifies a tradition of displacement that calls into question the notion of national identities and literatures, "a tradition that molds its cultural affiliations through a network of exchanges and interactions, guided by the generation of shared, inter-related stories and cultures that reflect a *poetics of movement*" (24; our translation). In the long and well-documented introduction to the dossier "Mujeres centroamericanas: Autorías y escrituras dispersas en lo global (1890–1980)," Mónica Albizúrez Gil and Tania Pleitez Vela (2021, 9) have identified that, in many cases, Central American female authorship is linked to the dynamics of displacement caused by different drivers (exile, professional stays abroad, international networks), resulting in what they call "writing dispersed around the globe." This dispersion is not limited to the geographic sense but also refers to the text itself. In many cases, as these are noncanonical genres (letters, diaries, translations, journalistic work), they have been left out of the conversation. Thus, an approach to Central American female authorship demands us to consider the individual mobility trajectories and the path of these diverse migration experiences in the writers' work and biographies.

In other words, the Central American literary canon has never developed exclusively within the geographic, political borders of the Central American states and not just within the Spanish language tradition. The above is still true—even more evident, we might add—in the first decades of the twenty-first century. The current trends in Central American literary and cultural studies have opened new perspectives in the understanding of what Central American literature and cultural production are. For example, the predominance of the Spanish language as the only valid language to write works of literature contributed to the exclusion of many authors who wrote in other tongues (English, Creole, Indigenous languages, etc.). That is the case of many Afro-Caribbean writers like Eric Walrond, Claude McKay, and Samuel Nation. In this context, Valeria Grinberg Pla (2020, 50) argues that “the concept of national literature has made it impossible during decades to include the work of [Samuel] Nation, written in English, in the Costa Rican literary canon” (our translation). In recent years, many editorial projects have acknowledged the multilingual and diasporic nature of Central American literature. An excellent example of the above are the anthologies *Teatro bajo mi piel* (2014) and *Puntos de fuga* (2017), which bring together literature written in both English and Spanish, within and outside of Central America, and the groundbreaking anthology *The Wandering Song: Central American Writing in the United States* (Hernández, Martínez, and Tobar 2017), which includes literary works in English, Spanish, and Spanglish. Additionally, there has been a boom in the creation of literature, cinema, and other cultural products in many of the region’s Indigenous languages (especially in the more than twenty Mayan languages spoken in Guatemala alone) in recent decades. Academics such as Arturo Arias, Gloria Chacón, Jennifer Gómez Menjívar, Emilio del Valle Escalante, Alicia Ivonne Estrada, Nathan C. Henne, Tiffany D. Creegan Miller, Rita Palacios, and Paul Worley explore this cultural production in their scholarly work.⁵

Over the last few decades, a solid body of cultural productions have explored the causes and hardships of the Central American migration experience. Examples include films such as Ishtar Yasin Guitiérrez’s *El camino* (2008), Cari Fukunaga’s *Sin nombre* (2009), Rebecca Cammisa’s *Which Way Home* (2009), Marcela Zamora’s *María en tierra de nadie* (2011), Diego Quemada-Díez’s *La jaula de oro* (2013), and Frank Maniglia

Jr.'s *A Bridge Apart* (2014). We should also mention here literary works published in Central America, Mexico, and the United States in English and Spanish, like Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998), Claudia Hernández's *Olvida uno* (2005) and *El verbo J* (2018), Rafael Ramírez Heredia's *La Mara* (2009), Emiliano Monge's *Las tierras arrasadas* (2015), Antonio Ortuño's *La fila india* (2013), Alejandro Hernández's *Amarás a dios sobre todas las cosas* (2013), José Serrano's *Central América* (2014), Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (2017) and *Lost Children Archive* (2019), Dennis Ávila's *Ropa americana* (2017), Balam Rodrigo's *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* (2018) and *Mar-abunta* (2018), and Noé Lima's *Gula* (2020). Narrative journalism has also exposed this painful reality. We can mention, for example, the project *En el camino* of the online newspaper *El Faro* (El Salvador) from which came Óscar Martínez's celebrated *Los migrantes que no importan* (2010), published in English as *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos in the Migrant Trail* (2013), and the photographic book *En el camino: México, la ruta de los migrantes que no importan* (2010) by Edu Ponces, Toni Arnau, and Eduardo Soterías. Another member of *El Faro* is Carlos Martínez, author of *Juntos, todos juntos: Crónica del primer intento colectivo de saltar la frontera estadounidense* (2019).

The migratory experience's influence in the Central American consciousness can also be traced in contemporary visual art. El Salvador offers a myriad of recent examples, such as Verónica Vides's *In God We Trust* (2005), Eduardo Chang's exhibition *Residente permanente por vínculo* (2009), Romeo Galdámez's *Territorio memoria @aquí* (2010), Boris Ciudad Real's *Pilar de ladrillos* (2010), Muriel Hasbun's work, Catalina del Cid's series *Muñecas de migración* (2010) and her book *Entre aquí y el Norte* (2012), and Nicolás F. Shi's exhibition *Huéspedes galopantes: A Chinese Family Odyssey* (2020).

Migration dynamics have also affected the rural and urban landscape of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras as shown in the interdisciplinary, multiauthor book *Arquitectura de remesas* (2010). This building style (remittance architecture) is defined as a *vernacular architecture* based on the negotiation between migrants, their desires, the types of construction styles they have seen abroad, and the perspective of the builder. What results is an "architecture without architects," with eclectic styles that

reflect the cultural hybridity that often results from migration, which also affects the people and communities left behind.

AN OVERVIEW OF CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION

Throughout the twentieth century, migration has been one of the defining features of Central America's sociopolitical and demographic horizons as well as a vivid and painful expression of its *crisis histórica* (historical crisis), which can be defined as that "which constitutes a structural-historical crisis—involving all levels—a crisis that reveals the limits of the process of evolution of a historical development pattern" (Turcios 2003, 19; our translation). According to historians Ronny Viales and David Díaz (2014, 131–32), the drivers for Central American migration flows have been as diverse as their destinations: forced mobilizations caused by violence or in response to monetary and political forces within the framework of a global economic model based on the exploitation of low-cost labor. For example, Machuca (2010, 3) points out that Salvadoran migration to the United States started at the end of the nineteenth century, but it turned into a massive phenomenon during the country's civil war (1980–92): "A significant characteristic of contemporary El Salvador is that it has become a country of emigrants." The impact of this phenomenon is demonstrated by the remittances (*remesas* in Spanish), which allow the Salvadoran national economy to stay afloat, but also in the social imaginary through the official discourse of *el hermano lejano* (the faraway brother/sister) and the creation of an imagined *Departamento 15* (Machuca 2010, 10–11).⁶

Based on a *longue durée* perspective, Viales and Díaz view the Central American migratory process over three centuries as an unstoppable movement across the region and beyond, especially to/from the Caribbean and to the United States: "La migración en y desde América Central produjo circuitos, flujos, tendencias y retornos que permitieron una relación más o menos estrecha, en diferentes periodos, entre América Central y el Caribe y entre América Central y Estados Unidos" (2014, 118).⁷ For instance, mass migration from Jamaica and other Caribbean islands to Costa Rica at the end of the nineteenth century and the arrival

of Italian, Chinese, and Arab immigrants on Central America's Caribbean coast region at the turn of the century are associated with two factors: the construction of railroads and the development of the banana enclave (Fernández 2008, 1245; Yúdice 2010, 98). Construction of the Panama Canal in the early 1900s also brought thousands of workers to the country, mostly from the Caribbean but also from Europe, the United States, and other Central American nations (as Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton reminds us in the celebrated verses of his "Poema de amor"). Jewish immigrants escaping persecution in Europe also arrived in Central America during the first half of the twentieth century. Guatemalan writer Eduardo Halfon—who was displaced during his country's long civil war (1960–96)—frequently writes about his Jewish grandparents and his family's multiple encounters with migration and exile.

Viales and Díaz elaborate a typology that links five different periods and trends in Central American migration since independence from Spain in 1821, characterized by socioeconomic and sociopolitical situations in the context of globalization and internal migration policy:

1. **1821/50–1900.** In this period, Central American countries experienced a transition to agrarian capitalism. The liberal economic ideal of the time assumed the need to settle frontier territory, which was considered an "empty area." Nevertheless, in reality, many of these areas were populated by Indigenous communities, mestizos, or ladinos.⁸ Production pressure caused by the construction of railroads and coffee and banana production forced these communities to look for other places to live. This process resulted in a monoculture economy, i.e., the development of export-led growth. The main type of migration during this period was internal and interregional.
2. **1900–1950.** This period is characterized by the consolidation of agrarian capitalism. The policy of populating frontier territory continues, and migratory flows were similar to the previous period.
3. **1950–1975.** Developmentalism and economic integration at the regional level took place in this period. As part of the model, the proletarianization of low-cost internal labor is encouraged.
4. **1975–1985.** Migration was driven by civil wars in El Salvador (1980–92) and Guatemala (1960–96), the Sandinista revolution and Contra war in Nicaragua (1979–90), the international economic crisis, and economic

integration at the regional level. This period led to forced and temporary migrations within and outside the region.

5. **1985–present.** The political and economic crises of the previous period led to the implementation of neoliberalism in the region; the states were modified, which helped to expand the informal economic sector. Family remittances became a key part of the economy as more and more Central Americans migrated to the United States for economic and sociopolitical reasons, among others (Viales and Díaz 2014, 118–22).

As Viales and Díaz point out, immigration and emigration (as well as intraregional mobility within the isthmus nations) have been constant occurrences in Central American history for the past two hundred years. However, human population flows into and out of the region have never been so prominent as in the last two periods that these scholars identify (that is, from 1975 to the present). Displacement, violence, and economic instability caused by regional wars (El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua) were the primary push factors for the migration waves in the 1970s and 1980s. Significantly contributing to these push factors has been the United States' insidious and sustained political, economic, and military intervention in the isthmus, which has been a constant shadow since at least the mid-1800s but which intensified during this period—for example, through support of right-wing authoritarian governments in the region that were being challenged by leftist parties and revolutions in the context of the Cold War, through disruptive policies in the context of the so-called War on Drugs, and even through outright military invasions, as in the case of Panama in 1989.⁹ In fact, according to Noam Chomsky (2015, 6), “No region of the world has been more subject to US influence than Central America and the Caribbean.” Not coincidentally, the United States emerged as the main destination for most Central American migrants who fled these armed conflicts. By 1980, there were 354,000 Central Americans in the United States, a number that rose to 1,134,000 in 1990—that is, a 320 percent increase in only ten years (Babich and Batalova 2011). But migration (within the region and outside of it) did not stop then. In fact, displacement drastically increased in the post-war years because of several factors. These include, first of all, various forms of violence (both old and new): political repression, gangs, drug and human trafficking, and gender-related crimes. According to *Insight*

Crime's 2018 report, the Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) have some of Latin America's highest homicide rates (Dalby and Carranza 2019), while these same countries account for the highest femicide rates in Latin America and the Caribbean and comprise 87 percent of all femicides in the isthmus (ECLAC 2018). Gender violence has led to an increase in the migration of women, as explained later in this introduction.

Other reasons are economic in nature. During the 1990s, Central America experienced a process of modernization of the state, which resulted in political and economic reforms. The first sought the consolidation of democracy, while the second led to the liberalization of markets (Sojo 2000, 9). While expanding wealth in the isthmus, these neoliberal reforms have not produced significant improvements for the majority of the population, having instead wreaked havoc on the most vulnerable Central Americans (Salgado 2015, 144). By 2016, half of the region's population lived under the poverty line, a proportion that rises to two-thirds in rural areas. The situation was much worse for Indigenous people: 75 percent of the Maya community (which makes up over 40% of Guatemala's population) lived in poverty, while 95 percent of Panama's Indigenous people (8% of the country's total population) were below the poverty line, just to cite two relevant examples. Overall, the poorest 20 percent of the population received only 3 percent of all income, while the wealthiest 20 percent received 60 percent (Borgen Project 2016). Finally, Central Americans have been increasingly displaced in the past three decades by natural disasters and climate change—whose impacts are compounded by social inequalities as they disproportionately affect the region's most vulnerable populations, including poor farmers and those who have no choice but to live in inadequate housing and disaster-prone areas. The devastating Hurricane Mitch (1998) and earthquakes in the early 2000s were among the disasters further driving migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. More recently, in 2020, Hurricanes Eta and Iota pounded Central America, affecting as many as 11 million people throughout the region. Additionally, parts of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (known as the Dry Corridor) have been affected by drought—with 2.2 million people suffering crop losses as a result and effectively creating a “climate refugee” crisis in the isthmus (Babich and Batalova 2021; Méndez 2021).

Statistics tell the rest of the story. By 2000, the number of Central American migrants to the United States had grown to 2 million (from 1.1 million in 1990). In 2010, that number rose to 3 million. By 2015, there were 4.2 million Central Americans migrants worldwide—3.3 million were living in the United States, 576,000 had migrated to other isthmus nations (mostly to Costa Rica), while the remaining 324,000 had settled in other countries around the world (Orozco 2018, 2). According to the latest figures available from the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020) and the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), there are now 5 million Central American migrants living in different parts of the world—3.8 million of them in the United States, 714,000 in several Latin American countries (including isthmus nations), and nearly half a million elsewhere (with Spain and Canada being popular destinations) (UNDESA 2020; Babich and Batalova 2021). This means that roughly 10–12 percent of Central Americans now live outside their countries of birth, which is four times the global migration rate (Sandoval García 2015, xvi). In El Salvador, which has the most global emigrants in the region (1.6 million), the rate is significantly higher: 25 percent of all Salvadorans now live abroad (UNDESA 2020; UNFPA 2021). While Central America as a region has become a net “exporter” of people, some isthmus nations have actually received more global migrants than the number of their nationals who have left. This is the case with Costa Rica, which has welcomed 521,000 immigrants (mainly from Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Colombia), compared with 150,000 Costa Ricans who have emigrated; Panama and Belize also have more immigrants than emigrants (UNDESA 2020). Nicaragua is the only country in the region whose top destination is not the United States, as close to 300,000 Nicaraguans have migrated to Costa Rica, compared with 255,000 who have left for the United States (López Ruiz and Delgado Montaldo 2016, 237; UNDESA 2020).

These human mobilities have resulted in the consolidation of substantial Central American communities around the world—especially in the United States. Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans (who have been particularly affected by violence, political instability, and socioeconomic inequalities in the past few decades) are the three largest Central American groups in this country. The Northern Triangle nations account for 86 percent of isthmian immigrants in the United States (Babich and Batalova 2021). Meanwhile, the Central American diaspora (immigrants plus

U.S.-born citizens with Central American roots) comprises 7 million individuals: 2.8 million are Salvadorans, 2 million are Guatemalans, and 1.3 million are Hondurans, who together make up 87 percent of the total U.S. Central American diaspora. Salvadorans are now the third largest Latinx group by origin in the United States, after Mexicans and Puerto Ricans (Babich and Batalova 2021; Noe-Bustamante 2019). Regarding territorial distribution, most Central American immigrants live in states along the coasts and the southern border; more than half of the population resides in California (25%), Texas (13%), Florida (11%), and New York (8%). Meanwhile, the highest concentrations of this population live in the greater Los Angeles (16%), New York City (11%), Washington, DC (9%), Miami (7%), and Houston (7%) metropolitan areas (Babich and Batalova 2021).

Central American migrants have received significant (though not necessarily positive) attention in U.S. media coverage and political discourse during the 2010s and 2020s for several reasons. First, Central American migration has outpaced Mexican migration in net rates terms. In 2012, the Pew Research Center announced that Mexican migration flows (which had dominated U.S. immigration numbers in the second half of the twentieth century and into the early 2010s) had reached a net rate of zero—meaning more Mexican nationals left the United States than entered the country (Passel, Cohn, and González-Barrera 2012). In parallel, Central American migration to the United States was on the rise; consequently, the United States began paying more attention to the situation in the isthmus and enacted additional policies to try to stem the flow of migrants from this region during this period—which, as the statistics show, has not happened.

Another characteristic of Central American migration during this period has been the large number of unaccompanied minors traveling to the United States, which saw a sharp increase in the 2010s. According to the Migration Policy Institute, the number of unaccompanied minors stopped by the U.S. Border Patrol (most of them from the isthmus) jumped from 24,668 in 2013 to 57,496 the following year. After decreasing slightly between 2017 and 2018, the numbers climbed again between June 2018 and June 2019, when more than 56,000 minors were detained at the border (Chishti, Pierce, and Telus 2019). More Central American women are also migrating; in 2017, women represented 25 percent of migrants apprehended by Mexican authorities (up from 13% in 2012) and

27 percent of migrants stopped by the U.S. Border Patrol (up from 14% in 2012) (Hallock, Ruiz Soto, and Fix 2018). Finally, beginning in 2018, U.S. media and right-wing politicians began fixating on the so-called caravans of Northern Triangle migrants who were trekking north in large groups of a few thousand individuals—a strategy intended to better protect themselves from criminal activity and to avoid paying onerous fees to *coyotes*, or “smugglers” (Lind 2018).

SCHOLARSHIP ON TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION AND ITS REPRESENTATIONS

Central American migration’s unprecedented growth and visibility since the 1980s has generated a significant (and expanding) body of scholarship dealing with this phenomenon, emanating from both the social sciences and the humanities. This edited collection establishes a dialogue with this existing scholarship while seeking to make an important contribution to its development—filling in some gaps particularly by bringing together approaches from social sciences and cultural studies and considering not only migration to the United States but also human flows into the isthmus and within it. This corpus includes works that explore Central American human mobilities from historical, demographic, economic, political, anthropological, and/or sociological perspectives. While some of them focus on twenty-first century flows and transformations in migratory patterns, they typically straddle centuries to account for the intensification of regional mobilities that began in the 1980s. Other works deal with the diasporic communities that have formed as a result of accelerated migration, particularly Nicaraguans in Costa Rica and Salvadorans and Guatemalans in the United States. Another set of scholarships zeroes in on recent cultural productions (generated in Central America and outside of the region) that address migration and other forms of displacement. Finally, a number of journalistic accounts, literary essays, and anthologies of testimonials that blend primary source materials with narrative techniques provide powerful depictions of the complex and often heart-wrenching Central American migrant experience. Here, we provide a representative sampling of this corpus, which is not meant to be comprehensive but to be

illustrative of the scholarship produced thus far on contemporary Central American migration and its diverse representations.

One of the first works to trace the tremendous growth in Central American migration from the 1980s into the early 2000s is Cecilia Menjívar's *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America* (2000), which provides a detailed account of the networks that facilitated migration from El Salvador to San Francisco in the late 1900s. Next is María Cristina García's *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (2006), which studies the effects of wars in the region and the fates of refugees and economic migrants traveling north in search of a safe haven and better living conditions. Meanwhile, Carlos Sandoval García (one of the leading scholars of migration in the isthmus) has produced a number of monographs and edited volumes that have expanded our understanding of this phenomenon in recent decades. They include *El mito roto: Inmigración y emigración en Costa Rica* (2008), published in English as *Shattering Myths on Immigration and Emigration in Costa Rica* (2011). This edited collection traces human mobilities in and out of Costa Rica from the late nineteenth century into the twenty-first century, establishing transnational and trans-regional connections with Europe, North America, South America, and the Caribbean.

In his next two books, Sandoval García expands his analysis to all of Central America. *No más muros: Exclusión y migración forzada en Centroamérica* (2015), published in English as *Exclusion and Forced Migration in Central America: No More Walls* (2017), explores the realities of twenty-first-century migrants to Mexico and the United States through interviews and analysis of migration policy in the transit and receiving nations. Finally, *Migraciones en América Central: Políticas, territorios y actores* (2016) focuses on contemporary migration waves out of Central America into the United States, Mexico, and Europe and analyzes the processes of deportation and the work of organizations assisting migrants. In 2019, Guillermo Acuña González published *Déjenos pasar: Migraciones y trashumancias en Centroamérica*, which focuses on the groups of Northern Triangle migrants traveling in caravans en route to Mexico and the United States in 2018. More recently, Nayar López Castellanos edited *Procesos migratorios en la Centroamérica del siglo XXI* (2020), which dissects twenty-first-century migration processes by

concentrating on the effects of neoliberal policies in the isthmus, violence, and the militarization of borders and migratory routes between Central America and the United States. Finally, Aviva Chomsky's *Central America's Forgotten History: Revolution, Violence, and the Roots of Migration* (2021) is an invaluable addition to this corpus, as it helps to ground the analysis of twenty-first-century migration flows out of the region in the historical context of U.S.-Central America relations and U.S. intervention in the isthmus. Another recent contribution to the field is Héctor Leyva's *Las caravanas centroamericanas: Guerras inciviles, migración y crisis del estatuto de refugiado* (2021), which examines how the recent phenomenon of migrant "caravans" has forced us to reevaluate the way in which non-war forms of violence take shape in and affect local populations—destabilizing the concept of civil war and who qualifies as a refugee.

A number of works deal with the formation of Central American diasporas and issues surrounding identity and community. Regarding the migration of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica, Sandoval García wrote the seminal study *Otros amenazantes: Los nicaragüenses y la formación de identidades nacionales en Costa Rica* (2002), which was published in English as *Threatening Others: Nicaraguans and the Formation of National Identities in Costa Rica* (2004). This monograph maps out the representation of Nicaraguans in Costa Rican social discourse and imaginaries as dangerous neighbors and unwanted migrants, providing a useful framework for the study of xenophobia in the region. Studies about Salvadoran and Guatemalan migrant communities in the United States (particularly in Los Angeles) have been written since the late 1990s. They include Gabriele Kohpahl's *Voices of Guatemalan Women in Los Angeles: Understanding Their Immigration* (1998); Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla's *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles* (2001); Carlos Cordova's *The Salvadoran Americans* (2005); and Enrique Ochoa and Gilda Ochoa's edited volume *Latino Los Angeles: Transformations, Communities, and Activism* (2005), which includes several chapters about Central American settlements in this city. Other works explore lesser-known diasporas in other parts of the country, such as Sarah England's *Afro-Central Americans in New York City: Garifuna Tales of Transnational Movements in Racialized Space* (2006).

Later works about the isthmian diaspora in the United States reveal a shift away from national origin-based identities, privileging a sense

of regional identity that is embodied by the term *Central American–American*. Coined by Guatemalan American poet and activist Maya Chinchilla, this term was first introduced in the academic sphere by Arturo Arias in his 2000 article “Central American–Americans? Remapping Latino/Latin American Subjectivities on Both Sides of the Great Divide,” referring to the emergence of a uniquely isthmian discursive and artistic identity that is distinctive from that of Mexican Americans or other Latinx Americans. In this vein, Karina O. Alvarado, Alicia Ivonne Estrada, and Ester E. Hernández published *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance* (2017), which privileges oral histories, cultural interventions, popular culture, the Maya diaspora, and the performance of “Central-americanismo” in public spaces. One year later, Maritza E. Cárdenas (2018, 5) published *Constituting Central American–Americans: Transnational Identities and the Politics of Dislocation*, which “explores the historical and disciplinary conditions that have structured U.S. Central American identity as well as the ways in which this identity challenges current discussions of Latina/o American ethnic and diasporic positionalities.” These two publications are groundbreaking for their contributions to expanding this field of studies and because they are among the first written by Central American–American scholars. Another important study about U.S. Central American diasporas is Yajaira M. Padilla’s *From Threatening Guerrillas to Forever Illegals: US Central Americans and the Cultural Politics of Non-Belonging* (2022), which focuses on how representations of visibility and invisibility regarding Central American migrants developed in the past four decades.¹⁰

Additionally, many academics have analyzed contemporary cultural production about Central American migration and diasporic life. Arturo Arias dedicates a third of his book *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America* (2007) to U.S. diasporic literary production and the Indigenous Maya movement in a context of globalization. Meanwhile, in her 2009 monograph *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures*, Ana Patricia Rodríguez proposes the term *transisthmus* to analyze Central American literatures “not as discrete national units” but rather as texts that can be read “across national divides, drawing connections between them while producing other transisthmian and transnational cultural and literary

spaces” (2)—including Guatemalan and Salvadoran communities in the United States. Similarly, in *El arte de ficcionar: La novela contemporánea en Centroamérica* (2012), Alexandra Ortiz Wallner studies a corpus of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Central American novels that account for mobilities and displacements in and outside the region and whose “nomadic” authors have created a literature that resists geographic or national constraints. More recently, in *Cicatrices: Central American Fiction in the 21st Century*, Jeffrey Browitt (2020) analyzes several novels that deal with migrants, including Costa Rican Daniel Quirós’ *Lluvia del norte* (2014) and Salvadoran Horacio Castellanos Moya’s *Moronga* (2018).

Other works explore performance and cinematic representations of migration. They include Ana Elena Puga and Víctor M. Espinosa’s *Performances of Suffering in Latin American Migration: Heroes, Martyrs and Saints* (2020), which analyzes a diverse corpus of plays, church pageants, migrant group performances, street demonstrations, individual defiance of deportation orders, and film and visual art by undocumented migrants, including Central Americans. Several recent volumes and journal issues have also included analyses of the growing number of films that portray Central American migration. For instance, in the edited collection *The Latin American Road Movie* (Garibotto and Pérez 2016), Yajaira M. Padilla studies *Sin nombre* (Cary Fukunaga, Mexico, 2009), while Alicia Ivonne Estrada explores Guatemalan Indigenous migration in *El Norte* (Gregory Nava, United States, 1983) and *La jaula de oro* (Diego Quemada-Díez, Mexico, 2013). Other examples are Esteban Loustaunau and Lauren E. Shaw’s edited collection *Telling Migrant Stories: Latin American Diaspora in Documentary Film* (2018), which includes essays on *Which Way Home* (Rebecca Cammisa, United States, 2009) and *abUSed: The Postville Raid* (Luis Argueta, Guatemala, 2011), and an article by Byron Barahona (2018) about *La jaula de oro*, published in *Revista Istmo*.

Finally, a number of nonfiction narratives and essays about Central American migrants have appeared in the past decade. Some are journalistic in nature, including Salvadoran journalist Óscar Martínez’s *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos in the Migrant Trail* (2013), which provides first-person accounts of the multiple risks Central American migrants take crossing Mexico. Meanwhile, the documentary *Casa en tierra ajena*, directed by Ivannia Villalobos (2017), includes

testimonials from a number of migrants as well as others who have stayed in their home countries resisting and trying to transform their realities. Testimonials are also gathered in the book *Solito, Solita: Crossing Borders with Youth Refugees from Central America* (2019), edited by Steven Mayers and Jonathan Freedman. The attention gathered by unaccompanied minors and other Central American children who migrate with their families is also evident in Mexican writer Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (2017) and in the memoir *Solito* (2022) by Salvadoran-born author and activist Javier Zamora, who in 1999 immigrated into the United States as an unaccompanied minor at the age of nine.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Central American Migrations in the Twenty-First Century aims to present readers with an overarching perspective of the diasporas—one that takes into consideration the multiple directions of these migrations, along with their multi-causalities and imprints in peoples' lives. We have chosen to concentrate on twenty-first century migration for a number of reasons. First, as explained above, more Central Americans have left their home countries in the past two decades than in the entire twentieth century. This unprecedented and rapid exodus has had significant social, political, economic, and cultural ramifications that this edited collection seeks to trace and understand, thus contributing to the growing field of Central American migration studies and contemporary global migration studies more generally. Also, as migration has risen in this century, the types of social and cultural expressions of this phenomenon have also become more abundant and diverse. This provides researchers with a rich corpus to study—a corpus that is constantly expanding as conditions in the isthmus change because of catastrophic events (hurricanes, for instance), new political crisis (such as the one experienced in Nicaragua since 2018), and the COVID-19 pandemic, just to name a few. Finally, recent Central American human mobilities have been in the spotlight of the media, politicians, and human rights organizations because of (among other factors) the surge in unaccompanied minors, migrant “caravans,” transnational gang activity, increased violence against migrants throughout Mexico,

separation of minors from their families at the U.S. border, and the arrival of migrants on Central American soil from other parts of the world, such as Africa and Asia.

A unique feature of this edited collection is that it brings together humanities and social sciences scholars who engage with the various ways in which the stories and the realities of migrants are told, represented, and disseminated. In doing so, we hope to establish a productive dialogue between these two fields of study to better help us understand how social dynamics and cultural expressions of migration interact and influence each other. Often, social scientists, literary scholars, and those engaged in visual and cultural studies approach complex phenomena such as migration from their silos and disciplinary perspectives. In this regard, *Central American Migrations in the Twenty-First Century* seeks to encourage a more inclusive and cross-disciplinary analysis of social manifestations and texts surrounding the issue of migration. That is why, for the purpose of this book, we define text, narrative, and representation in a broad sense, as understood in the field of cultural studies. Consequently, chapters in this book explore a wide range of texts, cultural products, and social expressions, which together paint a more comprehensive picture of the contemporary migration experiences inside and outside the isthmus. Emphasis, however, is placed on forced migration and its various manifestations and representations, as it accounts for a vast majority of the mobilities taking place in the region. Our aim is to find the nuances, correspondences, and tensions between reality, facts, and narrative/discourse, problematizing hegemonic representations and visibilizing other voices and perspectives that are often ignored (both in the media and in academic circles). Finally, it is important to point out that the contributors to this volume include scholars and artists living in Central America, the United States, and Europe, many of whom are migrants themselves and/or are actively engaged in pro-migrant activism. Their disciplinary, geographic, and cultural diversity (as well as their lived experiences) provide additional nuances to this study.

Central American Migrations in the Twenty-First Century is divided into three parts. The first section, entitled “Factum,” brings together social science approaches to migrations in, from, and throughout Central America. The book opens with one of the most overlooked migratory movements from Central America to the United States: the presence of

Hondurans in New Orleans, Louisiana. In “Forced Migration: The Honduran Settlement in the Post-Katrina New Orleans Scenario,” Carolina Simbaña González studies the migratory waves from Honduras to New Orleans, from the mid-twentieth century to the present, paying special attention to the great flux of Hondurans who settled in this city after Hurricane Katrina hit and destroyed it in 2005. Simbaña’s chapter explains how Hondurans were a crucial pillar in rebuilding New Orleans in the post-Katrina years and how they changed the city’s demographics. In “Externalized: Deportation and Outsourcing in the U.S. Empire,” Hilary Goodfriend analyzes the impact of the United States’ massive deportation on El Salvador’s call center industry. She argues that U.S. capital and imperialism have directed a process of Latin American migrant expulsion in order to adapt to new economic circumstances and business practices, which guarantees the continued subordination and dependent development of the region. Meanwhile, Guillermo Acuña’s and Gracia Silva and Fiore Bran-Aragón’s chapters challenge the enormous attention given to South–North displacements to provide examples of the multidirectionality of Central American migrations. Acuña’s “Transmigrations, Borders, Corporalities: African Migration Through Costa Rica in 2016” argues that Central America is not only a “sending region” but also a transit site for migrants from other parts of the world. In particular, he pays close attention to the transit of African migrants through Costa Rica in the past decade and how their bodies have become a contested site, activating xenophobic and racist discourses that already exist in this country’s social imaginary. Silva and Bran-Aragón’s “On Oppressions, Resistances, and Resilience: Narratives of Nicaraguan LGBTQI+ Refugees in Costa Rica” studies sexually oriented political persecution by the Ortega-Murillo regime in Nicaragua and how many people have sought refuge in neighboring Costa Rica in the past few years. This chapter presents the story of two Nicaraguan refugees and explains how their sexualities, in addition to their activism, made them political targets.

The second part, entitled “Visual and New Media,” explores representations of Central American migration in film, performance, and new media. This section opens with Andrew Bentley’s “Social Media as Testimonio: Guatemalan Collaborative Witnessing from COVID-19 to Migration.” Analyzing the Mexico-Guatemala border and the COVID-19 pandemic, Bentley proposes that present-day social media allows the

reinterpretation of the concept of *testimonio*, a predominant genre in Central America since the 1980s, arguing that social media works as a public collaborative witnessing project that replaces lettered mediators to represent the subaltern. In “Women to Power: Art, Politics, and Migration in Regina José Galindo and Tania Bruguera,” María Victoria Véliz examines performances that address issues of migration in the work of Regina Galindo (Guatemala, 1974) and Tania Bruguera (Cuba, 1968). Véliz argues that, from different repertoires and artistic positions, Galindo’s and Bruguera’s performances question the role of the states and their institutions in not protecting migrants and that they also contribute to rethinking the configuration of politics and the place of art in it. Next, Leda Lozier’s “Reading Intersectionality in Central American Migrant Women’s Experiences in the Documentary *María en tierra de nadie* by Marcela Zamora Chamorro” offers a critical analysis of Zamora’s powerful film about the desperate search for missing migrants by their relatives. Lozier argues that this film sheds light on issues related to the normalization of violence at the same time that it offers a way to understand how violence operates in the process of identity formation for migrant women. Óscar Martínez’s book *Los migrantes que no importan*, translated into English as *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos in the Migrant Trail* (2013), is analyzed in the chapter “The Central American Migrant: Mexico, the Never-Ending Border,” written by Judith Martínez. In this text, following Agamben’s contribution and creating a bridge between political philosophy and literary studies, the author determines that Central American migrants embody the figure of the homo sacer as a consequence of a state of exception. This section closes with Manuel Sánchez Cabrera’s “The Central American Migration Through Cinema: The Wretched of the Earth, Reality, and the Practices of Representation.” Here, Sánchez studies the Mexican films *Sin nombre* (Cary Fukunaga, 2009), *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas* (Luis Mandoki, 2012), and *La jaula de oro* (Diego Quemada-Díez, 2013) to determine how Central American migrants tend to be represented in fictional features. He argues that while these films are more realistic and nuanced than previous movies dealing with this issue, they continue to represent migrants on the basis of a supposed colonial condition.

The final part, “Literary Representations,” explores how contemporary literature written in Central America, Mexico, and the United States has

portrayed Central American migrations in recent decades. In the chapter titled “Sitios Equivocados: *El verbo J's* Queer Child,” Alicia Núñez shows how the queer child is at the center of Claudia Hernández’s novel. The author proposes the term *desubicaciones* to refer to representation of fluid gender identity accentuated by nonbelonging in different senses; she highlights a series of intersections portrayed in the protagonist. Drawing on the contributions of critical studies on men and masculinities, migration studies, and literary studies, Miroslava Arely Rosales Vásquez’s “Instances of Violence and Residual Masculinities in Capitalism: The Case of *Yo tuve un sueño: El viaje de los niños centroamericanos a Estados Unidos* (2018) by Juan Pablo Villalobos” examines how instances of violence (detention centers, for example) and residual masculinities (especially the one configured in the gang dynamics) are evoked in this book and how Villalobos’s work offers, through a laconic language, a *mise-en-scène* of the forced migration experience that problematizes the borders between fiction and fact. In “Women Poet Voices of the Central American Diaspora: An Intersectional, Transnational Reading,” Mauricio Espinoza and Tiffanie Clark analyze the work of four poets whose literary production wrestles with the trauma of war, violence, injustice, and/or poverty that have pushed so many Central Americans (including the poets themselves) to seek refuge and opportunities abroad. In their poetry, Tania Pleitez Vela (El Salvador, 1969), Alexandra Lytton Regalado (El Salvador, 1972), Ilka Oliva Corado (Guatemala, 1979), and Alejandra Solórzano (Costa Rica, 1980) retrace the memories of war and also interrogate the new realities that generate more migration. Their work is studied through the lens of intersectionality and transnationalism to reveal connections between issues of gender, class, and ethnicity as well as the articulation of trans–Central American literature in a global context of cultural flows. Ignacio Sarmiento’s “The Work of Mourning in the Central American Diaspora” closes this volume with a reflection about grief in the context of regional mobilities. The chapter proposes that despite the overproduction of death in cultural representations of migration, the work of mourning is still an overlooked issue. In this context, Sarmiento analyzes Balam Rodrigo’s *Libro centroamericano de los muertos*, winner of the Aguascalientes Fine Arts Award for Poetry (2018), which uses literature to give voice and visibility to the thousands of migrants who have lost their lives in the journey from Central America through Mexico en route to the United States.

NOTES

1. See Axon (2021), Barreno (2021), Ordoñez (2021), and Browning (2021).
2. According to the Migration Policy Institute, the 1.9 million unauthorized immigrants from Central America who resided in the United States as of 2018 account for approximately 17 percent of the country's 11 million undocumented immigrant population.
3. This massacre encouraged Mexican poet Sara Uribe to accept Sandra Muñoz's proposal to write a monologue that would take Sophocles's *Antigone* and bring it into the context of Tamaulipas, Mexico. The monologue created a connection with Isabel Miranda de Wallace's history of looking for her son and, finally, it examined the centrality of the recovery of the body. As a result, Uribe's iconic book *Antígona González* was written (see Uribe 2017, 47–48).
4. See Acuña González (2019), Dalby and Carranza (2018), ECLAC (2018), García (2006), and Hallock, Ruiz Soto, and Fix (2018).
5. See, for example, Arias (2017, 2019), Chacón (2018), and Gómez Menjívar and Salmon (2018).
6. A name given in El Salvador to the Salvadoran diaspora, identifying it as the country's fifteenth "department" or province. See Rodríguez (2005).
7. "Migration in and out of Central America created circuits, flows, trends, and returns that permitted a more or less close relationship, over different periods, between Central American and the Caribbean and between Central America and the United States."
8. The term *mestizo* refers to people of mixed European and Indigenous American ancestry, while *ladino* is used in Central America to refer to non-Indigenous people or mestizos who speak only Spanish.
9. For an in-depth analysis of U.S. intervention in Central America, see Noam Chomsky (2015).
10. It is also important to highlight the foundational work of U.S. Central American social science scholars Leisy J. Abrego, Cecilia Menjívar, Steven Osuna, Suyapa Portillo, Victoria González-Rivera, and Areli Zimmerman, among many others. Both Abrego and Menjívar have conducted extensive research on Central American families and migration.

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PART I

FACTUM

1

FORCED MIGRATION

The Honduran Settlement in the Post-Katrina New Orleans Scenario

CAROLINA SIMBAÑA GONZÁLEZ

NEW ORLEANS, Louisiana, stands out for being a diverse city, with people coming from different parts of the world. Latinxs (mostly Central Americans) in this city tend to group in communities where the cultural values and symbolic forms of their communities of origin are “reproduced and recreated” (Canales and Zolninski 2001, 233; referring to Chávez 1994) as a “tactical measure of defense and survival” (Durand 2000, 250). These communities are formed from a complex network of social relationships that link places of origin with places of destination (Durand 2000, 249).

Some cities, like New Orleans in the United States, draw attention because of the “predominance of immigrants from the same geographical place of origin, in the same locality” (Durand 2000, 249). In the United States, it is possible to find large groups of, for example, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in New York, Cubans in Miami, and Hondurans in New Orleans (NOLA). Durand (2000) calls this phenomenon *bulk migration with one-way flow direction*. These mobilizations and settlements take place as result of specific factors, including “political, geographical and cultural . . . armed conflicts, . . . neighborhood, . . . ethnic or linguistic kinship, as well as the legal factor—immigration regulations—and the religious factor” (Durand 2000, 250).

Hondurans have migrated in considerable numbers to the United States during the last century and settled in cities like New Orleans, making use of their predecessors' connections. This chapter aims to outline the characteristics of said settlement at the beginning of the twenty-first century and considers the environmental, political, social, and economic factors that occurred both at the origin of migration and the destination. The impact of Hurricanes Mitch and Katrina, the reconstruction of New Orleans after the latter, and measures implemented by the governments in power to address the crises left by these natural disasters would explain this placement. All these factors will be taken into account to explain the settlement of Latin Americans and Hondurans in the city through the lens of *forced migration*.

WHAT IS FORCED MIGRATION? PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

For a long time, the theory of migration thought of immigrants as rational individuals (Lewis 1954; Todaro 1969), development agents (Ratha 2005; Abella and Ducanes 2007), and cooperators (Gómez-Schlaikier 2008), among other characteristics. These theories studied migrants' movements, motivations, relationships with institutions, and actions with a perspective that positively affected their economies of origin. The general assumption was that migration benefits were reduced to money transfers from the North to the South. For example, in one period, monetary remittances were "the most cited element, tangible evidence and the measuring stick of the bond that connects migrants with their societies of origin" (Guarnizo 2004, 56).

These approaches underestimated "the macroeconomic effects of the transnational economic and the non-economic connections of the immigrants" and "the actions of immigrants and their influence in the global sphere" (Guarnizo 2004, 32). "The causes of the exodus of millions of workers from the world who have been forced to seek family support in developed countries" (Delgado Wise, Márquez Covarrubias, and Rodríguez Ramírez 2009, 27), as well as the contributions of immigrants to the receiving economies were ignored, and the multiple transfers and costs, material and human, that migration means

were covered up (Delgado Wise, Márquez Covarrubias, and Rodríguez Ramírez 2009, 27).

To address these issues, innovative perspectives emerged and detected that these previous theories were part of a political discourse that distanced the real understanding of the transfers between North and South that occur with the migratory phenomenon (Guarnizo 2004). Forced migration, proposed by Delgado Wise, Márquez Covarrubias, and Rodríguez Ramírez (2009), is one of the perspectives that provides a more complete and structural analysis of migration. This concept, supported by *uneven geographical development*, explains the phenomenon of the attraction of people from peripheral countries to central countries.¹ Both the periphery and the center produce institutionalized and legalized processes that promote mobility. In the periphery, “expulsion processes occur” (Delgado Wise, Márquez Covarrubias, and Rodríguez Ramírez, 2009, 30) through, for example, neoliberal structural adjustment programs of “opening, deregulation and privatization” (Delgado Wise, Márquez Covarrubias, and Rodríguez Ramírez 2009, 31) proposed by international development agencies.

In the central countries, on the other hand, the scenarios are produced to receive these immigrants with their specific conditions. Forced migration—with its massive incorporation of a cheap labor force and a high degree of labor exploitation—is the most effective way to satisfy the demands of labor markets that were undersupplied (Delgado Wise, Márquez Covarrubias, and Rodríguez Ramírez, 2009). Forced migration explains how, in this new international division of labor, recipient countries benefit from the arrival of “workers who contribute to the dynamization of production and consumption of their economy” (Delgado Wise, Márquez Covarrubias, and Rodríguez Ramírez 2009, 39).

On the other hand, these countries also benefit from “the transfer of resources invested in the process of social reproduction and education, which represent an even greater source of enrichment in the migratory process” (Delgado Wise, Márquez Covarrubias, and Rodríguez Ramírez 2009 43–44). The “labor immigration entails significant savings in the training of the workforce for the host country” (Delgado Wise, Márquez Covarrubias, and Rodríguez Ramírez 2009, 44). The immigrants carry with them everything their country and their families invested in them, including skills necessary to perform a job that most of the time are

acquired from public education (from public resources). Additionally, they bring with them the strategies of survival of their families, their ways of connecting with others to get resources (social capital), and the time and other resources used to reproduce their lives. They also bring economic wealth accumulated not only by themselves but also through a family-based support network.

Next, we will review how forced migration is exemplified by Honduran immigration to the city of New Orleans (United States) post–Hurricane Katrina. I will illustrate the specific factors and instances that drove this movement.

WHAT PRODUCED FORCED MIGRATION IN HONDURAS?

The following includes a review of how the structural adjustment measures adopted in Honduras in the 1990s were part of the so-called *capital accumulation mechanisms* (Delgado Wise, Márquez Covarrubias, and Rodríguez Ramírez 2009) that considerably affected the lives of people in their places of origin and expelled them to the core countries, such as the United States. These measures are an example of the institutional apparatus that makes forced mobility possible at its origin.

Honduras has suffered a significant impact from some of the most aggressive hurricanes in recent years. Before Hurricane Katrina came “Hurricane Fifi (1974), where extensive productive areas in the northern part of the country were destroyed, or Hurricane Mitch (1998)” (González Carías 2003, 135–36), which caused even more damage in the agricultural sector. The destruction of agriculture was a tremendous problem because it has been the country’s economic engine, the main source of work opportunities, and the main export sector, thus serving as the primary source of national income (FAO 2020).²

Honduras is considered a country of emigrants. Nowadays, around 16 percent of its total population lives outside the country, 8 percent (655,000) in the United States (O’Connor, Batalova, and Bolter 2019). The departure of these people has been justified by violence, political and religious struggles, natural catastrophes, and especially economic crises (González Carías 2003). Indeed, all of these factors have deepened

the precarious living conditions of the people living there and, as a consequence, their emigration. Nonetheless, Silvia González Carías (2003) highlights that those disasters in Honduras were only “aggravating factors to the socioeconomic difficulties already prevailing in the country” (González Carías 2003, 136).³

González Carías (2003, 123) identifies “the loss of hope in the country, the disenchantment with the institutions and their governments, and the deterioration of the productive apparatus” as motivations to leave. She points out that “many people left for other reasons and not precisely because they were victims of disasters like Mitch. The decision to emigrate had been made before the hurricane.” The high Honduran migratory movement at the beginning of the twenty-first century originated in the economic management of the country over the preceding decades. Poverty was already ingrained in the Honduran people as a product of “structural adjustments to the economy, the fall in the international prices of its main export products, corruption, an unsustainable foreign debt and the deterioration by Hurricane Mitch” (González Carías 2003, 37).

After Hurricane Mitch, actions were taken, such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy, which in 2002 already foresaw an increase in emigrants by 2015 (González Carías 2003). The direct impact on the Honduran population was evidenced by unemployment, the expansion of informal employment, a very low per capita income, and inflation. Already by the end of the 1990s, Honduras ranked 116th out of 173 countries in the world, according to the measurement of the Human Development Index (González Carías 2003).

Noé Pino and Andy Thorpe (1992) state that Honduras formally adopted structural adjustment measures at the beginning of Rafael Leonardo Callejas’s mandate through the Law of Structural Organization of the Economy in the 1990s. The measures focused on redefining the style of economic growth, giving primacy to the export sector as the source of foreign exchange and to the private sector as the engine of growth. These authors argue that the macroeconomic tool of devaluation of the Honduran currency (the lempira) established the basis for inequality. They insist that the manipulation of the exchange rate of four lempiras to one dollar in the Structural Ordinance Law was a key action. It was justified as a strategy to reduce the price of Honduran exportations in order to attract the international market and to increase Honduran export volumes. They

indicate that this decision was intended to discourage imports as well by increasing their costs. But instead, the companies and the population continued to purchase goods from abroad at much higher prices. With the increase in prices, inflation grew.

Pino and Thorpe (1992) sustain that the devaluation was nothing more than a mechanism that allowed those who received dollars for their exports to obtain a valuable increase in their income in lempiras. This stimulus benefited a few groups with variable income, such as merchants and entrepreneurs (especially in the export sector) and severely affected groups with fixed income, such as wage earners. Subsequently, inflationary pressure prompted an increase in taxes on sales, production, and the prices of petroleum derivatives. This triggered a rise in the price of many goods and a fall in real wages (Pino and Thorpe 1992). It finally led to precarious living standards and high crime-related violence. The systematic macroeconomic impoverishment of Honduras's population was possible through the government's political instability and corruption and the so-called narco-government and its pact with delinquency. In this context, the vulnerable population became an easy target for gang recruitment and extortion. As a measure of survival, it unleashed the emigration of thousands of men and women long before the hurricanes. It is presumed that, to a large extent, migration was the product of adjustment measures.

POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS, A MAGNET FOR LATINX IMMIGRANTS

During Hurricane Katrina, the levees built to contain the rising waters of the sea ruptured. This caused a great flood of the city along with its subsequent destruction. The reconstruction of infrastructure, houses, streets, buildings, institutions, and medical centers was a need that had to be covered immediately. Latinx workers—of which many were Honduran—after being forced out by the crises in their home countries accepted the dirty, dangerous, and sometimes even degrading conditions involved in eliminating storm debris and putrid content from the flooded buildings (Fussell and Díaz 2015; referring to Fussell 2009).⁴ Their hard work played an important role in the city's reconstruction. The following

section will explore how government administration in the United States during the crisis caused by Hurricane Katrina provoked a massive mobilization of immigrants to the city of New Orleans in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to know exactly how many Latinx workers entered the city in this period, though “in March 2006, a survey of construction workers in New Orleans found that about half were Latino and of those, half were undocumented” (Fussell and Díaz 2015, 2). Among the other half were Latinx who arrived with an H-2B temporary guest work visa provided by construction companies, restaurants, and hotels (Fussell and Díaz 2015). How was it possible that so many undocumented immigrants were hired during the reconstruction?

Elizabeth Fussell and Lucas Díaz (2015) indicate that this massive entry was possible because of a kind of Manichean law to allow “selective” immigration: “Several federal policy changes created conditions that made Latino immigrants the ideal labor force to quickly and cheaply rebuild the devastated area” (Fussell and Díaz 2015, 3). The suspension of Davis-Bacon rules was the most notorious and impacted change during this period: “On September 8, Bush issued an executive order suspending the Davis-Bacon rules, according to which construction workers on federal contracts must receive at least the average wage in the region. That decision was followed days later by the Department of Homeland Security’s announcement that it will not apply penalties to employers who hire staff without proper employment documents” (Manning 2005). All the regulations interrupted by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and other federal institutions created with the objective to protect the job markets and the borders got a pause in the city for a four-month period (Fussell and Díaz 2015). This key moment made it possible to admit workers like Hondurans without regular documentation looking for opportunities outside their countries of origin under uncertain conditions of living.

Although the Davis-Bacon rules were reinstated on November 8, 2005, after pressure from protests convened by the labor movement and political organizations, the contracts previously signed were not subject to this regulation (Fussell and Díaz 2015). As a consequence, many irregularities in the workplace were allowed within the law for about four months. Fussell and Díaz (2015) report abuses to the Latinx population

by their employers during this period—for example, the abandonment of injured undocumented workers in hospitals, as well as irregularities in payment of wages. Employers could pay unfair wages, and in some cases, workers even tolerated nonpayment of wages because they did not have anyone to complain to and they feared deportation or incarceration. The working conditions were so unfair and precarious that when a worker complained of conflicts in the workplace, they were exposed and even denounced to the police.

These risk management decisions were clear samples of the incentive to supply the temporary labor market with low-qualified personnel and low salaries without any warranty. They did not take into account the consequences of attracting this magnitude of people nor of their possible subsequent insertion in the society. After the reconstruction, contracts and visas expired, but many of these workers settled in the city despite hostile conditions, with or without the protection of the law, and inserted themselves through precarious ways into society. Through this example, it can be observed how migration is triggered in the periphery (countries) and how it is connected with the central through the promotion of laws and institutional forms that attract it. As such, it is an interlaced process.

THE HONDURAN SETTLEMENT

As discussed above, many Hondurans actively participated in all types of jobs during the reconstruction of the city in the early twenty-first century. Construction companies, for instance, increased their job openings in positions such as debris-removal operators and construction workers. Also, hotels and restaurants increased their number of cooks, servers, and housekeeping personnel. It is thought that Hondurans fulfilled many of these positions. In addition, other informal jobs were created around the city's rebuilding, including "taco truck" cooks and their drivers who served these laborers (Fussel and Díaz 2015). Unfortunately, there is no disaggregated data of the reconstruction workers' living standards by nationality during this period. Nevertheless, the data provided by three censuses (ACS 2000, 2006–10, 2011–15) illustrates some features of Honduran settlement in the city since 2000: the population growth over time, their geographical locations, and their socioeconomic conditions. The

Honduran population has seen exponential growth in New Orleans since the year 2000, at least doubling in number. This can be viewed in table 1.1 and figure 1.1.

TABLE 1.1 Hispanic/Honduran population growth in New Orleans compared with the total population in the greater metro area by cities within

	NEW ORLEANS		KENNER		METAIRIE	
	2000	2011-2015 ESTIMATES	2000	2011-2015 ESTIMATES	2000	2011-2015 ESTIMATES
New Orleans total population	484,674	376,738	70,517	66,993	146,136	142,715
Hispanic population	14,826	20,601	9,602	15,386	10,595	21,049
% of Hispanics in New Orleans	3.1	5.5	13.6	23.0	7.3	14.7
Honduran population	2,329	4,474	1,561	5,805	1,511	6,177
% of Hondurans within the His- panic group	15.7	21.7	16.3	37.7	14.3	29.3

Source: Data from ACS (2000, 2015).

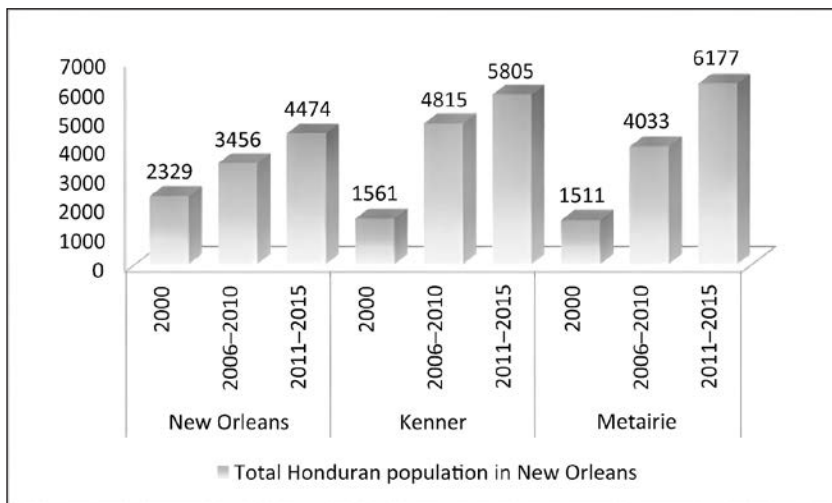


FIGURE 1.1 Honduran population growth in New Orleans over three different time periods. (Data from ACS [2000, 2010, 2015].)

From the census comparison, it was found that the Honduran population experienced consistent growth in the metro area between 2000 and 2015. The most relevant span is detected in the period from 2000 to 2010, especially in the cities of Kenner and Metairie, where Hondurans had firmly established communities during the last century. Of the three cities, Kenner received the most newcomers between 2000 and 2015 (an increase of almost 150%). There is no mistake in calling it “Little Honduras” in reference to the congregation in that location.

According to Samantha Euraque (2004, 10), the first Hondurans who arrived in the city “began to establish a community that would be referred to as ‘El Barrio Lempira’” in the lower area of uptown (Upper Garden District) in New Orleans, where they opened small businesses like supermarkets and restaurants that largely served the Latinx population. These pioneers arrived in the city making use of the connections that the Standard Fruit Company established between Honduras and NOLA when it started its banana production operations at La Ceiba at the end of the nineteenth century.

This movement was facilitated first through the multiple businesses created around the distribution and commercialization of bananas in the United States, and then through the benefits and facilities the company offered to its employees. One of the benefits was the foundation of La Mazapan, a K–12 school model that was recognized by SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) at La Ceiba in Honduras. Eventually, the beneficiaries could use these diplomas to continue their education or look for a job in the United States (Euraque 2004).

The growth of the Honduran population in New Orleans experienced a first rebound in the middle of the twentieth century. Gonzalez Carias (2003) indicates that events such as the emission of the Labor Reform, dictated by Tiburcio Carias in 1949, produced this mobilization. The Fruit Company, which was the first source of employment in the country by then, decided to reduce their labor force substantially after this amendment. In addition, the devastation of Hurricane Hatti, which destroyed the majority of plantations, caused the bankruptcy of these companies, which led to huge job losses. In the aftermath, unemployed Hondurans migrated to a place they were already familiar with in the United States—New Orleans—in hopes of better opportunities. With this gigantic entry into the city, the community relocated to the cities

of Kenner and Metairie. Their businesses moved with them as well, settling in Williams Boulevard (Kenner) and other places around the city (Euraque 2004).

By 2000, some neighborhood populations in Kenner reached levels of up to 89 percent Honduran. Similarly, Metairie became another suburb of Jefferson Parish that contained a big portion of this population (Sluyter et al. 2015, 82; from the 2000 census). As can be seen, the Honduran community has not stopped growing in either location.

The Honduran feasts, such as La Morenita celebration and Mass, are examples of the large congregation of Hondurans in New Orleans. Feasts have been celebrated in one of these two metro-area cities (Kenner and Metairie) for at least the last four decades, and they have been planned by organizations of the civil society, generally related to the Catholic Church, such as Damas de Suyapa, Apostolado Hispano, and Asociación de Hondureños Unificada de Louisiana. In 2017, the Mass was celebrated by Father Juan Ángel López, spokesperson and bishop for the Archdiocese of Tegucigalpa (Honduras). A banquet of typical Honduran food took place in the church cafeteria, bringing the Honduran community together (Field diary, February 3, 2017). Father López was the special assistant for the community that year (Fieldwork 2017).

La Morenita, as her followers know the virgin Santa María de Suyapa, is an essential Honduran patron saint. According to popular belief, La Morenita was called Coyapa (In the Water of Palm Trees) in the Indigenous language. Coyapa made her appearance in an Indigenous town in the southwest of Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, on a Saturday of February 1747 in the form of a small miraculous sculpture (InterfaithMary.net, n.d.). From then on, the peasants and the remaining Hondurans adopted the Virgin of Suyapa as the country's patron saint. Migrants are no exception.

The Hondurans residing in New Orleans commemorate La Morenita's appearance during the first week of February with a great party, which is promoted by members of the Hispanic community. Throughout the year, for instance, the Ladies of Suyapa hold different events to collect funds to finance the festival. A sign of the festival's importance is the presence of the Honduran Consul in New Orleans, priests, archdiocese leaders, and other celebrities every year. Local television channels, such as Tele-mundo, cover this event with great enthusiasm (Fieldwork 2017/2018).



FIGURE 1.2 Mass for the feast of La Morenita, patron saint of Honduras, in Saint Clement of Rome Church (Metairie, New Orleans). (Source: Fieldwork 2017; photo by author.)

As we can see, the Honduran community has its own places in the city, both geographical and symbolic. However, the socioeconomic conditions are not optimal for all members. Some Hondurans living in New Orleans are homeowners, have a job, earn a good income, and have reached high levels of education, but many cannot enter the labor market and do not earn a proper income to cover basic goods and services like healthy food, housing, health insurance, or childcare services.

Table 1.2 shows that from 2010 to 2012, nearly one-third of the total population (35%) living in the metro area was employed in a full-time job, with a median income of around \$30,000 per year for those working. It also indicates that more than half did not have health insurance. The majority of this population (62%) was considered tenants, not owning the houses where they lived or any other property. This data shows the indicator's average of this population within those years. Looking at it as a whole, it sights an impoverished group, but if we look at the same indicators during different periods of time, they show a big difference between

TABLE 1.2 General characteristics of the Honduran population in the New Orleans metro area

Total population	25,234
Men	57%
Women	43%
Full-time employees	8,732
Men	66.3%
Women	33.7%
Homeowners (men and women)	
Percent	37.4%
Tenants (men and women)	
Percent	62.6%
Health insurance (men and women)	
Private	28.1%
Public coverage	25.6%
No health insurance	50.6%
Income (full-time workers' annual salary)	
Men	\$35,948
Women	\$27,878

Source: Data from ACS (2010).

the Hondurans who arrived after the hurricane and the ones who had been living in the city prior to the disaster. “The new Latino immigrants were similar to the pre-Katrina Latinx in their national origins—mostly Central American—but their recent arrivals to the U.S. meant they were less integrated” than were those who arrived in the last century (Fussell and Díaz 2015, 3).

In this research, it is presumed that the immigrants who arrived after the hurricane created more connections and routes than previous immigrants had established, which led to a population with these new characteristics in the city in the years after the hurricane. Through this presumption, it is possible to explain how the population experienced this big change in their general characteristics since 2000. There are two specific variables that best represent the less integrated new Honduran population in the city: “1) legal status, especially among those who lack authorization and their families and friends; and 2) limited English

language proficiency, which is more prevalent among the recently arrived” (Fussel and Dias 2015, 4).⁵ These characteristics are considered the Achilles’ heel for most immigrants, especially for the Latinx community. “Legal statuses, as created through immigration laws, determine immigrant families’ access to goods and services while also shaping their sense of belonging in US society” (Menjívar, Abrego, and Schmalzbauer 2016, 28). Menjívar, Abrego, and Schmalzbauer (2016) indicate that until now, and for all nationalities, Latinx families generally have been blocked from public services and benefits in different ways. For instance, with the increase of migratory control, Latinx people tend to avoid public institutions because of the fear of being asked to prove their regularized documentation. The lack of information also plays an important role in their isolation, as well as the few opportunities to learn the English language.

The following data provides information about the proficiency in the English language for the Honduran population above eighteen years old living in New Orleans in different periods since 2000. Table 3 and figure 1.2 show that 75 percent of the total population living in the city in 2000 was proficient in the English language.⁶ That percentage decreases over the years in the different cities of the metro area. After the hurricane passed, between 2006 and 2010, this decrease was considerably greater, especially in the city of Kenner, where it fell by almost 20 percent. These two variables experienced an inverse relationship: the greater the population increase, the lower the English proficiency in this population. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the massive arrival of Hondurans after Katrina brought with it a population with different characteristics than the previous residents in New Orleans had, including being less fluent in the English language and less integrated into society.

CONCLUSION

This research emphasizes the substantial difference between two groups of Hondurans who moved to New Orleans: those who entered before the year 2000 and those who immigrated in the twenty-first century. The majority who arrived earlier were inserted into society in more favorable conditions, at least in the economic sense. They acquired similar goods and lifestyles that the native middle class obtained to reproduce their lives out of vulnerability. Most of them managed to buy a house and

TABLE 1.3 English language levels of proficiency of population over 18 years old

HONDURANS									
	NEW ORLEANS			KENNER			METAIRIE		
	2000	2006–2010	2011–2015	2000	2006–2010	2011–2015	2000	2006–2010	2011–2015
Total population	2,329	3,456	4,474	1,561	4,815	5,805	1,511	4,033	6,177
age 18–64	1,687	2,697	3,349	1,167	3,775	4,393	1,055	2,883	4,995
Speak only English	115	407	639	43	354	503	149	280	832
Speak “very good” English	867	586	1,013	606	1,523	1,684	527	1,233	1,044
Speak “good” English	434	586	332	287	670	784	223	626	936
Proficient (speaks “very good” or “good” English)	1,301	1,172	1,345	893	2,193	2,468	750	1,859	1,980

Source: Data from ACS (2000, 2010, 2015).

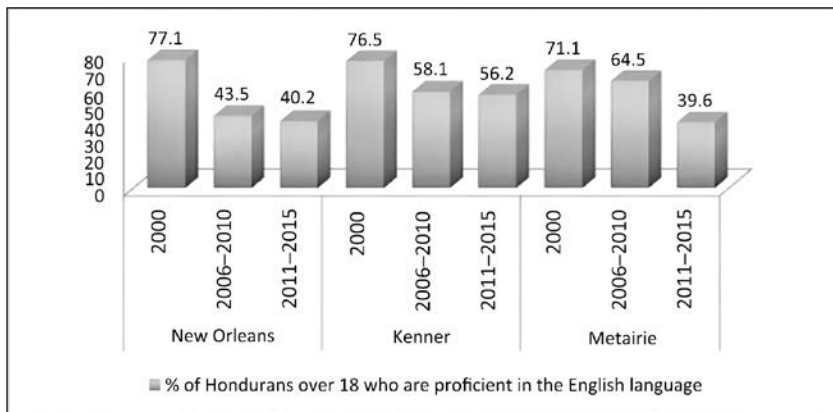


FIGURE 1.3 Percentage of Hondurans over eighteen who are proficient in the English language. (Data from ACS [2000, 2010, 2015].)

reached high educational levels, among other achievements. It is thought that this was a population that mobilized with some initial resources. This claim doesn't suggest that they were entirely assimilated by society or acculturated.

However, those who entered in large numbers after 2005 are part of contemporary capitalist processes, explained by forced migration. This group of people is part of the population impoverished by the political and governmental management in Honduras, the country's indebtedness to international institutions, and the application of measures that deprive the most vulnerable sectors. This group of migrants traveled in precarious conditions, attracted by job offers in first-world countries. These migrants were also characterized by precariousness as a byproduct of an anomalous institutional management. As a consequence, they faced serious complications in their livelihoods at the destination. Poor command of the English language, for example, limited their insertion into formal jobs. However, what causes the greatest problems was the legal status of undocumented people, which characterizes the majority of this population and which they have not managed to modify until now.

NOTES

1. It is the "historical process of economic, social and political polarization between regions, countries and classes derived from the dynamics of capitalist accumulation, the international division of labor, and class conflicts at various levels and levels" (Delgado Wise, Márquez Covarrubias, and Rodríguez Ramírez 2009, p. 28).
2. FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations).
3. She illustrates this argument by documenting the stories of around one hundred returned undocumented Honduran emigrants who passed through migrants' houses in Tecún Uman and Guatemala City between October 1999 and February 2000.
4. In 2000, the Honduran population represented 13.9 percent of the Hispanic population in New Orleans, and in 2013 it increased to constitute 25 percent of this group. It was one of the minorities that doubled its presence in the city, besides the Mexican population (Fussell and Díaz 2015).
5. In order to know which variables best represent the Honduran undocumented group in the United States, a multivariate regression was run using the category

of non-citizen Hondurans according to the 2000–10 estimates of the American Community Survey. These were the results:

HONDURANS NON-CITIZEN = $149.06 - 135.24$ (POLITICAL TREND BY STATE) $- 0.63$ (HONDURANS WITH AN EDUCATION LOWER THAN NINTH GRADE) $+ 1.34$ (HONDURANS WHO SPEAK LESS THAN VERY GOOD ENGLISH) $- 0.15$ (HONDURANS EMPLOYED IN THE SERVICES SECTOR) $- 1.94$ (HONDURANS RECEIVING SNAP BENEFITS) $- 0.00049$ (HISPANIC NOT CITIZENS).

With a number of observations of 51, the probability of F is < 0.05 (0.0000), which means that this model composed of the previously detailed variables can explain the values of the dependent variable with a percentage of 99.37%. This is a very high level of explanation.

The most determining variable in this regression is the variable HONDURANS WHO SPEAK LESS THAN VERY GOOD ENGLISH. This has the highest coefficient and is the one that most explains the dependent variable. It is the only variable that in the model has a value of > 1.96 (16.37), which means that I reject the null hypothesis that the coefficient is 0 and I add the resulting coefficient that marks my relationship with the variable HONDURANS NON-CITIZEN. (American Community Survey, Social Characteristics Selection Table DP02 of the 2000–2010 survey estimates for Hispanics or Latinx of any race and for Hondurans in all states except Puerto Rico).

Through this result I could understand not just the principal characteristic of some populations but also how important the creation of opportunities is for learning the English language to achieve effective integration into U.S. society.

6. Being proficient in a language means that a person has the needed skills to be fluent in its use, the ability to communicate efficiently both orally and in writing.

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2

EXTERNALIZED

Deportation and Outsourcing in the U.S. Empire

HILARY GOODFRIEND

IN THIS chapter, I show that the changing demands of imperialist capitalist accumulation in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008 have destabilized the neoliberal migration pattern that has structured the mass movement of low-wage laborers from Mexico and Central America to the United States since the 1980s. Drawing from the theoretical frameworks of critical political economy and Latin American Marxist dependency theory, I argue that the imperialist U.S. state has directed a racialized process of migrant expulsion and exclusion in order to adapt to the shifting conditions of accumulation, a strategy that guarantees the continued subordination and dependent development of the region. Finally, I use the example of the employment of deportee labor in the outsourced call center industry in El Salvador to demonstrate how, in this context, U.S. capital finds ways to exploit low-wage racialized service workers in the region from abroad, thereby maintaining and even exacerbating the structural inequalities that have historically separated the dependent periphery from the imperial center.

DEPENDENCY

I take the concept of dependency from the work of Latin American Marxist scholars like Marini (1973), Dos Santos (1994), Bambirra (1978),

and Osorio (2016). This tradition, which builds on Marxist theories of imperialism from thinkers like Lenin (1939) and Luxemburg (2003), conceptualizes the reproduction of uneven development between the imperialist centers of capitalist development and the Latin American postcolonial periphery. These Marxist dependency theorists affirm that the conditions associated with underdevelopment do not constitute a deviation, delay, or distortion of capitalist development. Instead, they arise as a necessary counterpart of imperialist development and capital accumulation in an integrated but asymmetrical global economic system. According to Marini (1973, 18), dependency is “a relationship of subordination between formally independent nations, in whose framework the relations of production of the subordinate nations are modified or re-created in order to ensure the expanded production of dependency.”¹ In this formulation, dependency is not a condition or situation but a social relation, reproduced through structural mechanisms of value appropriation and transfer from dependent economies to the imperial center.

Dependency theory emerged in the context of debates over theories of development amidst the postwar struggles for national liberation and decolonization (Katz 2018). Marxist dependency theory is a response to both neoclassical proposals like that of Rostow’s stages of growth (1960) and orthodox Marxist insistence on the need to achieve bourgeois capitalist revolution before attempting socialism, and it developed in dialogue with the structuralist analysis advanced by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, in Spanish) under the midcentury leadership of Raúl Prebisch (1998). Militant theorists like Marini (1973) demonstrated how capitalist development in imperialist economies requires the siphoning of value from the dependent periphery through mechanisms like the unequal exchange of low-productivity primary materials and agricultural goods for high-productivity finished industrial products, as well as enclave economies of extractive industry, monopoly price-fixing, and, increasingly, the repatriation of profits from local subsidiaries by transnational corporations headquartered in the imperial center. Such mechanisms reproduce and often deepen the historic inequalities and indicators associated with underdevelopment that divide imperialist economies from former colonies.

Marxist dependency theory was marginalized from Latin American critical thought and debate during the heyday of neoliberal hegemony. “The concepts of dependency did not succumb. They were silenced by the neoliberal counterrevolution,” argues Katz (2018, 130). But that hegemony was significantly fractured by the 2008 global financial crisis and ensuing economic instability (Peck 2010). Neoliberalism’s false promise of upward global economic convergence lies bare; instead, the conditions associated with underdevelopment are increasingly present in the imperialist core. And yet, national borders remain essential markers and makers of economic disparity. In this context, critical Mexican scholars have used the tools of Marxist dependency theory to make insightful interventions about the uneven movement of labor and capital across borders and the role of mass migration in reproducing the subordinate insertion of the periphery in the globalized capitalist economy. I turn to these thinkers in the following section.

THE NEOLIBERAL MIGRATION PATTERN

Aragonés and Salgado (2016, 407) affirm that “labor migration is one of the ways in which the transfer of surplus to the benefit of the center is effected.” In this context, the authors theorize patterns of migration as associated with patterns of uneven capital accumulation that predominate in a particular historical moment. Migration patterns are configured by “economic articulations between the receiving pole and the sending pole, therefore, we are talking about structural conditions and not simply conjunctural ones” (Aragonés and Salgado 2016, 406). From Mexico, the authors identify three broad historical migration patterns: the “classic” transatlantic migrations of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the mass migrations to the United States during the postwar period of Fordist accumulation and import substitution industrialization in Latin America from 1945 to 1970, and the mass migrations to the United States during the period of neoliberalism from 1980 to 2009 (2016, 408). It is this final pattern and its crisis that concern the present inquiry.

The 1970s saw the dawn of a global capitalist economic restructuring. This process was the result of the exhaustion of what Harvey (1990,

2005) terms a Fordist-Keynesian regime of capital accumulation led by the imperialist economies of Europe and the United States. This regime was characterized by a tense accord between organized labor, capital, and the state that afforded relative stability and security to labor and imposed certain controls and regulations on capital in the decades following World War II. In the face of mounting economic stagnation, capital launched a counteroffensive to restore conditions for accumulation. The transition to a regime of flexible accumulation, or neoliberalism, was achieved through policies of liberalization, privatization, and free trade, leading to the dispersal of production into global commodity chains, the processes of financialization, and the weakening of organized labor over the course of the 1980s and 1990s.

In the global periphery, neoliberal counter-reforms were often imposed through antidemocratic means, most notoriously in Chile following Pinochet's 1973 coup against the elected socialist government of Salvador Allende. Central America, for its part, was incorporated into the neoliberal accumulation regime in the wake of the defeat of the insurgent revolutionary movements of the 1980s, following the collapse of state-led import substitution-based industrialization and a prolonged period of armed conflict and U.S.-sponsored counterrevolutionary violence.

Neoliberal restructuring engendered new mechanisms of dependent capitalist reproduction in Latin America. The new accumulation regime forged a new international division of labor, converting Mexico, Central America's Northern Triangle, and much of the Caribbean into labor reserves for U.S. capital. Delgado Wise and Márquez Covarrubias (2006, 42) theorize the implementation of a "labor export-led development model" in Mexico, beginning in 1986 with the country's incorporation into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (today's World Trade Organization). In Delgado Wise and Márquez Covarrubias's framing, neoliberal counter-reforms imposed by U.S.-dominated international financial institutions drove Mexico to export cheap labor to the United States both indirectly, in the form of maquiladora manufacturing, and directly, in the form of the mass forced migration of workers displaced and dispossessed by structural adjustment and free trade. Central America soon followed. In El Salvador, neoliberal restructuring began in 1989, before the signing of the 1992 Peace Accords brought the country's twelve-year civil war to a negotiated close. The counter-reforms included the privatization of

the national banking, pension, and telecommunications systems as well as the substitution of the U.S. dollar for the Salvadoran colón, and they culminated with the 2006 implementation of the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) (Moreno 2004).

Both the direct and indirect export of labor contributed to the reproduction of dependency in the region. The new international division of labor transferred the lowest-skilled, most labor-intensive segments of production to the dependent economies of the periphery, while the higher-skilled, technologically dynamic segments remained anchored in the imperialist core. Typically housed in deregulated Export Processing Zones designed to benefit foreign capital and disadvantage local workers, the maquiladora industry is characterized by extremely low wages, precarious labor conditions, and minimal integration into the domestic economy (Delgado Wise and Márquez Covarrubias 2006, 43). Marini (1977, 214) identified the industry as an enclave structure, in which the profits of the capital invested are repatriated to the imperialist center: "The fact that the capital invested in the maquila uses the dependent economy's labor has practically the same effect as if that labor were physically transferred to the imperialist economy to be exploited by the parent company." Indeed, the conditions created for foreign capital by neoliberal restructuring in dependent economies, from tax incentives and regulatory exemptions to wage suppression, permit the steady suctioning of value from the periphery to the center.

Following neoliberal restructuring in El Salvador, the maquila industry flourished as the agricultural sector withered. From 5.2 percent of exports in 1979, maquiladora manufacturing represented 53 percent of exports by 1999; in turn, traditional agricultural exports of coffee, cotton, sugar, and shrimp fell from 65 percent to 12.2 percent in the same period (Segovia 2002, 72). Wage suppression was central to the new export strategy, as salaries constituted 80 percent of maquiladora operating costs in the early 2000s in El Salvador. Despite a productivity increase of over 134 percent from 1993 to 2002, the minimum wage for maquila workers—the majority of them women—rose by less than 36 percent in that period and remains fixed below that of other industrial or service workers (Anner 2011, 30). To keep wages down, union organizing was also repressed. Anner (2011, 31) calculates that the average unionization rate in Salvadoran Export Processing Zones between 1980 and 2004 was

0.46 percent, against 9.83 percent in the rest of the manufacturing sector. By 2020, maquiladoras in El Salvador produced mainly garment and textile products, as well as electronic components like microchips and plastic products, principally for export to the United States (Banco Central de Reserva 2021). Nevertheless, while maquiladora exports remain a principal pillar of Salvadoran exports, manufacturing has stagnated in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, as we will discuss below.

The direct export of labor, in turn, gave rise to the neoliberal migration pattern, under which the mass expulsion of low-wage, unskilled migrant laborers from the dependent economies of Central America and Mexico fueled the process of deindustrialization in the United States, supplying racialized, deportable, and devalued labor power to the booming service and construction sectors, as well as to the more traditional agricultural sector. As Sassen (2008) demonstrates, neoliberal restructuring promoted a growing demand in global financial centers for migrant labor to provide maintenance, cleaning, and culinary work in offices, hotels, and restaurants, as well as for domestic and care work and transportation. At the same time, migrant remittances became a vital support for the precarious restructured economies of the dependent periphery, both as supplements to suppressed household incomes and as foreign exchange for governments (Aragónés and Salgado 2016; Delgado Wise and Márquez Covarrubias 2007; Delgado 2016). Roldán (2013, 123) describes this migration relationship with the concept of “subordinate complementarity,” characteristic of the asymmetrical relationship of dependency that has historically conditioned the region’s insertion in the U.S.-led global capitalist economy.

Central to this neoliberal migration pattern was the production of migrant illegality and deportability. Even as the implementation of asymmetrical commercial frameworks like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and CAFTA-DR in 2006 spurred the mass migration of workers uprooted from restructured Mexican and Central American economies to the United States, immigration reforms in this period effectively criminalized their entry into U.S. labor markets. Together, the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of that same year broadened the population of migrants subject to deportation, accelerated deportation proceedings, increased penalties for reentry, limited judicial discretion, and expanded the federal immigration

authorities' collaboration with state and local law enforcement (Kansroom 2012, 12). Enforcement at the U.S. southern border also ballooned: from 3,700 agents in 1986, the Border Patrol boasted 9,200 agents by the year 2000, a figure that more than doubled in the following decades under the auspices of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (Goodman 2020, 175–81).

De Genova (2002, 438) writes that “the disciplinary operation of an apparatus for the everyday production of migrant ‘illegality’ is never simply intended to achieve the putative goal of deportation. It is deportability, and not deportation per se, that has historically rendered undocumented migrant labor a distinctly disposable commodity.” The progressive criminalization of migration in this period did not serve to halt the influx of undocumented migrants or to purge them from within U.S. borders but rather to ensure their unequal insertion in segmented U.S. labor markets, that is, to guarantee the availability of a more docile and compliant class of racialized laborers vulnerable to expulsion. Indeed, the steady increase of immigration enforcement throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s resulted in the growth, not reduction, of the undocumented population in the United States—a trend that would not be reversed until the 2009 recession and its aftermath.

In the case of El Salvador, migration to the United States in the neoliberal postwar period outpaced wartime migration significantly. According to the United Nations Development Program, an average 51,156 people fled El Salvador annually from 1980 to 1990, the years of the conflict's height; from 1990 to 2000, that figure rose to 63,305 per year and still averaged 61,942 from 2000 to 2010 (PNUD 2010, 242). Wartime migrants were largely driven by the insecurity and violence provoked by the armed conflict, while the majority of postwar migrants cited economic factors (Ruiz 2011, 39–40). From 94,400 in 1980 and 465,400 in 1990, the population of Salvadoran-born migrants in the United States reached 817,300 in 2000; by 2018, an estimated 1,419,300 Salvadoran migrants resided in the United States, equivalent to roughly 22 percent of the population of El Salvador (Migration Policy Institute 2022). These migrants were largely employed in the tertiary sector: a 2007 survey found 51 percent of working Salvadorans in the United States were employed in services, 19 percent in commerce and transportation, 17 percent in construction and agriculture, and 13 percent in manufacturing (Ruiz 2011, 66). As the

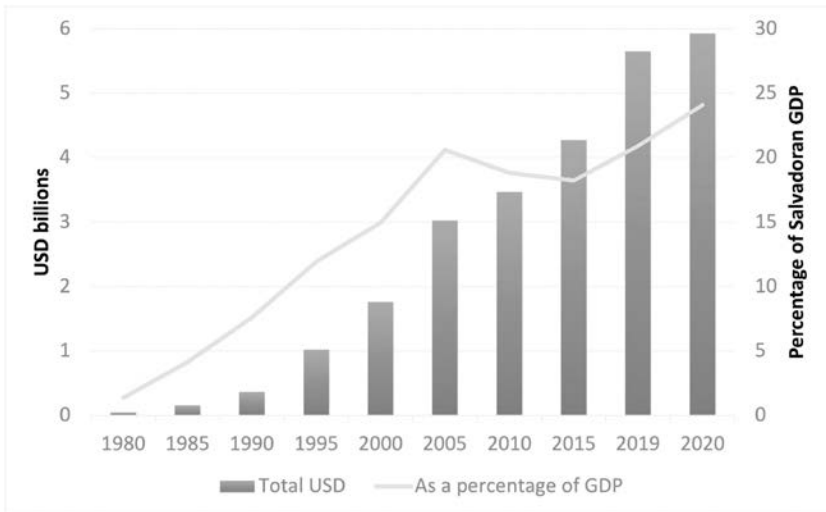


FIGURE 2.1 Migrant remittances to El Salvador 1980–2020. (Data from World Bank [2022] and Banco Central de Reserva [2021].)

Salvadoran component of the U.S. workforce grew, so did El Salvador's reliance on migrant remittances. Remittances, which represented less than 2 percent of El Salvador's GDP in 1980, amounted to 20.6 percent by 2005 before a relative decline during the post-2008 recession; by 2019, remittances again constituted nearly 21 percent of the country's GDP and reached a record 24 percent in 2020 (see figure 2.1). In this way, the direct export of racialized migrant labor under the neoliberal migration pattern helped to bind the Salvadoran economy to that of the United States in a highly unequal relationship of dependency.

CRISIS

The 2008 financial crisis and subsequent recession had a destabilizing effect on the global neoliberal accumulation regime, provoking a corresponding destabilization of the neoliberal migration pattern. In the decade and a half following the crisis, the logic of deportability that had dominated U.S. migration enforcement strategies has been increasingly displaced by one of mass expulsion and exclusion. The consolidation of a mass deportation regime in the United States and the progressive externalization

of migration controls into Mexico and Central America can be understood as an official, repressive response to the extended economic crisis unfolding since the 2008 market crash. Radical Black abolitionist thinkers like Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) have long emphasized the role of mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex in managing racialized relative surplus population, or reserve labor, within U.S. borders in the wake of neoliberal restructuring and deindustrialization. As Golash-Boza (2015, 2016) persuasively argues, mass deportation has relatedly emerged as an increasingly favored strategy to transfer racialized migrant relative surplus population to the periphery in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. At the same time, policies like Plan Frontera Sur, Safe Third Country Agreements, and Migrant Protection Protocols, or “Remain in Mexico” projected U.S. border controls farther and farther south, resulting in the mass containment and exclusion of migrants, particularly affecting those from Central America (Hernández López 2020). While the practices and machinery of mass deportation and border externalization are not unique to the post-2008 context, transformations in both U.S. enforcement strategies and migrant populations point to profound, qualitative shifts in the prevailing migration pattern in this period.

One key alteration in U.S. migration enforcement is the turn to formal deportation over voluntary departure. As Goodman (2020) highlights, voluntary departures—now termed *returns* by DHS—historically composed the vast majority of U.S. expulsions, accounting for 90 percent of all U.S. deportations over time. Nevertheless, in 2011, formal deportations, or what DHS calls *removals*, surpassed voluntary departures for the first time since 1941 (see figure 2.2). Voluntary departures are typically applied to Mexicans and have been preferred by both U.S. officials and migrants because they avoid costly and lengthy processes of detention and hearings as well as harsh legal consequences like reentry prohibitions, now prosecutable as a felony. Indeed, recourse to voluntary departure led to the so-called revolving door effect at the U.S. southern border; by 1985, 35 percent of deportees had experienced at least one prior expulsion (Goodman 2020, 115). The decline in voluntary departures, which in 2018 constituted less than 25 percent of all expulsions, and the increase in formal deportations signal what Goodman (2020, 168) terms “the deportation machine’s punitive turn.” From 30,039 in 1990 and 188,467 in 2000, U.S. removals reached their zenith in 2013

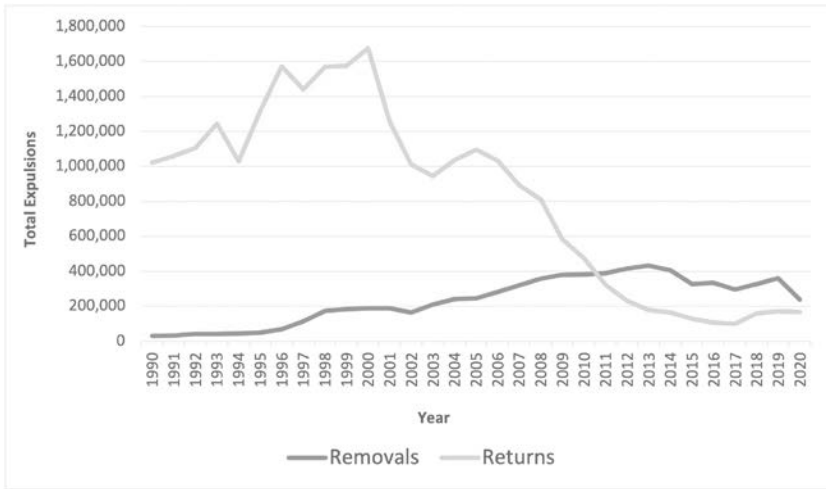


FIGURE 2.2 U.S. removals and returns, 1990–2019. (Data from Office of Immigration Statistics [2022].)

with 432,448 (see figure 2.2). U.S. deportations to El Salvador followed a similar pattern: from 4,439 in 2000 and 7,571 in 2005, the U.S. deported 18,911 Salvadorans in 2010 and peaked in 2014 with 28,946 (Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería 2021). The subsequent relative reduction in U.S. deportations was accompanied by an increase in expulsions of Central Americans from Mexico (see figure 2.3).

The externalization of U.S. migration controls to Mexico dates to at least the 1980s, when U.S. authorities sought to intercept Central American refugees fleeing Reagan’s counterrevolutionary wars (Goodman 2020, 183). Anguiano Téllez and Lucero Vargas (2020) mark the formalization of a Mexican policy of migrant containment in 1993 with the creation of the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM). The implementation of Plan Sur in 2001 represents another important precedent. This strategy expanded with the 2014 implementation of the Programa Frontera Sur along the Mexican border with Guatemala. The progressive criminalization of migrants in transit has rendered the journey north all the more costly, difficult, and dangerous, as migrants face the hostility of state authorities, organized crime, and the natural landscape. Since 2015, Mexico has deported more Central American migrants than has the United States, a tendency that held fast even throughout the extraordinary pandemic year of 2020 (see figure 2.3).

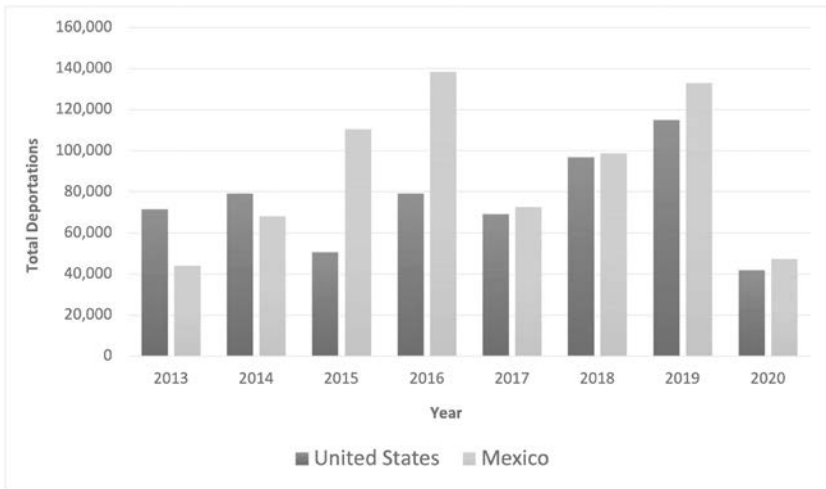


FIGURE 2.3 U.S. and Mexico deportations to northern Central America, 2013–2020. (Data from *Iniciativa de Gestión de Información de Movilidad Humana en el Triángulo Norte* [2021b].)

In addition to the evolving strategies of containment, exclusion, and expulsion, migrant populations themselves have transformed. Previously dominated by undocumented, job-seeking Mexican men, the populations apprehended near the U.S.-Mexico border increasingly comprise asylum-seeking families, women, and children from Central America, as well as a growing number from the Caribbean and South America. In the year 2000, Mexicans made up 98.26 percent of all those apprehended by CBP in the U.S. southwest border region, and 88.63 percent in 2010. In 2014, Mexicans constituted less than half of CBP border apprehensions for the first time, reaching a historic low of 28.63 percent in 2019 (see figure 2.4). That year, CBP reported 473,682 “family unit encounters” near the border, 90.89 percent of which were from Central America’s northern countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, and 301,806 “single adult encounters,” only 49.69 percent of which were Mexican. Similarly, CBP registered 4,444 unaccompanied children from northern Central America in 2010, and 13,724 unaccompanied Mexican children; by 2014, unaccompanied children from northern Central America reached 51,705 and 62,906 by 2019, while CBP reported 11,012 unaccompanied Mexican children in 2014 and 10,487 in 2019 (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2022a).

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted these trends in 2020, but the deviation was short-lived: in FY 2021, CBP reported 1,734,686 “enforcement encounters” at the southwest land border, a 77.5 percent increase from 2019. Migrants from northern Central America constituted a plurality of those apprehensions, at 40.4 percent; Mexicans accounted for 37.8 percent, while migrants from elsewhere made up an unprecedented 21.8 percent (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2022a). The externalization of U.S. migration controls into Central America, in turn, only escalated in the context of the pandemic: in 2020, Guatemalan authorities deported 5,190 migrants to Honduras—accounting for nearly 12 percent of all deportations to Honduras that year (EFE 2021); in a six-day period in January 2021 alone, Guatemala deported over 3,600 Honduran migrants attempting to transit through the country toward the U.S. border (DW 2021). Meanwhile, the U.S. strategy of mass exclusion was redoubled through the implementation of devastating measures such as the Migrant Protection Protocols or Remain in Mexico, which left 421,838 asylum seekers stranded in desperate conditions in Northern Mexico between 2020 and 2022 (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2022b), together with Title 42 expulsions, which saw over 2.2 million people deported under the pretext of public health protections in the same period (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2022a). This surge

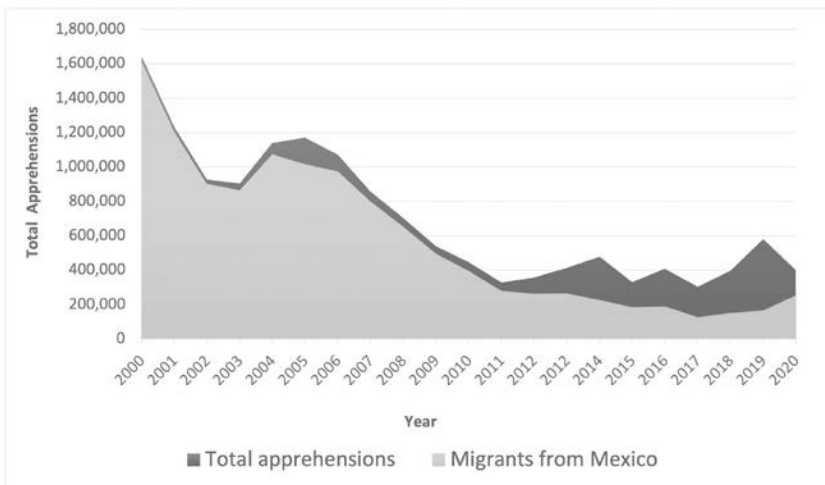


FIGURE 2.4 CBP apprehensions in southwest border region, 2000–2020. (Data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection [2022a].)

in expulsions contributed to the soaring number of CBP apprehensions. The agency's monthly operational update releases note that "the large number of expulsions during the pandemic has contributed to a higher-than-usual number of migrants making multiple border crossing attempts, which means that total encounters somewhat overstate the number of unique individuals arriving at the border" (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2022c).

Within Central American migrant populations, the increasing presence of women, children, and families is another indicator of the neoliberal migration pattern's destabilization. In the case of El Salvador, women made up only 7.7 percent of deportations from the United States in 2012, but reached 16.7 percent in 2015 and 15.2 percent in 2019, while Salvadoran minors, who accounted for 0.06 percent of U.S. deportees in 2012, constituted 3.64 percent in 2019 and jumped to 7.69 percent in 2020 (see figure 2.5). Such trends are even more stark among those deported from Mexico. In 2015, women accounted for 19.6 percent of Salvadoran deportees from Mexico and 22.7 percent in 2019, while minors comprised 22.6 percent and 33.2 percent, respectively (see figure 2.6). Mexican deportations fell sharply across the board in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic but began to recover in 2021, with deportations to El Salvador surpassing 2020 totals by 30.4 percent (Unidad de Política Migratoria 2022).

In addition to changes to the character of irregular migration at the U.S. southern border, the overall population of undocumented migrants in the United States declined post-2008, attributable to an exodus of Mexican migrants from the country in the decade following the recession. As new migration from Mexico to the United States declined in this period, authorized migration of highly educated job seekers from China and India increased (Zong et al. 2019).

These transformations suggest that the long-standing neoliberal migration pattern has been destabilized, both by the unraveling and exhaustion of the neoliberal political economy in the dependent periphery and by shifts in the accumulation strategies of U.S. capital in a broader context of prolonged economic crisis. The prevalence of asylum-seeking women, children, and families from Central America and beyond at the U.S. southern border indicate the abject failure and collapse of the neoliberal development model and its attendant social and political structures in dependent economies. The shift from the logic of deportability

to that of mass expulsion and exclusion, in turn, signals that U.S. capital's demand for cheap, racialized, and criminalized migrant labor in the service industry has been disrupted in the context of the same sprawling global crisis. In the face of these evident alterations of the prevailing relations of migration and accumulation, some thinkers offer proposals for the possible contours of new migration patterns.

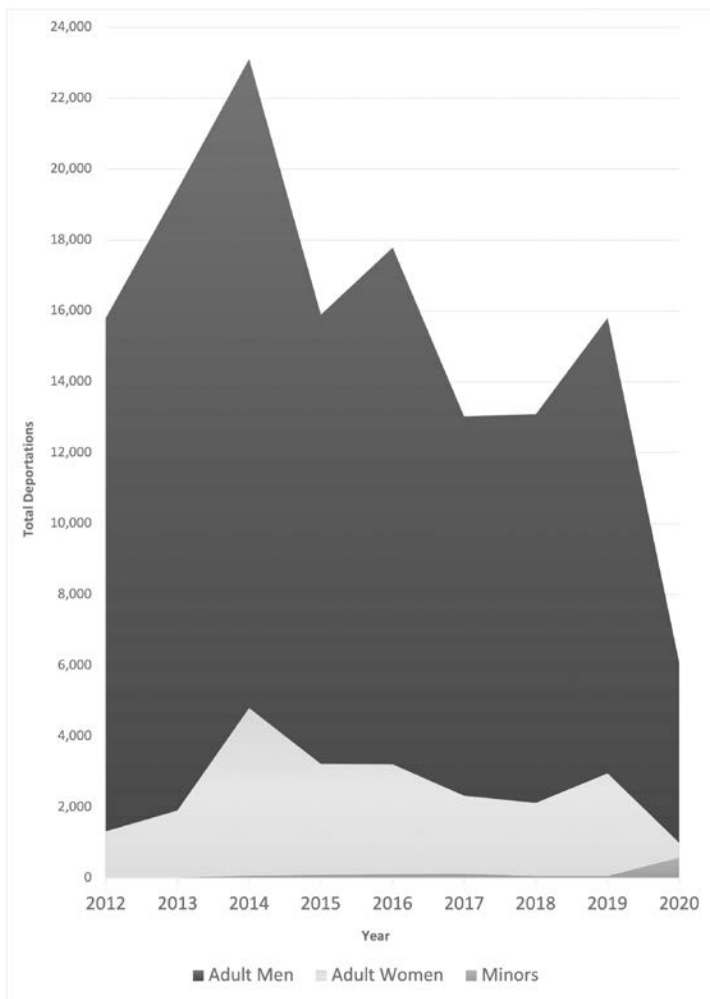


FIGURE 2.5 U.S. deportations to El Salvador, 2012–2020. (Data from *Iniciativa de Gestión de Información de Movilidad Humana en el Triángulo Norte* [2021a].)

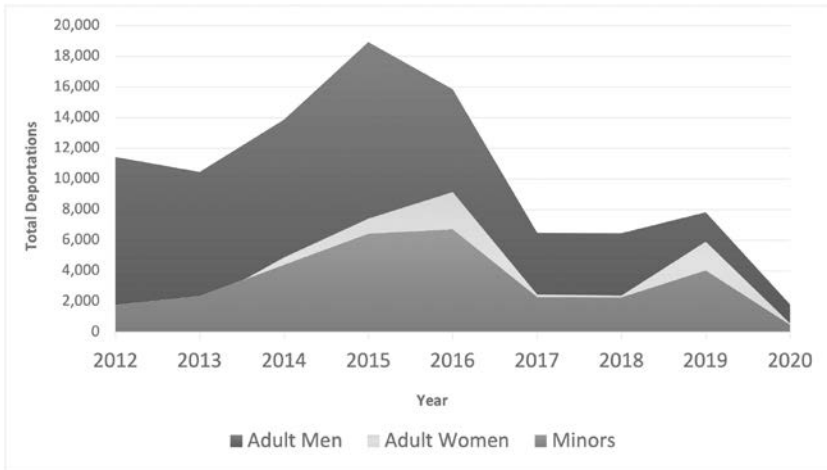


FIGURE 2.6 Mexico deportations to El Salvador, 2012–2020. (Data from Iniciativa de Gestión de Información de Movilidad Humana en el Triángulo Norte [2021a].)

For Feldman (2020, 171), “the political backlash against undocumented workers is undoubtedly related to the more generalized crisis of capitalist globalization, which is producing ever-larger numbers of surplus populations that, from the perspective of the transnational capitalist class and the global elite, must be contained and repressed.” Feldman (2020, 171, 174) contends that the state’s “assault on unauthorized crossings and undocumented workers” is part of a project to create “pools of authorized—yet ultimately deportable—noncitizen workers subject to a wide array of restrictions and surveillance” via the expansion of H-2A guest worker visas and contingent, precarious programs like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS). Aragonés and Salgado (2016), in turn, propose that we are witnessing the formation of a new migration pattern that prioritizes skilled, documented labor for U.S.-based high-tech or “knowledge” industries over low-waged, undocumented migrant service workers.

Whatever the outcome, the destabilization of the prevailing migration pattern that has bound the dependent economies of Central America and Mexico to the imperial center for decades raises serious questions for countries like El Salvador, where in 2021, migrant remittances amounted to 90 percent of the value of total exports and 26 percent of GDP (World Bank 2022). As the direct export of labor via mass migration

is increasingly stymied by an enforcement regime of mass exclusion and deportation, the growth of the call center industry in El Salvador points to possible alternative accumulation strategies for U.S. capital and dependent development in the periphery, through new processes of indirect labor exports.

RECYCLING

Since the 1980s, deportable, racialized migrant labor has helped fuel the growth of the tertiary sector in the United States. Advances in communications technologies combined with financial liberalization and labor deregulation, however, have facilitated the increased outsourcing of service industry jobs to the dependent periphery in the twenty-first century. Even as mass deportation expels racialized relative surplus population from the United States, it supplies English-fluent, long-time U.S. residents to staff the growing call center industry in Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean, where deportees again labor in service of U.S. capital at a fraction of the cost (Anderson 2016; Goodfriend 2018; Meoño Artiga 2016; O'Neill 2015; Rodkey 2016). In what follows, I consider the case of deportee call center labor in El Salvador to show how U.S. migration enforcement continues to serve U.S. capital in the context of the destabilization of the neoliberal migration pattern and contributes to the maintenance of the historical relationship of dependency that reproduces both the global inequities and local disparities associated with underdevelopment.

When the first call center opened in El Salvador in 1999, the maquiladora industry accounted for over 50 percent of the country's exports (Alfaro et al. 2019; Banco Central de Reserva 2021). But the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) carried out via call centers soon became a key new frontier for the indirect export of low-wage labor to the United States. Most of this growth has occurred in the post-2008 period: from just over 9,000 employees in 2011, El Salvador's call center workforce had nearly doubled in 2015 to 17,500 employees (Ministerio de Economía 2020); by 2020, over 29,000 people were formally employed in the industry (Ministerio de Economía 2021). Indeed, in the wake of the global financial crisis, service exports became the primary engine of growth

in El Salvador's export-oriented economy, consistently boasting positive growth rates and claiming an ever-greater share of total exports even as the export of goods contracted, demonstrating zero growth since 2011 (FUSADES 2019, 13). By 2019, service exports accounted for 41 percent of the country's total exports and 12.3 percent of GDP (World Bank 2022). In this period, call centers rose to prominence among the country's top employers. Between 2000 and 2016, maquiladora firms jockeyed for the number one position among the country's largest private sector employers—with the exception of the year 2007, when Walmart distributor Operadora del Sur briefly claimed that title. By 2017, however, the Salvadoran subsidiary of the France-based Teleperformance call center corporation overtook maquiladora firms like Hanesbrands El Salvador and Intradesa to rank as the country's single-largest private sector employer, with nearly 4,700 employees in 2017 and just under 5,900 in 2020 (ISSS 2021).

By 2020, El Salvador registered ninety-one call center companies active nationwide, up from thirty in 2011 (Ministerio de Economía 2020; Ministerio de Economía 2021). Over one-third of El Salvador's call center workers, however, are concentrated in the local subsidiaries of five transnational corporations: Teleperformance, Sykes, Concentrix, Telus, and Atento (Ministerio de Economía 2020). Since 2015, these companies have ranked among El Salvador's top twenty employers (ISSS 2021). Sykes and Concentrix are U.S.-based, while Teleperformance is headquartered in France and Telus in Canada. Atento, once a subsidiary of the Spanish Telefónica, was acquired by Bain Capital in 2012 and sold to three international institutional investors in 2020 (Atento 2020). Nevertheless, each of these firms channels revenue into the United States through their clients, which are not the mostly North American customers served by call center operators but rather their mostly North American corporate accounts: U.S. banks, telecoms, airlines, and other companies contract with call centers in El Salvador the same way a brand like Nike contracts to a local maquiladora to assemble its products for export. Only in this case, workers are providing low-wage remote customer service, technical support, sales, and other back-office services for U.S. companies.

The call center industry still represents only a fraction of Salvadoran exports, but its extraordinary growth has remained in the double digits since at least 2015 (see figure 2.7). From 3.32 percent of total exports in

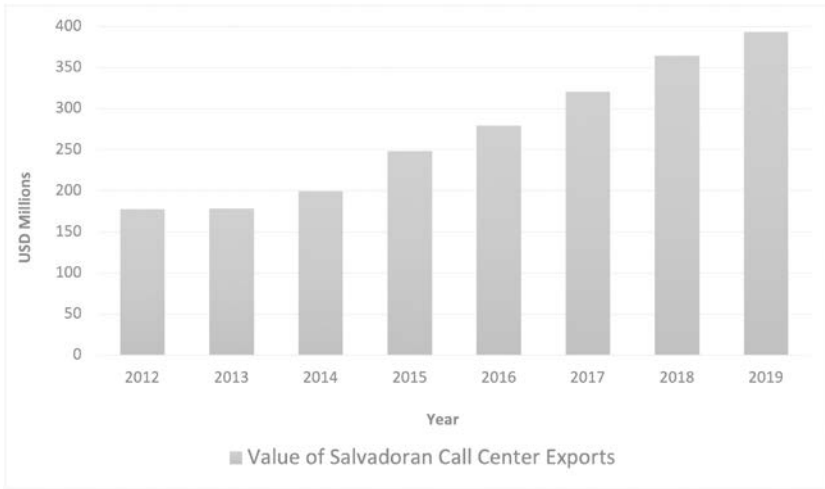


FIGURE 2.7 El Salvador annual call center exports, 2012–2019. (Data from Banco Central de Reserva [2020].)

2012, equivalent to 16.04 percent of the value of maquiladora exports, call centers represented 6.67 percent of total exports in 2019, or 33.79 percent the value of maquiladora exports (Banco Central de Reserva 2020; Banco Central de Reserva 2021). The country’s office for foreign investment promotes El Salvador as an ideal “nearshoring” destination for U.S. capital, boasting attractive fiscal incentives, a lack of currency conversion risks because of the use of the U.S. dollar, and a “unique labor force” with “excellent customer service abilities as well as a natural cultural affinity” with the United States (Dirección de Promoción de Inversiones 2020, 4). This “natural cultural affinity” is the result of decades of mass migration and, subsequently, deportation.

Like outsourced maquiladora manufacturing, the call center industry’s advantages are the result of the severing of functions previously performed in-house and their externalization to lower-cost territories—a process made possible by global neoliberal restructuring. The tremendous wage differential between countries like El Salvador and the United States constitutes the primary factor, given that, similar to maquilas, labor can account for some 70 percent of call center operation costs (Hualde Alfaro 2017, 45). In El Salvador, the industry also benefits from the privatization of the national telecommunications system, dollarization, and additional neoliberal counter-reforms since the 1990s. Foreign-owned

call centers enjoy generous fiscal incentives: call center capital in El Salvador is exempt from income tax, sales tax, municipal taxes, and import taxes on equipment and machinery (Alfaro et al. 2019, 52).

Like maquiladora manufacturing, the call center industry also contributes to the reproduction of dependent capitalist accumulation in El Salvador. BPO facilitates surplus transfers from countries like El Salvador to countries like the United States in a number of ways: in addition to securing extraordinary benefits from savings on wages and taxes, call centers contribute to technological dependency by concentrating the most dynamic and technologically demanding segments in the imperialist economies, while outsourcing labor-intensive segments to the dependent periphery. Nor does the industry contribute to the development of local auxiliary industries, since both the software and hardware used in call centers is imported or licensed from abroad. The investment required by call center capital is minimal, reserved nearly exclusively to local labor costs, while profits are appropriated by the contracting companies in the imperial center.

In 2020, bilingual call center agents in El Salvador earned an average monthly salary of \$720 before taxes (Dirección de Promoción de Inversiones 2020), and large transnational firms offer amenities like on-site medical clinics, cafeterias, and recreation spaces (Sykes 2020). Such conditions are significantly more attractive than the \$299.3 minimum wage in the maquiladora sector (Consejo Nacional del Salario Mínimo 2018) yet remain far below the U.S. salaries contracting companies would otherwise be obliged to pay. In addition, call center workplace conditions mimic those of the maquila in other ways, with constant electronic and physical surveillance, limited bathroom access, accelerated work pace, limited promotion opportunities, and strong anti-union practices. As a result, the industry is characterized by extremely high turnover: in a 2015 study, major employers reported rates as high as 40 percent, in the case of Sykes, and 30 percent at Telus (Hernández and Rivera 2015, 39–40).

Since the industry's inception, the United States has supplied labor power for outsourced English-speaking services in El Salvador through deportation. Longtime U.S. residents and deported 1.5-generation migrants—those who migrated as children and spent their formative years in the United States—make up what Kanstroom (2012) terms the “new American diaspora,” a highly stigmatized and criminalized

population in El Salvador, associated in official discourse and the popular imagination with criminal gangs. Deportees who evince U.S. identifications through dress, language, consumption, or other cultural signifiers face widespread discrimination from potential employers as well as targeted harassment from both the authorities and organized crime (Coutin 2016; Dingeman-Cerda and Rumbaut 2015; Rivas 2014; Zilberg 2011). Mass deportation in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis has swelled the ranks of this diasporic population, even as mass exclusion has rendered them a minority within the growing population of Salvadoran deportees, an increasing number of whom are apprehended in transit or shortly upon entering the United States (Rivas, Chévez, and Gómez 2015). Among those deported from the United States between 2011 and 2015, 20 percent had lived in the United States for 1–8 years, 10 percent for 9–16 years, 3 percent for 17–24 years, and 1.8 percent for more than 25 years (Rivas, Chévez, and Gómez 2015, 51). This is the cohort from which call centers may draw recruits. Indeed, call centers have become notorious for providing the few formal employment opportunities for this stigmatized and vulnerable population (Blitzer 2017; Guitierrez 2015; Johnson 2015; Rivas 2014).

In research conducted between 2004 and 2006, Rivas (2014) highlighted the tensions between a government program designed to attract professional, U.S.-born Salvadorans to the call center industry and the anxieties produced by young male deportee call center workers who were often perceived as untrustworthy or dangerous. As deportations from the United States surged over the course of the following decade, however, the Salvadoran government adopted a new approach, actively seeking to channel deportees from the United States into the call center industry as part of official labor reinsertion programs. Between 2015 and 2020, the Foreign Relations Ministry reported connecting 176 deportees with call center jobs through its services for returning migrants (Dirección General de Vinculación con Salvadoreños en el Exterior 2020). Many more find the industry through informal networks of friends, family, and social media.

No survey exists of the total number of deportees working in El Salvador's call center industry, but research demonstrates that it serves as a crucial economic resource for diasporic deportees. Dingeman-Cerda's study of the postdeportation trajectories of ninety-six men deported to

El Salvador from the United States between 2008 and 2013 found that those with stronger U.S. ties and identifications, who had migrated as children and spent long periods in the United States, had greater difficulties integrating into Salvadoran society in sociocultural terms but achieved better economic integration than their Salvadoran-identified counterparts; this relative economic success was attributed almost exclusively to their employment in bilingual call centers, where 38 percent of the U.S.-identified deportees found work (Dingeman-Cerda 2017).

From racialized, criminalized migrant service laborer in the United States to stigmatized deportee call center worker in the dependent periphery, these trajectories reveal a close relationship between migration and accumulation patterns and the role of U.S. migration policy and enforcement in regulating relative surplus population in strategic labor markets on both sides of the border. The deported call center worker thus embodies two modes of externalization. On the one hand, that of BPO: the product of capital's tyrannical drive to reduce labor costs and its insatiable demand for new frontiers of accumulation. On the other, that of mass deportation and exclusion, a result of the imperialist state's recourse to the violent expulsion and containment of racialized migrant populations that exceed capital's requirements in a period of crisis.

CONCLUSIONS

The literature tends to conceive of migrant labor and laborers as "disposable." But by employing deported Salvadorans, outsourcing companies are re-metabolizing, or "recycling," labor that had been deemed excess within the United States' borders (Goodfriend 2018). With the neoliberal accumulation regime and its associated migration pattern in crisis, these deported workers, who gained their language and cultural skills through years of residency, education, and work in the United States, can now be exploited at greater advantage to U.S. capital from outside U.S. borders than from within them. Mass deportation emerges in this context not merely as the forcible removal of excess labor from U.S. markets but as its violent transfer from one labor market to another. The cruelty and cynicism of this accumulation strategy is hard to overstate.

The fraction of Salvadoran deportees eligible for call center work remains small within the growing population of deported migrants. But if mass deportation and exclusion is an increasingly favored solution to the problem of racialized relative surplus population in the context of extended economic crisis in the United States, the industry provides a potential model for capital's repurposing of the region's labor reserves for the growing and grueling BPO and information technology industries. It's a sinister prospect: an externalized, low-wage army operating phone and chat services, performing data entry, bookkeeping, interpretation, and coding for U.S. companies from enclaves beyond U.S. borders. In countries like El Salvador, such a configuration is indeed already underway. This indirect export of cheap labor to the United States, however, be it via maquiladora manufacturing or bilingual service exports, offers no exit from the conditions associated with underdevelopment, no solution to the cascading crises of the country's postwar political economy. Instead, it can only contribute to the development of dependent capitalism in the region, ensuring that peripheral economies remain coupled with and subordinate to the capricious exigencies of U.S. capital.

NOTE

1. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated in the reference section.

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3

TRANSMIGRATIONS, BORDERS, CORPORALITIES

African Migration Through Costa Rica in 2016

GUILLERMO ACUÑA

IN 2006, the Central American region began experiencing an increase in human migration flows from various countries in Asia and Africa (Acuña 2017; Mora Izaguirre 2017; Mora Izaguirre 2020; Chaves Groh 2020). Such migration flows had been observed in previous periods (FLACSO 2011), but they never reached the volume and intensity of the transit seen during that year. This extraordinary phenomenon was due to a combination of factors in the countries where these mobilities originated as well as the activation of support mechanisms for migratory movements that had intensified the year before, specifically for Cuban migrants heading toward the United States (Villalobos Torres 2017; Acuña et al. 2018).

Called by a variety of names—including *extracontinental migrations*, *extra-regional migrations*, *mixed migrant flows*, *migrant crisis*, *African migrations*—this situation represented a change in the way migration had been viewed in Costa Rica, where people had routinely referred to the transit of these populations with disdain in the past. Beginning in April 2016, this migration wave included an increase in the passage of African migrants through Costa Rica's border regions, the visibilization of their conditions and the way institutions addressed the situation, and the production and reproduction of social discourses about their representation.

All these factors made it possible to identify distinct characteristics of this migration flow with respect to historical transmigrations that took place in the region in the past.

Previous migration waves into Costa Rica's southern border mainly originated in South American countries (such as Ecuador and Colombia), and their causes included the search for better working conditions as well as particular sociopolitical situations affecting the sending nations. Contemporary transmigrations, however, respond to a wider diversity of causes and countries/regions of origin. For this reason, it is helpful to situate this analysis at the precise moment in which a particular narrative about these rather new and unusual migrations is taking shape. Chaves Groh (2020) identifies this moment as one characterized by recent transformations in the construction of new scenarios in Costa Rica's migration flows. In fact, recent transmigrations obey to multiple causes as well as the establishment of a regional migratory corridor that provides convenient routes for the massive and prolonged transit of humans, including those coming to the Americas from Africa. As indicated in a previous analysis of these flows, "the development of population dynamics, the importance of the [Central American] region as a geographic zone adjacent to North American countries; openness, diversity and density of migration routes; the boost in border security in several transit and destination countries (both in Europe and in the Americas); the presence of transnational organized crime players; and human trafficking, among other factors, can be identified as elements that drive the mobility processes of migrants originating in various latitudes who use this region as a stopover to reach their final destination [usually the United States]" (Acuña 2017, 232).¹ Considering the institutional and social effects of the transmigrations experienced in Costa Rica in 2016, this chapter covers both the historical background of these flows and the useful dimensions for analyzing their implications from broad perspectives. Regarding the first aspect, this chapter emphasizes the emergent nature of these mobilities (Sassen 2016) and their traceability in the Latin American, Central American, and Costa Rican contexts. In terms of the second aspect, three specific issues are addressed: the local implementation of global migration strategies (Kron 2011; Mora Izaguirre 2017; Mora Izaguirre and Winters 2019), the corporealization of social discourses (Acuña 2019b), and the process

of acquiring autonomy by transmigrating individuals from a critical perspective (Salmón 2017; Winters and Reiffen 2019).

These elements are considered as related to a process of historical formation of Costa Rican social identity, which has established complex relationships with people originating from other geographic contexts—and in which conditions such as race, ethnicity, and place of origin intervene in the codification and implementation of discourses. This is not a minor factor in a society that, through its historically constructed social imaginary, sees itself as mainly white. This imaginary has not only affected social, cultural and ethnic variables but has also influenced the development of Costa Ricans' political culture—as Carlos Sojo (2011) has pointed out in his now classic essay on the social construction of inequality in the country.

In fact, this new wave of migrant mobility through Central America and its visibilization on Costa Rica's border regions confirmed “the updating of racialized notions of the body working within specific and contextualized corporal frameworks, which are linked to the construction of the migrant's body as an agent upon whom actions and discourses that serve as social, ethnic and racial markers are operating” (Acuña 2019b, 115). The construction of concepts such as *migrant crisis* and *migrant danger*, as indicated by Contreras and León (2020), is part of the discursive elaborations attached to the transmigration of African people through Costa Rica.

The reflections presented here are based on the analysis of documentary sources dealing with this particular migration phenomenon, in addition to journalistic coverage of the migrants and the impacts of their transit. I will first refer to a series of contextual considerations regarding the emergence of transmigrations in Latin America, Central America, and Costa Rica. Later, I will study these considerations in conjunction with processes of agency, migration strategies, and regimes of corporality. The chapter ends with a series of reflections about the challenges regarding the institutional handling of and the generation of knowledge about these migration flows—which have definitely ceased to be situational given the current dynamics of human mobility characterized by changes in routes and the increased volumes on a global scale.

A photograph taken by the Nicaragua daily *Diario La Prensa* and reproduced by the website Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano (see



FIGURE 3.1 An African migrant at the Panama-Costa Rica border holds a sign that reads “Please helps us just to cross.” (Bravo, Josué. “La terrible travesía de los migrantes africanos por Centro y Sud América.” In *Movimiento migrante mesoamericano*, July 30, 2016, retrieved from <https://movimientomigrantemesoamericano.org>.)

figure 3.1) shows a man holding a sign that reads (in misspelled Spanish) “Por favor, ajudanos solo para passa” (“Please helps us just to cross”). The man looks somewhat anxious and holds up the handwritten sign with determination. In the middle ground, two other men appear to be accompanying him in his plea. Movement can be seen in the background, with hands raised as if they are clapping. This image was captured during the weeks in which pressure by groups of African and Caribbean transmigrants (particularly those coming from Haiti) mounted at the Costa Rican border. The gathering of significant numbers of people at the border, their express request to be able to continue their voyage north toward the United States as a final destination, their particular humanitarian needs, their irregular migration status, and the presence of children and women among the groups all came together to create a situation that garnered institutional and media attention in Costa Rica.

The story accompanying the photograph, written by journalist Josué Bravo, reveals the uncertainty experienced by these people during the long voyage beginning in their countries of origin and in transit through

various Latin American territories. More specifically, it refers to the risks faced by these individuals while crossing Panama and trying to reach Nicaragua—a country that the previous year had formally closed its southern border with Costa Rica to prevent these groups of migrants and others coming from Cuba from entering its territory. Those risks include traversing the borderlands between Colombia and Panama, known as the Darién Gap, a jungle region about 100 kilometers long characterized by inhospitable conditions and difficult access. The Gap is the main entry point into the Central American isthmus (particularly its southern tip where Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua lie) from South America. While this news report focuses on a specific moment of this migrant crisis that appears limited to local territorial and social conditions, in reality it is also inserted into a much broader global phenomenon made possible by changes in processes, routes, and characteristics of contemporary human mobilities.

THE GLOBAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT OF AFRICAN TRANSMIGRATIONS

In the past twenty years, the world has experienced the appearance and intensification of so-called emergent migration waves that include trans-migrations between regions and continents and which in other times in history did not reach major significance. The current flows of human mobilization have become part of the “epochal change” in international migrations, an idea put forth by Saskia Sassen (2016) to refer to dynamics characterized by systems that go beyond decision-making inside the home regarding who the most qualified family member to embark on the migratory journey may be. These include geopolitical conditions at the municipal, regional, and global levels and not just the microdimensions at the family level, as Sassen has indicated in her work. The organization of migrations according to systems, the author continues, determines the historical beginning of a migration project beyond the causes accumulated in the long term.

The transformations in migration flows that Sassen alludes to include a “break” in the direction of mobilities traditionally aligned along the south-north axis. That’s why south-south migrations, which

link up countries and regions located on faraway geographic regions, can be seen as part of the framework of emergent migration flows indicated before. Human mobilities whose origins are outside the American continent and that traverse different countries in the region are connected, according to Gonzáles Páramo (2020), to a “structural flow between the great global migrations” that has contemporary implications while being tied to historical migration processes. In this regard, push factors and adequate conditions for transit combine in direct and intense ways.

Regarding push factors, we can identify a series of economic, individual, political, and religious features that help explain the intensification of migration flows generated outside of Latin America from Asia and Africa. Employment, family reunification, various situations resulting from the violation of human rights, religious persecution, and interethnic conflicts were important factors behind these human mobilities at the beginning of the second decade of the current century (FLACSO 2011). When it comes to favorable conditions for transit, Bernal and Polo (2018) point to central factors such as a geographic location that makes it possible to reach the final destination, limited visa or paperwork requirements for entering countries in the region, Central America’s proximity to the United States, and the relative ease provided by land travel through the various territories in the region. The previously cited FLACSO study (2011) provides additional reasons, including the existence of support networks or migrant trafficking operations in the isthmus and in Mexico.

As a whole, the Mesoamerican region represents a favorable corridor for migrations originating on the African continent. This characteristic has gained strength in recent years in terms of reach and volume, coinciding with the new paradigm of increased security and even militarization as part of migratory policies in the region (Álvarez Velazco 2016), as well as the consolidation of a migration scheme between the North and the South—which implements global patterns of restriction and control (Salmón 2017).

In previous migration flows that preceded those occurring in mid-2016 along the borders shared by Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua, the groups of African individuals who traversed various Latin American

countries on their way north shared routes and border crossings with other migrant groups, including those from Cuba and Haiti. For that reason, any analysis about the nature of the Latin American migratory corridor during this period should not only focus on African mobilities but also include the various migration flows that crossed the region during that time period—characterized, in turn, by increased security, control mechanisms, and “borderization” targeted at human mobilities. The work to analyze African transmigrations in the region has not been easy. Winters and Reiffen (2019) point out their complexity, which makes it more difficult to adequately characterize their flows, mobility schemes, and features related to their social and cultural constitution.

Additionally, Salmón (2017) warns that there’s a tendency toward analyzing these migrant groups through the lens of increased criminality, the racialization of social and institutional perceptions about them, and the conceptualization of their transit through crisis discourses. One of the central features of this migration context is the diversity, not just of migrant groups but also of the Latin American nations they cross—where there are many different approaches to dealing with migrants. Winters and Reiffen (2019) list the existing migratory infrastructure, the lack of human resource and financial capabilities for dealing with large migrant groups passing through or being held at border regions, the challenges in gathering statistical information, and the absence of cooperation mechanisms between Latin America and the countries of origin of these transmigrations as the most salient issues. Another aspect to consider that adds to the complexity of studying these migration flows are the specific situations that cause the interruption of migration projects, reason for which many of these individuals choose to remain in transit countries. González Páramo (2020) point out that even though the objective is to reach the United States as a final destination, legal hurdles, lack of resources, and personal circumstances force many of these people to stay in different places along the way.

The factors listed above provide a clearer picture about the nature of African migration flows through Latin America. During this process, two distinct geographic regions are crucial as stopovers before migrants can reach their final destination: Central America and the routes through Mexican territory that lead to the United States.

PASSAGE THROUGH CENTRAL AMERICA

African transmigrations arrive in the isthmus after traversing South American countries such as Brazil, Ecuador, and Colombia. The crossing from Colombia into Panama is a particularly risky and difficult one, because of the natural dangers present in this remote border region (Salmón 2017; Winters and Reiffen 2019; Acuña 2019a). Once in Central America, migrants must negotiate passage through five countries: Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala. However, at various moments, the routes could vary for geopolitical reasons (Winters and Reiffen 2019), such as the closing of borders, specific accords between countries, or the presence of human trafficking operations that force migrants to modify their planned routes.

The 2016 migrant crisis was caused by the closing and militarization of Nicaragua's border with Costa Rica in response to the growth of African transmigrations at the time. This forced the Costa Rican government to implement contingent strategies for the attention of these migrants, which will be explained in detail in the following pages. Contingency when it comes to handling emerging migration flows seems to be the norm in the entire region. During the period being studied here, common characteristics of these responses that were identified included lack of resources, institutional vulnerabilities, and the absence of a common regional strategy for adequately dealing with African transmigrations (La Sussa 2016).

TRANSIT THROUGH MEXICO

Meanwhile, Mexico represents the threshold for migrants seeking to enter the United States and is characterized by other mobility processes, such as the transit of Central American migrants mainly from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (FLACSO 2011; Narváez Gutiérrez 2015). As both a route and an entry point, Mexico must be understood in the context of its constitution as a vertical border or border of containment in relation to the United States. This situation helps to explain the restrictive migration policies, controls, and limitations for migrants that exist both at border areas and along the migratory route throughout this country (Salmón 2017). In the case of Mexico, 2016 also represented a

shift in transmigratory dynamics that included people of African origin, who were identified particularly in the border regions of Baja California and Sonora (Septién 2016).

The transit through Mexico involves both risks and opportunities. Regarding risks, the presence of criminal organizations that control various territories represents serious threats to the safety of migrant groups. On the other hand, there's a strong migrant support system in place in Mexico and, in a way, the economic situation of African migrants (much better than that of Central American migrants) allows them to pay certain amounts of money to buy passage on their way to the United States (Nájar 2016; Septién 2016). Despite the constant reference to the dangers, threats, and risks facing African transmigrations through Central American territory, it is important to indicate that these are not mobilities that are out of control, that are impossible to contain, or that generate crises. On the contrary, as I will analyze further ahead, these human mobilities can be conceived as subjective, collective, and autonomous experiences that take advantage of the protection systems in place as well as the security mechanisms provided to them as they cross through different countries.

AFRICAN TRANSMIGRATIONS THROUGH COSTA RICA IN 2016: JUNCTURE AND SCENARIOS

The significant increase in African people traveling through Central America and especially in the region's southern sector (Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua) in 2016 can be explained through a combination of factors related to these migration flows themselves and other situations that took place in previous years—such as natural disasters in the Caribbean that led to many Haitians fleeing and the worsening of other push factors in the area.² In the case of Costa Rica, this new migration dynamic should not be isolated from the conditions and impacts of two migration-related events that took shape from the early 2010s until the last years of the decade.

VIOLENCE AS PUSH FACTOR

This phenomenon takes place during the first half of the 2010s and is linked to the worsening of various types of social violence in Central

America's Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), which became the main push factor both toward outside the region and toward other Central American countries—Costa Rica being the main receiving nation. This is a population that seeks protection in Costa Rica as a result of risks caused by several factors related to the sending countries' social fabric (gangs, drug trafficking) as well as state-level issues. In fact, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has noted the multifactor nature of this production of violence, which at first causes internal displacement that later leads to forced migration toward other destinations (CIDH 2018). Costa Rica experienced the arrival of this Central American population in the first years of the 2010s. By 2015, the country saw a 15 percent increase in refugee and asylum applications (Amnistía Internacional 2016, 26).

This forced migration wave is composed of specific populations such as children, women, young people, and individuals belonging to the LGBTQI+ community. According to a report conducted by Fundación Género y Sociedad (GESO) and the Costa Rican Immigration and Foreign Nationals General Office (2017), this last group faced particular issues regarding their security and protection needs. In fact, starting in 2013, the Costa Rican government began to see an increase in refugee applications for which the main reason was persecution based on sexual orientation or gender identity. According to the same sources, by 2017, nine individuals from the LGBTQI+ population had successfully obtained refugee status in the country. In more recent years, the exodus of Central American citizens experienced changes, including new mobility methods with the United States as their final destination (Acuña 2019a). However, their arrival in Costa Rica has not stopped.

OLD AND NEW MIGRATION PROFILES

A new phase begins in 2018 and includes the arrival of Nicaraguan citizens in Costa Rica as a result of the intensification of the sociopolitical crisis in that country. Also arriving during this period are Venezuelan migrants because of changes in exit patterns from the South American country, migration policy restrictions enacted by neighboring countries such as Colombia, Peru, and Chile, and the strengthening of humanitarian migration networks operating from Costa Rica.

Both of these cases have resulted in the consolidation of new migrant profiles when it comes to arrivals in Costa Rica. Regarding the Nicaraguan population, this new wave is different compared with economic migrants who have arrived in the country during several decades and who have become typical in the transborder flow between these neighboring nations. The migration flow that began in April 2018 represents a young population fleeing for political reasons, including human rights defenders and leaders of social and peasant movements, among others (CIDH 2019).

Meanwhile, the Venezuelan population is of recent arrival in the Central American regional context. It represents a shift in this South American country's migration scenario, as it has become a sending country in only a few years. Costa Rica has kept an open-borders policy, which includes no-return and acceptance of expired travel documents (OEA 2020). These factors have led to the growth of the Venezuelan migrant population in Costa Rica to 40,000 individuals, surpassing Colombian migrants as the main South American group in the country and second overall behind Nicaraguans.

THE JUNCTURE

Starting in April 2016, an increase in the presence of African migration flows in the border region between Panama and Costa Rica started to be noticed. Mora Izaguirre (2017) indicates that the main feature of these flows is their origin in sub-Saharan countries. Their diversity of national origins is also a distinctive feature of this wave, as the people identified came from Congo, Nigeria, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Somalia (Acuña 2017). Previously, in 2015, another migration wave had created challenges for the Costa Rican government, which had to resolve it in collaboration with countries such as Mexico. This was caused by the arrival of significant numbers of Cuban nationals who traveled to the country as they were trying to reach the United States once this country halted its favorable "dry feet, wet feet" policy toward Cuban migrants (Acuña et al. 2018).

These precedents are not minor during a period in which, for Chaves Groh (2020), there were important transformations in the country

regarding its migration patterns: the transitory nature of these mobilities shifted, as moving through Costa Rican territory became a hurdle to the migrants' ultimate goal of reaching the United States; these flows achieved visibilization and public expression; and the national origins and profiles of the migrants were more diverse than ever before—also including people from Eritrea, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. Between April and June of 2016, the presence of these migrant groups intensified, especially on the border regions. The situation was complicated as the Nicaraguan government continued to implement its restrictive migration policies, which had begun the previous year in order to block passage of Cuban migrants (Acuña 2017, 2019a).

The confluence of these factors generated challenges for Costa Rican society and the state, as it was now dealing with novel migration dynamics. Without much previous experience attending to migrant groups in transit and lacking judicial tools to tackle the specific needs of these groups, the government was faced with helping nearly 3,000 African migrants who were moving between Panama and Nicaragua, seeking answers to their plights. The Costa Rican state deployed an attention strategy that it called CATEM (Temporary Migrant Assistance Center, by its acronym in Spanish), setting up these centers initially in three places: the border with Nicaragua (Peñas Blancas), the southern region (Golfito), and the South Pacific sector (Buenos Aires)—these last two near the Panamanian border.

According to Chaves Groh (2020), the implementation of this strategy facilitated the work of cleaning, feeding, and providing health care for the migrants, as well as ensuring the safety of these individuals. However, the temporary nature of these assistance centers eventually changed, becoming more permanent and leading to challenges regarding lack of resources and the need to develop more integral care and logistical approaches. In a critical analysis of migration waves and institutional responses to them, Chaves Groh indicated that Costa Rica should think long term about these issues because such mobilities will most likely continue to occur in the next few years, requiring more strategic planning and implementation. The author also pointed out that work needs to be done to correct the legal vacuum regarding this type of migrant, including the development of migration policies that address transient migrant waves beyond the decree issued in 2016.

MIGRANT MANAGEMENT AT THE BORDER: HEGEMONIC REGIMES OF CORPORALITY AND AUTONOMIES

The sheer quantitative nature of a growing migration phenomenon led to its social manifestations becoming more visible. Perhaps the main result of the events that took place in Costa Rica in 2016 involving African mobilities was precisely the implementation of an incipient work agenda at the institutional level as well as the academic treatment of the impact of these responses. A recent body of knowledge produced in Costa Rica helps to reveal various sociodemographic, institutional, and sociocultural dimensions of these migration waves.

Some scholars have conceptualized African transmigrations as examples of mixed flows (Mora Izaguirre 2017, 2020); externalization of borders (Mora Izaguirre and Winters 2019); important consequences for the construction of perceptions about race and identity (Acuña 2017, 2019a), and mobilization of state institutions and public policy in response to the specific attention needs of the people involved in these migrations (Otárola 2019). Others have focused on pointing out the transformation in the nature of human mobilities in the region as part of global dynamics that insert themselves in local responses (Chaves Groh 2020).

This reflection seeks to focus on several aspects that would allow us to delve deeper into these recent transmigrations. In this regard, I concur with Winters and Reiffen's (2019) call to overcome frameworks that essentialize and victimize, which tend to be used to examine emerging migration phenomena. These human mobilities should be read from analytical perspectives that help to establish the development of migration policies rigorously implemented at the international level; the sociocultural impact of this transit through countries such as Costa Rica, which has had to incorporate new tools and attention schemes; and the resources that migrant individuals deploy to contend with adverse situations.

In this regard, I propose a reading of the 2016 juncture involving African transmigrations and the events that followed from the following perspectives: (1) the implementation of migration management strategies at national borders linked with the current global migration system, which results in operations based on control, security, and migrant administration; (2) tied to the notion of regime, the development of a

hegemonic experience of corporality, from which discourses based on ethnic and social superiority arise; and (3) even with the predominance of the previous restrictive and dominant dimensions, migrants still manage to act on their own through process of agency, autonomy, and proposal development—establishing clear, targeted strategies to maximize the utilization of institutional resources, social frameworks, and social discourses (typically racialized) as tools for advancing their migratory journeys.

In the following section, I delve into these three perspectives to look more specifically at the events of 2016 and the transformations that occurred in terms of social discourses regarding migration and the institutional handling of African migrants, in particular in Costa Rica.

MIGRATION MANAGEMENT: LOCAL RESPONSES TO A GLOBAL PROCESS

The deployment of global patterns of migration management has permeated local practices for safeguarding national borders, as evidenced by the installation and intensification of policies of control, restriction, and monitoring (for the sake of security) aimed at migrant flows that have skyrocketed internationally in the past few years. These patterns coincide with the consolidation of a “securitist turn” in the global administration of human mobilities (Álvarez Velasco 2016), the development of regimes of mobility, and the creation of a migration industry at the global scale characterized by the involvement of actors and activities (both formal and informal) that profit from making migration successful (Winters and Reiffen 2019).

In the Latin American region, and more specifically in Central America, the role of its territories as corridors for transmigration has highlighted Mexico’s status as a transit country in the context of the externalization of borders, which is the case of its northern border with the United States (Prunier and Salazar 2021). Stopover nations, such as Costa Rica, also play a specific and crucial role in the success of these human mobilities (Mora Izaguirre and Winters 2019). As Prunier and Salazar indicate, the presence of migrant groups originating in Africa has allowed the region to adopt several differentiated migration policy schemes

(control, humanitarian assistance, safe conduct, etc.) and to consider its role in the global geopolitics of human mobilities.

However, one cannot overlook the restrictive nature of the responses that Costa Rica, as well as other countries from the isthmus (Panama and Nicaragua), gave to African mobilities during the year that this study focuses on. In this regard, Mora Izaguirre and Winter's (2019) notion of the externalization of Costa Rica's borders should be supplemented by a concept previously developed by Kron (2011) about the development of a migration management strategy that is conditioned by the institutional arrangements of regional mobility that link Central America with North America. This management process is based on priorities related to the safeguard and control of borders. What happened during the period of African transmigrations suggests the development, at first at least, of a scheme closely related to these approaches. The imposition of security and monitoring policies on these groups is perhaps the main characteristic of the management strategy deployed at that moment.

As indicated in a previous reflection on this issue (Acuña 2019b), the regional response was the result of a series of combined actions taken by the countries immediately affected (Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua). These include the rejection of migrants at the border, the setup of temporary assistance centers and detention centers, the lack of administrative action because of a vacuum in national laws for determining the requirements needed of individuals involved in these migration flows, the discursive adoption of the theme of security in the case of Nicaragua, the deployment of Operation Shield in Panama (aimed at stopping the flow of drugs and irregular migrants), and the implementation of certain actions such as fingerprinting in the event of "suspiciousness." These mechanisms portray a type of migration management approach that deals with a system of global mobilities via actions undertaken at local border regions. Additionally, control and migrant management take precedent over a focus on human rights in this approach.

In the Costa Rican case, the actions taken by the state a posteriori to deal with this type of migration flow can be characterized as more closely resembling efforts guided by the perspectives of integration and holistic approaches (Otárola 2019; Chaves Groh 2020). However, these approaches are still of a contingent nature, framed by a judicial and

normative architecture that needs to be updated to better reflect the realities of these new global migration dynamics. Additionally, the local implementation of global migration management schemes is not entirely circumscribed to the juncture analyzed here. We should also consider the way in which regional countries acted during the health contingency that began in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. During this global health emergency, countries in the region closed their borders again, leading to uncertainty for the flow of migrants who did not stop traveling even during this period. Still ongoing, this pandemic period could translate into new social and institutional challenges for the administration of regional and global South–South migration flows, such as the ones examined here.

HEGEMONIC REGIMES OF CORPORALITY

The diversity of the African migrant groups correlates with the variety of national and regional experiences for dealing with them. Crisis discourses, which are linked with a certain idea about the uncontainability of these flows (Mora Izaguirre and Winters 2019) and the social production of discourses of danger around migration (Contreras and León 2020), are results of the effect of perception and social practices that generate a particular type of imaginary surrounding these human mobilities.

The topic of danger has to do with the social construction of migrant subjects as new global enemies, which is weaponized through the emergence of nationalist and xenophobic practices (Contreras and León 2020) that respond to and question the presence of these individuals—whether they are just passing through or have stayed permanently in the transit countries. The recent African transmigrations have generated a series of labels influenced by racialized categories, originating from a complete ignorance of the causes for migration, the realities experienced by these migrants, and the historical treatment of racial others in the transit and receiving countries.

A recent study on Mexico's southern border conducted by the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) and the Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración (IMUMI), titled *Nos tienen en la mira: El impacto del*

racismo anti-negro sobre las personas migrantes africanas en la frontera sur de México (We are a target: The impact of anti-Black racism against African migrants on Mexico's southern border), provides details about the racism, discrimination, and xenophobia experienced by these groups (BAJI and IMUMI 2021). The intersectional invisibility and discrimination faced by African women (as their gender, migration status, and racial features all play a critical role) are part of the study's results. Rejection of blackness is a key aspect here. According to Sánchez (2014), blackness is a category in constant reconstruction along with others such as indigeneity, both the consequence of colonial relations of power that still persist in Latin American countries.

In the case of Costa Rica, the transit of African transmigrations is linked with the construction of discourses of crisis, danger, and racialization that already operate in social perceptions. The notion of corporal hegemony or regime of corporality is useful for understanding the conceptual and ideological substrate of these social constructions and perceptions. In my work on the topic (Acuña 2019b), I point to the treatment of Africanness in Costa Rican history not because of the way it is considered but because of the way it has been made invisible. I also point to the persistence of these historically and contextually situated regimes of corporality, as well as to the updating of active racial markers for the purpose of establishing differences and superiority of some populations over others.

In 2016, the construction of social discourses (especially on social media and in local newspaper forums and comment pages) helped to reveal the differentiating nature of the treatment of black corporalities in transit by some sectors of the Costa Rican population.³ Included in this analysis are two examples: essentializing features (which Winters and Reiffen avoided in their study) and the endorsement of a supposed dangerousness associated with the bodies of transmigrating individuals. We can see the first aspect exemplified in the following opinion, published on the electronic forum of a Costa Rican newspaper: "Are they African or Haitian? Their way of speaking makes them sound Caribbean" (Acuña 2017).⁴

Regarding the second aspect, here's an example of how racialized perceptions about African migrants appeared in social media posts (Acuña 2019b).

WOMAN: Don't talk like that. They're human beings. What comes out of your mouth returns to you multiplied.

MAN: Would you tolerate them if they were in your house? Please pick them up, when they rob you, rape you and even kill you, maybe you'd be happy then.

MAN: Continue spoiling those ingrates, and soon they will be "demanding" that we give them manicures with aromatherapy, massages for that stress in the bones that comes from crossing other people's borders unauthorized, and that we wake them up every morning by tickling their feet and making them Tarrazú gourmet coffee. Oh, and smoking hot because the cold might hurt their sensitivities.

WOMAN: They should give them a big scare . . . take the SWAT team to them. This is no way to enter a country like foreigners, if they let them get away with this they will keep getting away with things, good-for-nothing cops, they should make [the law] be respected, that's what they get paid for.

MAN: Let's send them on rafts back to their countries, spoiled brats, they should be met with clubs and tear gas.

MAN: Please, somebody tell me that the government is already getting quotes for rafts so we can send this bunch of criminals out to sea.

WOMAN: During my ride in Tracopa [a bus company] every Sunday there are 10 Costa Ricans and 60 Africans, such a bad smell, they urinate wherever they want, fights . . .

WOMAN: I'd like to see what would happen if a Costa Rican reacted like that; in a country of savages as Africans are, they would most likely kill us, but because we are a "peaceful" country, anyone can manipulate us, even Nicaraguans.

MAN: WE ARE THE ONES WHO NEED HELP. TO GET RID OF THIS SCOURGE.

The previous examples provide evidence of the racialization that operates in social discourses. Challenges regarding this issue continue to be important, even more so now when a supposed connection between migration and illness has been deployed as an explanation for the ongoing global health contingency. Additionally, the transit of these migrants through nations such as Costa Rica forces us to reflect about the country's preparedness to provide assistance to these populations and, in some cases, to help integrate them into the local social and institutional

fabric. Regimes of corporality is a useful category to obtain a clearer picture of these issues and to respond, from a broader perspective, about the ways in which African mobilities have affected current sociocultural behavior patterns.

AGENCY AND AUTONOMY: AN ONGOING DEBATE

The recent transmigration of African individuals through Costa Rica has been generally labeled from discourses of homogenization, crisis, uncontainability, and chaos. These discourses assume that the people involved in these flows follow a goalless trajectory, that they all belong to the same countries, and that their presence in stopover nations generates social, health, and institutional problems. Facing the state's management approach (which appropriates for the local context certain global premises about migrant control and national security) and social discourses of racialization (imbued in hegemonic structures of identity where blackness will always be a site of contention and counterweight), transmigrating individuals generate responses, exercise their agency, and develop strategies that allow them to continue on their migration routes. Such an approach allows us to recognize the migrants' autonomy without failing to consider their vulnerabilities and the risks they face. According to Salmón (2017), the implementation of strategies for overcoming restrictive barriers and policies, migration control, and structures of violence along the routes points to the generation of autonomy on the part of migrant individuals as they traverse Latin America. These strategies fall under two general categories: those implemented in transit to deal with particular contingencies experienced along the route and those implemented in relation to the transit states, which consist in the utilization of resources that these states offer (such as applying for refugee status). Regardless of their type, transmigrants must resort to many of these strategies as they are pushed to migrating in an irregular fashion—because national legislation does not include appropriate laws that would protect them as transmigrants with specific conditions, because the monetary cost involved in becoming regularized is high, or because establishing a

dialogue with their places of origin is impossible, as many of them do not have consular representation in transit countries.

The conversation about autonomy and agency of transmigrant individuals is still a disputed field that is far from being settled. It requires the development of critical analyses about subjectivities and the migrants' processes for reacting to current contexts and institutional frameworks. These analyses should also depart from the very conditions that individuals come from to be able to better understand their relationship with the environments they encounter along the migration route. As Winters and Reiffen (2019, 14) indicate, "We base [our analysis] on an exploration of human agency, looking at how and when different experiences and practices related to being a migrant, to a certain nationality, ethnicity, religion, among others, play a role in daily life. Also, we emphasize that these experiences could be shared with other social groups."

Regarding the phenomenon and juncture that have been studied in this chapter, it is possible to visualize a series of mechanisms activated by the migrants themselves to try to overcome hurdles to their migratory goals. Mora Izaguirre (2017) refers to utilizing refugee status as a strategy used by these African migrants to be able to cross borders. This particular legal tool can be accessed quickly, Mora Izaguirre points out, as it is backed by international treaties and it goes into effect immediately. Once the request has been granted, individuals can move freely throughout the country—something they require to reach the next border and attempt to enter yet another country. Refugee status is the most recognized legal tool for migrants in the various Latin American transit nations, and its implementation depends on the requirements established by each country and the characteristics of each individual case.

In the case of the African migrants on Costa Rica's border regions in 2016, other mechanisms of agency and autonomy were deployed. One of them is their visibility, which makes these migration waves different from previous ones, as Chaves Groh (2020) has suggested. Additionally, practices related to their corporality and performativity were made evident: "Their selective silence while being interpellated and even the performativity of their individual and collective bodies before border authorities, especially Costa Rican officials, were the mechanisms designed by African migrant groups on Costa Rica's border regions: at various moments, their public actions were accompanied by singing and dancing as forms of

protests due to the situation they were experiencing” (Acuña 2019b, 111). It becomes clear, then, that the conditions in which these new migrant realities operate present diverse challenges to receiving nations, but especially to transit countries. Evidence has also been found about conscious and planned actions by these groups that challenge narratives of their victimization, homogenization, and uncontainability that are often used to try to explain their migration journeys. This evidence comes from certain agential features identified by researchers and that allow for more nuanced readings of the migrants’ subjective project, whose main goal is crossing Central America and Mexico to reach the United States.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

During the second decade of the twenty-first century, there was a noticeable increase in the transit of migrants originating in various African countries. This was an empirical expression of emerging dynamics within the context of global migration systems (Sassen 2016), characterized by linkages between risk and agency, visibility and control, perceptions generated from the perspective of hegemonic bodies, and the racialization of discourses—particularly those produced on social media sites. The 2016 juncture analyzed here should be considered as part of the continuation of novel and permanent schemes in international migration waves that Costa Rica has experienced in the past few years. Even though the impact that the closing of borders stemming from the global pandemic in 2020 has had on these specific migrations was not included in this analysis, it can be considered an extension of this same period—characterized by the increase, intensity, and visibilization of transmigrations in Costa Rica and Central America.

In order to study these emergent migration realities, it is necessary to consider the critical role of approaches that emphasize the performativity of subjects over territories, control structures, and migration regimes on border regions. Such an approach allows us to consider other relevant aspects, such as regimes and discourses of corporality, from a two-pronged approach: on the one hand, discourses and perceptions generated about these groups given their racial and corporal characteristics; and on the other, the construction of autonomy, a proactive category that

disrupts any attempt at de-subjectivizing the people engaged in contemporary migration dynamics.

A characteristic that needs to be visualized with more precision is the heterogeneous nature of transmigrations in the current context. This requires considering the multiple origins of these migrations and thus making irrelevant categories such as extra-continentiality and extra-regionality, which this chapter does not employ on purpose. In fact, a feature of some studies and discourses that must be permanently questioned is the homogenization of migrant subjects. This is a type of racialized discourse that does not allow for considering the specificities of these transmigrant flows. This issue must be analyzed carefully. At the time of this chapter's writing (mid-2021), a new sociopolitical crisis was declared in Haiti following the assassination of the country's president, Jovenel Moïse, at the hands of a network opposed to his regime. This situation, in addition to the closing of the country's common border with the Dominican Republic, will most likely result in more Haitian migrants passing through Central America. Researchers working in this area should sharpen their perspectives to properly analyze this new transmigration in the making.

During May 2021, U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken visited Costa Rica. One of the items in his agenda included a request for the country to move toward improving its handling of international migration flows. Despite the fact that the country has made significant strides in adapting a normative and institutional structure that would better suit the needs of recent migration contingencies, it has been the victim of inertia, lack of systematic organizational capabilities and knowledge about the environments through which these groups move, and a position that regards returning these migrants to their countries of origin as a nonnegotiable option.

Instead, a broader and more comprehensive view of the situation should be taken, acknowledging that the migration contingencies experienced in the country and in the region in the past few years are perhaps no longer specific junctures but rather part of a continuum that will likely persist in the following years. In terms of perceptions and social discourses, it is also important to consider these populations' specific characteristics, to reject the sociocultural essentialization through which these transmigrants have been categorized, and to put aside the

narratives of crisis to achieve a more precise understanding of their migration dynamics and their actions and proposals for agency over the institutions and scenarios on which they intervene.

NOTES

1. This and all other quotations in this chapter have been translated from their original Spanish by the author.
2. Other factors include the role U.S. cooperation agencies and nonprofits, such as the Clinton Foundation, played in the migration of Haitians during this period.
3. Particularly in the daily *La Nación* and its social media pages.
4. This example and the following conversation have been translated from the original Spanish by the author.

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4

ON OPPRESSIONS, RESISTANCES, AND RESILIENCE

Narratives of Nicaraguan LGBTQI+ Refugees
in Costa Rica

GRACIA SILVA AND FIORE BRAN-ARAGÓN

IN 2018, Nicaragua experienced a civic rebellion followed by unprecedented government repression, which has resulted in the largest refugee crisis in the country's history. The LGBTQI+ community had a relevant leadership and participation in the uprising, causing government repression and discrimination against them to be particularly acute (Valdivia and Abaunza 2020, para. 3). Consequently, hundreds of members of this community have gone into exile in neighboring Costa Rica. This paper analyzes the life stories of two young Nicaraguan political refugees from the LGBTQI+ community in Costa Rica, specifically how the rebellion and exile have changed their lives and have exposed them to new forms of oppression and exclusion, amid which they have created new opportunities for resilience, solidarity, and integration in Costa Rica.

Our work with these life stories is inspired by the experience of Cuban scholar Marta Núñez's (2003, 9) interactive interviews. This is an approach in which the researcher is not guiding the interview but rather creating a free flow of ideas that allows a deeper collaboration between researcher and interviewee. We present the stories using a literary approach to convey their complexity. We also conducted interviews with the executive director of the National LGBTQI+ Nicaragua Board (a mechanism for organization among people of diverse sexualities and

nonbinary genders) to enrich our perspective about the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica.

Our hope for this work is that it will contribute to people's empathetic understanding of the realities of LGBTQI+ refugees and to the debate on the importance of listening to and learning from their narratives. In particular, we want people to understand the resistance, resilience, and demands of this population, and we want to highlight the relevance of a sense of connectedness and community for a dignified life in Costa Rica.

Additionally, we expect to encourage other authors to take on the challenge that conducting research in topics related to sexually diverse peoples in Central America represents (Arévalo et al. 2022, 14) and to contribute to confronting the anti-rights movements that are gaining strength in the isthmus, giving a voice to the protagonists of these stories.

LGBTQI+ POPULATION IN NICARAGUA BEFORE 2018

Discrimination and repression against the LGBTQI+ community are not limited to the current government, but they are rather expressions of “machismo” and models of masculinity predominant in Nicaragua's nation and citizenship projects.¹ According to Erick Blandón (2003, 29), Nicaragua's modern state project was a product of the vanguardist cultural movement of the early twentieth century, and it was based on three fundamental pillars: *mestizaje*, Spanish as the only language, and Catholicism.² Although the Catholic aspect of this project initially referred purely to religious issues, it soon expanded into the public sphere, to areas such as morals and family life. As a result, the model of nation and citizenship reproduced in public narratives presents the heterosexual family as the basis of society, monogamous and heterosexual marriage as the only legitimate family model, and reproduction as the main goal of sexuality (Gómez 2015, 170). Thus, any model of sex-affective relations and family outside this one was considered unnatural (Gómez 2015, 174).

In 1979, with the triumph of the Sandinista popular revolution, a different project of a nation was introduced. Various social sectors, including women, began to participate in public life and to claim fundamental rights such as gender equality, as well as sexual and reproductive rights (Howe 2013, 46). This favored an environment of sexual liberation in

which common-law relationships between sexually diverse people became visible among some social sectors. However, starting in 1986, in the context of the Contra War, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) government prohibited sexually diverse militants from organizing outside party lines, and sexual diversity began to be considered a “bourgeois decadence” and “imperialist importation” from the United States (Howe 2013, 42). According to Victoria González-Rivera (2010, 72), the ideal of the revolutionary “new man” and his identity based on sacrifice and revolutionary consciousness ultimately considered any gender or sexual dissidence as a threat to the revolutionary community.

With the return of a neoliberal government in the 1990s, discourses around gender and sexuality in Nicaragua continued to be shaped by the Catholic Church, which proclaimed that women must be subordinate to men, emphasized the biological function of sex, and considered any queer sex-affective relationship as reprehensible and threatening to society (Montenegro 2000, 40).

The FSLN returned to power in 2007 with a revolutionary discourse, but in practice, its model of authority was centered on the president (Daniel Ortega) and his family core. Although the FSLN tried to co-opt LGBTQI+ people in an effort to appear modern and to draw sexually diverse people into their clientelist networks and away from feminist opposition (Kampwirth 2022, 35), in public narratives Ortega and his wife and vice president Rosario Murillo constantly resort to Christian morals and the heterosexual family model to support their political authority, while alluding to the cohesion of the nation and citizenship (Gómez 2015, 11).

By doing this, the Sandinista government perpetuated an exclusionary model of nation and citizenship, which particularly discriminates against women and sexually diverse peoples. This became evident with the lack of vindication of LGBTQI+ rights (Kampwirth 2022, 35) and with the state’s constant harassment of feminist and sexually diverse activists even before 2018 (Informe Alternativo 2018, 72).

Although in Nicaragua, sexually diverse people’s identities and expressions have not been legally punishable since 2008, the new Sandinista government has not taken any proactive action to guarantee equal rights and to reduce the social stigmatization that promotes hate crimes and LGBTQI+ phobia. A 2015 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) report on the situation of “LGBTI peoples in Latin America”

compiled data on generalized violence, arbitrary arrests, and hate crimes, including eleven murders of sexually diverse people in Nicaragua in 2010 (IACHR 2015). Among the most common perpetrators were police officers, and there were no state actions taken to address these violations.

Regarding police abuse, in a 2010 IACHR (IACHR 2010, 3) hearing on hate crimes based on sexual orientation, the AIDS Center for Prevention and Education of Nicaragua presented data based on 1,295 interviews that evidenced the persistence and impunity with which these abuses were perpetuated.

- Three out of seven sexually diverse persons had been detained by the National Police.
- Three out of four people who had been arrested were detained for crimes such as “scandal in the public sphere” or “disorderly conduct.”
- The detainees were victims of psychological, verbal, physical, and in some cases, sexual assault. In the latter case, the abuse was carried out by prisoners who committed violations with the complicity of police officers.
- When an LGBTQI+ person filed a complaint against the perpetrators, the investigations did not produce any favorable result for those affected.

Unfortunately, in Nicaragua there are no official records on hate crimes or other human rights violations against sexually diverse people. However, it is likely that by 2018, when the current sociopolitical crisis exploded, the situation remained the same or had worsened. To understand the stories of Nicaraguan LGBTQI+ refugees, it is necessary to know the context of the 2018 Nicaraguan protests and to explain how government repression pushed members of the LGBTQI+ community, and protesters in general, to flee the country.

CIVIC REBELLION, STATE REPRESSION, AND LGBTQI+ LEADERSHIP IN NICARAGUA

On April 18, 2018, while some citizens protested against reforms to the social security fund, they were attacked by violent groups led by the state and protected by the police. The attacks took place in two key cities—Managua (in front of the Central American University [UCA] and at the

Camino de Oriente shopping center) and León (outside the HEODRA Hospital)—and the main targets were university students who organized the protests. These attacks were broadcast on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and by the independent press, making many people feel outraged. This served as a catalyst of people's indignation and more people each day started mobilizing, not only against the reforms but against repression and political violence (Cabrales 2019, 9).

By all accounts, the protests were spontaneous, without a specific organization or structure behind them. People called others to take to the streets on Facebook and Twitter, in group chats, in independent media, and by word of mouth, which resulted in the coalescing of various groups with different identities and grievances—without a plan but linked together in their search for justice and condemnation of state repression.

During several months, protesters denounced the acts of political violence and clamored for justice in the face of repression. Some of the most popular forms of protest were marches, pickets, and the occupation of university campuses, such as the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN-Managua) and the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua (UPOLI). The response by the Ortega-Murillo government was “to call up and deploy paramilitary groups, including skilled snipers” (Cuadra 2019, para. 8). One of the most heinous attacks took place at UNAN-Managua on July 13, 2018, when the police and paramilitaries entered the campus for fifteen hours to evict students who had occupied it since May (Partlow 2018, para. 5). As a result of the government's violent response, by August 19, 2018, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2018, 7) estimated “thousands of victims, including approximately 300 deaths and 2,000 persons injured.” Notably, certain groups were disproportionately targeted for persecution, intimidation, smear campaigns, and confiscation of assets. Among these groups were students, journalists, human rights defenders, and the LGBTQI+ community (OHCHR 2018, 8).

During all this time, the participation and leadership of the LGBTQI+ population in the protests was evident, and activists began to appear publicly (Peace Brigades International, n.d., para. 1). In addition to calling for an end to the repression, they demanded respect for the fundamental human rights of LGBTQI+ people. In the streets of Managua, stencils and graffiti began to appear that represented the participation of this population in the civil uprising. In June 2018, the LGBTQI+ pride parade

in the capital city was used not only to commemorate LGBTQI+ resistance but also to demand democracy and justice for the crimes of the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship (Artículo 66 2018, para. 4). This was the last pride parade that took place in the country (Despacho 505 2022, para. 1). In many ways this represented a new rebellion, since until then the political participation of LGBTQI+ activists in national political processes had been made invisible by official history (Rocha 2017, para. 1).

As the visibility of LGBTQI+ leaders increased in the struggle, so did the direct repression of the government against community members. LGBTQI+ people faced various forms of violence—some people faced violence in similar fashion to most protesters, others were directly targeted because of their sexual orientation or identity. By the end of 2018, there were forty-two political prisoners identified as LGBTQI+, whose imprisonment lasted between a couple of hours and several months, among them three transgender women (Mesa Nacional LGBTQI+ de Nicaragua 2019, 24). During their arbitrary detention, these women received a particularly degrading treatment: their gender identity was unrecognized, and they were forced to stay in prison with heterosexual male inmates; some of them suffered physical and psychological violence, threats of sexual violence, and ridicule because of their gender identity.

In a 2019 report of the Mesa Nacional LGBTQI+ de Nicaragua, based on the testimonies of 220 LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan refugees living in Central America and Mexico (67% of whom had not participated in social organizations prior to the self-organized protests), the 220 participants registered a total of 915 occurrences of human rights violations. These violations included physical and verbal attacks, death threats, harassment and persecution of the protester and relatives, rape (eight people) and murder (eight people). Of the latter, most of the victims were gay men. Additionally, it was found that among the harassers on social media and activism spaces, there were also people who identified as government opponents. According to the report, most of the violations documented had an exemplary function and sought to paralyze the victim and make them feel powerless. Some of these violations had the effect of forcing victims to “go back into the closet” so as not to be exposed to further abuses because of their identity and sexual orientation.

The LGBTQI+ population and other people who participated in the protests have continuously faced stigmatization, harassment, detention, and criminalization by the Ortega-Murillo government and their

supporters (Amnesty International 2018, 44). The persecution has been such that in 2021, Nicaragua became the country with the second-highest number of new asylum applications: 111,600, a five-fold increase from 2020 and surpassed only by Afghanistan (UNHCR 2022, 31–32). Most of these asylum seekers fled to neighboring Costa Rica, a country that has maintained an open-door policy to all Nicaraguan refugees except during the COVID-19 pandemic (Vásquez 2021, paras. 1–2). This wave of refugees was accompanied by irregular and seasonal migrants, making it a mixed flow that diversified the panorama of Nicaraguan migrations in Costa Rica. Because of the short distance between the two countries, shared culture, and job opportunities in agricultural production, house-keeping, and construction, Costa Rica has historically been an important destination for economic migrants from Nicaragua (OIM 2019, 24).

However, after April 2018 the profile of Nicaraguans arriving in Costa Rica changed. According to Mora and Guzmán (2018), in 2016, among the Nicaraguan migrant population, 46 percent were men, 39 percent were between the ages of 26 and 40, and only 6 percent had a higher education degree. In contrast, a study by the International Organization for Migration (OIM by its acronym in Spanish as cited in this chapter, 2019) on mixed migration flows of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica between April 2018 and June 2019 showed that 70 percent of migrants during this period were men, 68 percent were between 20 and 39 years old, and 47 percent had higher education studies. Moreover, the International Organization for Migration's study revealed that 4 percent of respondents identified themselves as part of the LGBTQI+ population. This study was based on focal groups, interviews, and surveys and represents the largest and most representative study conducted to date of the Nicaraguan refugee population in Costa Rica.

LGBTQI+ REFUGEES IN COSTA RICA: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES OF INTEGRATION

According to José López (2020), director of the National LGBTQI+ Nicaragua Board, who was interviewed by one of the authors in September 2020, sexually diverse refugees have not faced direct discrimination practices by public servants. However, they have faced passive

forms of discrimination when requesting refuge, such as the denial of attention because of the alleged need for extra documents or the presence of a specific official. This not only slows down processes but also makes them inaccessible for those who do not have the time or financial resources to go to the required government offices on several occasions. According to López, this produces a triple exclusion: based on xenophobia, homophobia, and the lack of resources that make access to refuge difficult.

Costa Rica kept its open-door policy until March 2020 and resumed it in 2021 when the pandemic subsided. As of July 2022, Costa Rica has received 150,000 refugee applications from Nicaraguans, of which only 10 percent have been processed (Expediente Público 2022, para. 16). The number of applicants continues to increase, especially after the reelection of Ortega in November 2021 (Sánchez 2022, para. 5). This has made it very difficult for the Costa Rican government to continue providing favorable resolutions for refugees in a reasonable time frame, regardless of their policies (Amador 2020, para. 1). At the end of 2019, Costa Rica signed an agreement with UNHCR through the Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS) to care for 6,000 refugees; however, this palliative measure has not solved the difficulties of an “overwhelmed” system (Amador 2020, paras. 3–4).

Even though Costa Rican law calls for facilitating the integration of refugees, and although initiatives for care and integration have been carried out, in practice the scope of both the law and the initiatives remain limited. For example, Amador argues that the guidelines around inclusive health and education for refugees “encourage” institutions to provide services but generally do not reinforce that intention. For example, there are limited policies to provide dignified work for refugees, who are prevented from accessing legal employment until three months after their arrival, when they can submit their refugee application. Some other barriers to dignified employment include the resistance of employers to recognize provisional work permits, the lack of recognition of foreign university degrees, and the resistance of professional associations to accept immigrants as members (Chávez-Gonzalez and Mora 2021, 32–34).

According to the International Organization for Migration, the main needs of the LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan migrant population surveyed were

access to income generation (62%), access to education (52%), nutrition (48%), and medical assistance (43%)—with 76 percent of the LGBTQI+ surveyed population not having medical insurance. Among the concerns of the LGBTQI+ respondents were the increase in mental health problems, with 81 percent claiming to have suffered from emotional distress (OIM 2019, 88). The study also noted an increase in HIV-infection cases (OIM 2019, 88; quoting García).

However, according to López, in general, Nicaraguan LGBTQI+ refugees in Costa Rica feel “grateful” and “safe” for being in a country where they face fewer risks because of their political opinion, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Although this sense of being “safe” does not reduce other pressing needs, for López, the condition of the refugees consulted by the National LGBTQI+ Nicaragua Board in Costa Rica is qualitatively better than that of the average LGBTQI+ refugee in other Central American countries and in Mexico. This is due to Costa Rica’s meaningful progress in legal matters to protect LGBTQI+ people, resulting from the advocacy of activists and the compliance of the state with international law and the recommendations of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights on topics of gender identity and equality.

Additionally, there are some key stakeholders who have provided assistance and support to improve the living conditions of LGBTQI+ Nicaraguans in Costa Rica. According to López, those refugees who are members of the LGBTQI+ Nicaragua Board in Costa Rica have been able to establish alliances with NGOs and LGBTQI+ rights groups to get emotional and sometimes financial support. Organizations such as the Center for the Social Rights of Migrants (CENDEROS), Colectivo Colmena de las Brujas, Migrant Women Network, TCU-Migraciones (from the University of Costa Rica), Access Foundation, and Fierce Voices, as well as international organizations such as RET International and HIVOS Latin America and the Support Group for Families and Friends of Sexually Diverse Peoples, have been key for refugees’ integration in Costa Rica (Peace Brigades International, n.d., para. 12; López 2020). Moreover, support and solidarity networks among LGBTQI+ refugees have been equally or more relevant than formal institutional networks for their integration because they provide everyday support and recognition.

LEARNING FROM REFUGEE STORIES

During 2019, one of the authors of this chapter was conducting research on Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica. At that time, she lived in Costa Rica for a couple of months, getting to know different Nicaraguan refugees with a diversity of stories and conducting interviews with some of them. These refugees were recruited through snowball sampling. Many of them were part of the LGBTQI+ community, and their stories showed another layer of difficulty in their process of adaptation and integration. This work is rooted in some of those testimonies, which made us wonder how LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica are different from other Nicaraguan refugees in the same country, what particular struggles they face, and which discourses and practices shape their resilience.

For this section of the chapter, two LGBTQI+ activists who applied for asylum in Costa Rica because of the repression they experienced in Nicaragua were interviewed. These refugees identified themselves as mestizas, from the city of Managua, and from middle- to lower-class families. The interviews took place at local diners chosen by the interviewees. Before the start of the interview, an information sheet was read, and they were asked to sign a consent form. All their questions were answered, and they were encouraged to ask more questions if they arose during or after the interview.

During the interviews, they shared their experiences living in Costa Rica and how they were coping with the challenges of being refugees and adapting to a new country. These conversations followed Núñez's proposal about how to create a free flow of ideas to enhance a deeper collaboration between the researcher and the interviewee. Through her research, Cuban sociologist Marta Núñez (2003, 10) has shown how the development of deep empathetic relations between interviewer and interviewee opens the possibility to include new topics, change the questions, and exchange views. By sustaining an exchange among equals, we were able to include what was most important to them in this research and to understand their situation from their point of view.

To present these stories, we took inspiration from the work of social researcher Jessica Martínez, in which she presents narratives of rural women in Nicaragua as a way to talk about and understand poverty and happiness in the country, and thus we decided to write the stories as

vignettes (Martínez 2014). During the writing process, we adhered to the participants' testimonies. We use extended quotes from the interviews to make sure you hear them, assuming an omniscient voice to narrate some parts without quoting the whole interview.

We tried to capture the intonation of their voices, keeping the grammatical mistakes and the changes between grammatical tenses, but the translation process (from Spanish to English) serves as another filter that mediates the messages of the co-researchers. It was a challenge to ensure accuracy when dealing with slang and different references to Nicaraguan culture. We reproduced the original speech as accurately as possible and tried to express the meaning of what they were saying in the best possible way that we could think of in English (López et al. 2008, 1733).

Our aim is to present these lived experiences while connecting them to a broader sociohistorical context (Sautu 2004, 21) and to reflect on the systemic rights violations that affect Nicaraguan LGBTQI+ refugees and how they built support and resilience through their activist work and their community. We believe the testimonies we are about to present illustrate the experiences of many other people and have the potential to make their path of resistance, resilience, and solidarity visible.

MAGDALENA (SHE/HER)

During July 2019, one of the authors had the pleasure of talking with the LGBTQI+ activist, and trans woman, Magdalena, who has been part of the National LGBTQI+ Nicaragua Board since its creation in 2012. Magdalena was twenty-six years old at the time of the interview. Born in Managua, she did not finish high school but has worked as an activist for LGBTQI+ rights since she was really young.

Magdalena has kind eyes, a sincere smile, and long beautiful dark hair. She decided to support the protests because she thought the social security reforms were unfair. For several years, Magdalena had a strong commitment to justice, and in this particular situation, she held firm to her convictions and ideals—assuming the consequences. She continued her activist work linking the topics of oppression, which were her focus, with the sociopolitical crisis. Not surprisingly, when asked about why it was important to participate in the protests, she answered:

Because every voice counts, to begin with. The nation-state of Daniel Ortega is totally perverse. And it is also my awareness of the actual need for freedom and democracy. Knowing that I have lived all my life in Nicaragua being oppressed due to my gender identity, knowing that in Nicaragua it is a lie that there are rights for everyone. In Nicaragua, sovereignty is completely determined by who has more money, who has more . . . who has more power, who has more contacts, who is straight, who is white, so I lived all that, all those oppressions I lived, and how could it be possible that there was a civic revolution where young people went out to the streets to say: “They are killing us. We are poor and they are killing us for being poor. They are killing us for thinking differently, for being different,” and that I was not there? I mean, for me it did not make sense that I had been an activist for twelve years and was not participating in this revolution.

Between November 2018 and January 2019, the LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan Board developed a study on the effects of the sociopolitical crisis on Nicaragua’s LGBTQI+ population. As part of her work, in April 2019 Magdalena was chosen to present the report of this study in Costa Rica. Her immediate circle of friends and colleagues had been pressuring her to flee the country, but she resisted this idea. However, after the presentation of the report was streamed live on social media, Magdalena was afraid to return. She ended up staying in Costa Rica and applying for asylum.

Magdalena had enough money for a couple of months, and she received support and found a place to live in an apartment for Nicaraguan activists. But despite having this support, at the time of the interview she was facing financial distress: “I need to find ways to survive because this is no cheap place. It is complicated, it is unlikely that I will find a formal job. Here there are no jobs even for *ticos*, much less for me, a Nicaraguan, poor, barely fourth year of secondary education.”³

In her opinion, “Nicaragua will not become our dreamed Nicaragua just from the fact that Daniel Ortega goes away. Nicaragua continues to be a ‘machista,’ misogynistic and patriarchal country. The ‘azul y blanco’ have been capable of saying they rather continue to be governed by Ortega than LGBT people getting to have rights.”⁴ Then, I wonder how different they are from him.” This is what motivates her to continue with her activist work denouncing the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship, supporting other refugees, and organizing with other LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan

refugees to keep working for the rights of all LGBTQI+ people, their equality, and their inclusion.

When we talked, Magdalena was attending group therapy for Nicaraguan refugee women and felt that it was helping her accept the changes in her life. Additionally, she was constructing a support network with other activists and LGBTQI+ friends. She spent time with her friends to cook dinner, dance, walk around the city, and watch movies. They even supported themselves with their expenses when one of them needed something. “The circle that I’ve created here is totally new, and we have created a really nice bond. I love them, I love them very, very much, even if sometimes I want to kill them [joke], but in them I have found a small piece of Nicaragua in here, and I think that has helped me to not miss Nicaragua so much.”

In the story of Magdalena, we could identify how the transformation of individual emotional and political identities into the collective identity of the LGBTQI+ community serves to denounce and confront the patriarchal structure that rules Nicaragua. As part of an LGBTQI+ organization for several years, she acquired the tools to speak out and act against oppression. Her values and the awareness she had about the injustice she faces on a daily basis are what motivated her to join the protests. However, she also identifies that although the LGBTQI+ community had an important role in the protests, their particular demands were not well represented by the “azul y blanco.” Feeling excluded and discriminated against within the movement, she is critical about the discourses and actions from the opposition.

CHANALLA HUDSON / ALSO KNOWN AS JORGE ISAAC SANDOVAL DÍAZ (THEY/THEM)

In the center of San José, Costa Rica’s capital, there is a place called Plaza de la Democracia (Democracy Square). We think it is ironic that Chanalla (JSD) asked to have the interview here. Ironic because the rupture of the illusion of democracy is what catapulted them out of Nicaragua. But it is August 2019, and we meet to talk and eat chips under a tree.

Chanalla (JSD) is kind and has tender eyes. They were twenty-four years old at the time of the interview. Chanalla (JSD) was a student at the

National University of Engineering (UNI) in Managua. They completed three years of civil engineering, but at the time the protests started, they were not enrolled at the university; instead, they were working at a call center and learning English. Unlike Magdalena, Chanalla (JSD) was not part of any organization before 2018, but they supported activities and protests organized by the LGBTQI+ community.

Chanalla (JSD) was part of the UNAN-Managua occupation until it ceased after the attack on the university. When the protesters were expelled from the UNAN campus, they decided to flee the country. After a journey of several weeks through Nicaragua, on August 3, 2018, Chanalla (JSD) arrived in Los Chiles, on Costa Rican soil near the Nicaraguan border, and went to the Migration Office to apply for asylum. They did not have a plan, did not know anyone in Costa Rica, and did not know what they were going to do. Chanalla (JSD) went to Upala, a city close to the Nicaraguan border, and ended up asking a family there if they could give them a place to live, and the family accepted. Chanalla (JSD) worked every day in exchange for food and a place to sleep.

A month later, while Chanalla (JSD) was in San José for their first immigration appointment, they received a job offer on a farm. They were told that on the farm they were going to have food and a place to sleep and would get paid 20,000 colones per week.⁵ They decided to take the offer, moved to the province of San José, and started working on the farm in mid-October. Unfortunately, things did not go as they expected, and they did not receive a fair payment. The farm paid them only 1,000 colones per week.⁶ Chanalla (JSD) mentions they did not react to this because “I knew that I was being exploited but seeing the violence and xenophobia that exists in this country, I could not report it, because I did not have a network to count on.” Chanalla (JSD) tried to look on the bright side and was grateful to have a roof over their head. They continued working at the farm but combined it with other small jobs: “When I had to work, because I did not have a work permit, I was going to clean houses, once I had to clean for three days and they only gave me 7,000 colones. Another day I cleaned for two days, and they only gave me 5,000 colones. And I knew they were exploiting me, but those were 7,000 colones and 5,000 colones that I did not have.”

One day, after returning from cleaning a house, they found a note saying they had to leave. Later Chanalla (JSD) realized the reason they were

kicking them out was their gender identity, because they are nonbinary. Chanalla (JSD) states that the most difficult part of this period was

the emotional aspect, because coming to a country where you do not know anyone, where you do not really know if the friendship you are being offered is sincere, if you will have the support of that person. I mean, you come from Nicaragua, where you have a support network, and come to a place where you have nothing, you have no place to sleep, not even clothes, because I came with clothes just for two days, and not having a hug from someone who really loves you, to hear from someone you care about that they love you and everything will be fine. So, on an emotional level, you are destroyed, you left your family, and to find limitations. And you start wondering if it was worth leaving everything behind for that, if it was worth leaving your family, and not being able to say goodbye or hug your loved ones. . . . And also, having limitations like xenophobia, discrimination, diversophobia, and it is not victimization, but it is the reality of this country. People do not have the sensibility; at this moment they do not have the sensibility to understand that this migration was forced.

After they were kicked out, Chanalla (JSD) lived with some friends that they met in the city of San José and started selling plants on the street. One day, they and a friend went to sell plants at the Migrant Social Rights Center (CENDEROS), an NGO that works to empower migrant populations in Costa Rica. One of the CENDEROS workers started chatting with them and, after hearing their story, helped them collect the data and documents needed to move to one of CENDEROS's refugee homes. From there, things began to improve for Chanalla (JSD). They lived at the refugee house for almost two months. At this time, they started receiving individual and group therapy. Chanalla (JSD) feels this was something important because

there are too many griefs that I have to heal from in order to understand this exile, to understand this whole trip. Because before, I locked myself up, I said, at this moment I have to be present here because I am all by myself, and I have to get ahead. . . . At night I felt depressed, I cried, for hours, I could not sleep. The first week I could not sleep. And then, when I came to San José, I could not sleep either. I listened to the bullets of the Divina

Misericordia, I had flashbacks of that.⁷ At that moment I listened to the bullets, even if I was in the day to day. But I understood that it was part of the trauma, that at some point I was going to heal, that it was going to become less important.

At the refugee house, Chanalla (JSD) met other Nicaraguan refugees who were also part of the LGBTQI+ community and were living there. Through them, they met with members of the LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan Board in Costa Rica and joined this organization. They believe this activism is important because “us in the LGBTQI+ community are not represented by anyone, we represent ourselves. I mean, this space, the board, was created for us to be a communication channel, but we are not representative of the LGBTQ community.” They use this platform to share the reality of the LGBTQI+ refugee population with others and talk about their concerns, such as dealing with unemployment, renting a house or an apartment as an LGBTQI+ person, and engaging in survival sex.

Along with the other LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan refugees they befriended at the refugee house, Chanalla (JSD) created a group of five and got a house together. At the time of the interview, they all worked in different fields: one in construction, another one as a seamstress, one as a hair stylist, another one in cleaning, and Chanalla (JSD) was starting to work as a masseuse, but only one of the roommates had a formal job and a fixed salary. Living with other refugees was a huge source of support. Emotionally, “because you get home and even if you do not have money, you have nothing, but you have a person who is becoming fond of you, who loves you, who is going to hug you, and who will be able to read through you and say, ‘Hey, are you alright?’” And also economically: “With a small contribution, bringing tomatoes, bringing some bananas, bringing something, knowing that we are making a small contribution to the house. So, that way we have got our backs, because it is hard not having money and being hungry.”

In the story of Chanalla (JSD), the guiding thread is their struggle for survival and a big focus is their difficulty finding a decent job. Once they did find a job, it usually was under precarious conditions, with an income below the minimum wage and with no benefits. They were forced to accept these working conditions because they needed to secure a place to live and to buy food. The need to find a job has even marked Chanalla

(JSD)’s path inside the country, having to move to different cities in pursuit of better labor conditions.

This story also brings into the spotlight the labor discrimination linked to sexual orientation and immigration status. This is a common problem, and the OIM (2019) states that many of the Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica are finding that their work permit from the Costa Rican Immigration Office (*Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería*) is not recognized in many private workplaces—and labor discrimination is mentioned as the primary reason Nicaraguan refugees cannot find a job. This situation is exacerbated when it intersects with belonging to a sexually diverse population.

OPPRESSIONS, RESISTANCES, AND RESILIENCE

In the stories of Magdalena and Chanalla (JSD), it becomes clear that they have several sources of stress in their lives. In their study of LGBTQI+ Latinx immigrants in the United States, Gray, Mendelsohn, and Omoto (2015, 203) expose that because of being simultaneously an ethnic minority, a sexual minority, and immigrants, this population faces “institutional barriers such as discrimination, residential segregation, decreased access to services, and the impact of immigration policies.” Magdalena and Chanalla (JSD) also encountered these barriers, but they also had the burden of not having an income that secures them access to housing and food.

For both of them, a source of support to deal with the frustrating circumstances they face in Costa Rica has been the company of other Nicaraguan refugees in general. However, the feelings of connectedness and support they receive from the LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan community, specifically, stand out as the most important factor for their well-being. This resembles the findings of Gray, Mendelson, and Omoto (2015, 206) on LGBTQI+ Latinx immigrants in the United States, in which the majority of their sample perceive the LGBTQI+ community as “welcoming, supportive, and accepting, and as a place where everyone could get along.”

The LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan community in Costa Rica is one of the most organized subgroups of Nicaraguan refugees. Their organizational trajectory in Nicaragua helped them build a network of support in Costa

Rica to continue the fight for their rights and against the oppressions they face. The LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan Board in Costa Rica has similarities with what social psychologist Mary Watkins and philosopher Helene Shulman call *communities of resistance*. These communities create a physical and symbolic space of resistance against the dehumanizing attacks of the dominant groups. In these stories we perceive that the LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan Board in Costa Rica has created a symbolic space of resistance to take care of each other, have dialogue, organize to act and think on “imaginative practices of representing history and conceiving the future” (Watkins and Shulman 2008, 210). Working together, they have been able to cover their basic needs and to find company that helps them to cope with dire circumstances.

Magdalena and Chanalla (JSD) live and interact with other LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan refugees because they need each other to pay rent and buy food, since it is easier to share resources than to live alone. However, living together, interacting with people with similar experiences with whom they can talk, people with whom to keep company and get their minds off their problems also has the benefit of acting as an emotional stress relief and serves as an important support group to heal, feel, and “understand” the exile, in Chanalla (JSD)’s words.

As part of these processes of living together and interacting, Chanalla (JSD), Magdalena, and others are building the LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan Board in Costa Rica and use it as a platform to fight for their rights as refugees and as members of the LGBTQI+ population, to call out the patriarchal system and the “machismo” (particularly in Nicaragua), and to advocate for their individual and community right to heal. The board has also been an important resource for financial support, psycho-emotional accompaniment, and learning activities—such as workshops and courses and awareness campaigns on topics such as discrimination and gender inequality (Peace Brigades International, n.d., para. 11).

It is particularly interesting how in understanding their activism and their road through oppressions and resistances across borders, both Chanalla (JSD) and Magdalena emphasize different parts of the process. For Chanalla (JSD), who started their activism in 2018, building a community that supports their healing process is the most pressing need to have a dignified life in Costa Rica and to support other LGBTQI+ refugees. For Magdalena, with a longer trajectory in activist groups, building a

community is relevant to healing and to continuing work to denounce the human rights situation in Nicaragua, particularly for LGBTQI+ people. In both narratives, the relationship between communities of resistance and solidarity, healing, and the struggle for human rights are interwoven in a way that suggests their involvement in spaces like the board has been for them a source of resilience, validation, and support. Facing great uncertainties, they find “more humane ways of being together” (Watkins and Shuman 2008, 209).

HOW CAN WE LEARN FROM WHAT HAS HAPPENED? WHAT NOW?

Before 2018, the LGBTQI+ community in Nicaragua was already experiencing a series of abuses on different levels. They suffered state abuse inflicted by the police, and they experienced marginalization from society as a whole. As a result, they were a community with a history of organization and a trajectory of advocacy for their rights and a construction of networks of support for their well-being. They experienced more vulnerabilities, but they had built networks of support and had strategies of resilience.

When the protests against the social security reforms started in 2018, they reflected on their own oppressions and, thinking that this was not an isolated situation, they joined the protests and tried to contribute to change. However, government supporters and opposition have continued to harass them and have denied them the space or support they demand and deserve. As a collective, the price they paid for being part of the protests has been high and many members of the community have suffered persecution and been forced to flee the country.

In their new realities as refugees in Costa Rica, they have resorted to their community bonds to resist and build resilience. Their community allows them to protect each other, to organize to secure their basic material and emotional needs, and to have room for expression and to fight for their rights. This is really important because, as Chanalla (JSD) says, they do not represent everyone but their organization as a formal collective in the National LGBTQI+ Nicaraguan Board in Costa Rica is necessary because no one else represents them.

We believe that LGBTQI+ people's contributions and experiences need to be considered when reflecting on what has happened in Nicaragua as a result of the current sociopolitical crisis, and we pose the need to reflect on the fact that as a society we continue repressing stories and creating second-class citizens—which has serious implications for the resilience of the country's social fabric. For this to change, the memories of LGBTQI+ exiled people and the history of their leadership in Nicaraguan movements can no longer be made invisible.

The experiences of solidarity organization and LGBTQI+ resilience have a lot to contribute to the process of imagining ways to start healing and rebuilding Nicaraguan society. The reconstruction of Nicaragua requires us to challenge the machista society and the human rights talk on which we base our ideas of citizenship, and to support and integrate the LGBTQI+ population as citizens with equal rights and with the possibility of living dignified lives.

NOTES

1. *Machismo* is a set of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that rest on the mutually exclusive contrast between male and female attributes and the superiority of male attributes in the public sphere and in decision making. Machismo establishes a series of values and patterns of conduct, among which are the claim of domination over others, a rivalry between men, the need to exhibit traits that are considered virile, and a loathing toward values deemed feminine (Castañeda 2007, 26).
2. According to Hooker (2016), *mestizaje* is a national ideology adopted in the twentieth century by "the elites of various Latin-American countries, preoccupied with resisting American imperialism." In Nicaragua, *mestizaje* argued for the fusion of different "races" because this produced a new and superior type of race: the mestizo race. These ideologies defied the scientific theories of Europe and North America, which unequivocally argued for the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon peoples. At the same time, however, the national ideologies that argued for *mestizaje* as a form of "white-washing" maintained intact the basic racist evaluations that non-whites were inferior. Even more importantly, these myths of *mestizaje*, or "racial democracy," also actively denied the existence of racism and incentivized the identification with a national identity rather than with racial identities or specific cultural groups (Hooker 2016, 494).

Blandón argues that Nicaragua's modern nation project is based on a "hispanizing and homogenizing paradigm" imposed by the Hispanic-Creole elite during the colonial era and based on three pillars. One, *mestizaje*, or a mes-

tizo identity, understood as the multiracial and only cultural and linguistic identity that combined Hispanic heritage (masculine) with Indigenous blood (feminine). This identity implied the abjection of all other cultural identities. Two, Spanish-speaking, which refers to the imposition of a monolingual and colonial worldview, limited to the written word to which only elites had access. And three, Catholicism, which refers to the imposition of Christian beliefs and the delegitimization and suppression of Indigenous beliefs and practices, in particular those associated with “potentially non-reproductive sexualities,” the nonheterosexual, and the nonmasculine (Blandón 29–31).

3. *Ticos* is an affectionate slang term for Costa Ricans.
4. The term *azul y blanco* (blue and white, the colors of the Nicaraguan flag) became popular during and after 2018 to refer to people who identify as government opponents.
5. Around \$35 USD at the time of the interview.
6. Less than \$2 USD at the time of the interview.
7. The UNAN-Managua attack ended with the siege of the students who sought protection inside the Divina Misericordia (Divine Mercy) Church, which is next to the campus. The police and paramilitary attacked the church for over fifteen hours, killed two protesters, and injured several more (Partlow 2018).

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PART II

VISUAL AND NEW MEDIA

5

SOCIAL MEDIA AS TESTIMONIO

Guatemalan Collaborative Witnessing from COVID-19 to Migration

ANDREW BENTLEY

TESTIMONIAL WORKS by Rigoberta Menchú and Mario Payeras have redefined how we bear witness to human rights abuses, making clear that novels as the hegemonic discourse about culture constitute but one lens through which we can understand Guatemala. In the context of the present volume, on cultural representations of Central American migration, the need to explore more inclusive modes of expression beyond the parameters of mass-produced written works is crucial, especially when we consider the ongoing exodus of migrants (a term I prefer to “caravan”) from the isthmus to the United States. Literature by Dominican-Guatemalan author Ariel Francisco (2020) and Javier Zamora (2017, 2022) of El Salvador, to name but two examples, focus on climate change and unaccompanied minors, main tenets of post-conflict Central American migration.

Along with written accounts, social media has emerged as another lens through which to understand struggles for survival and subalternity. Unequivocally, these categorizations have been amplified, thousandfold, in the context of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), which has increasingly become a major factor for Central American migration, visible in social media posts in proximity to hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #JusticeforGeorge in our current era of anti-racist activism against

police brutality. As an alternative to narrative form, social media posts, like *testimonio*, are firsthand accounts of injustice that signal the importance of open-access community activism.

Therefore, this chapter posits a contemporary rereading of *testimonio* through social media representations of migration and COVID-19 in Guatemala, which I conceptualize together because of how these thematic currents resonate with witness accounts, an inherently testimonial characteristic. In this sense, I follow Guadalupe Escobar (2021, 29), who postulates, “*Testimonio*, by and large, has renewed urgency and importance in the light of ongoing state-sanctioned violence, dangerous diasporas, detention in privatized prisons, global capitalist exploitation, and historical amnesia.” With her view on *testimonio* as an ongoing project of “unfinished business,” Escobar highlights the genre’s evolution over the last fifty years, which, nevertheless, I see as retaining some of its hallmarks. As Elzbieta Sklodowska has suggested, *testimonio* is a collaborative witnessing project shared by editor (lettered mediator) and oral narration (subaltern), which underscores multiple discourses in the construction of the text. With the global COVID-19 pandemic as a frame of reference, this chapter makes the case for a public collaborative-witnessing project wherein the technologies of social media replace lettered mediators to represent the subaltern. Facebook and Instagram posts, including their written and visual components, I argue, show how social media documentation of COVID-19 in Guatemala epitomizes a digital turn in testimonial witnessing. By situating these COVID-19 posts in a corpus of thematically related coverage on social media of late migration, this chapter dialogues with Achille Mbembe’s notion of the necropolitical to understand Guatemalan collaborative witnessing through the lens of cultural criticism.

The first case of COVID-19 in Guatemala was reported on March 13, 2020 (Escobar and Domínguez 2020). The next day, Guatemala became the first country in the world to ban entry to U.S. citizens. At the same time universities across the globe switched to online remote instruction (Menchú 2020). By March 2021, more than a year after the onset of the global pandemic, COVID-19 had officially claimed over twenty-one thousand lives in the seven countries of Central America, though the actual numbers are higher because of limited testing accessibility and low reporting of positive test results. According to the map provided by

the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center (CRC, n.d.), there were 6,435 active cases of the virus in Guatemala as of March 13, 2021, among the highest in the region after Honduras and Panama. Vaccine availability was initially stagnant with President Alejandro Giamattei, under whose leadership the Guatemalan Congress was burned, partially in response to subpar COVID-19 relief.¹

As I made these distant observations on my own devices, I began to discern, via Facebook and Instagram, distinct ways Guatemalans experienced the pandemic. That is, I saw photos of woven facemasks crafted with leftover huipil materials, and images of the slums of Guatemala City at a standstill, as social distancing was impossible in these urban spaces. Families spoke of military checkpoints between departamentos that conjured images of war, manifestations such as those on February 25, 2021 (Day of Dignity of the Victims of the Internal Armed Conflicts) blended masks and memory mapping, and pictures of the barred entry of Hondurans juxtaposed migration with the inability to provide negative test results.² While these tropes—woven handicrafts, slums, ubiquitous militarization of everyday life, political uprising, and migration—are well-established fixtures of the Guatemalan social landscape, their intensity has been magnified under the pandemic.

Now more than ever, I recall Diane Nelson's (2015) ingenious but chilling inclusion of "Chapter Minus One" in *Who Counts? The Mathematics of Death and Life After Genocide*. On the one hand, the negative number brilliantly underscores Maya numerology and the concept of zero before Europe, while on the other, Nelson reminds us, "Guatemalans used to guesstimate the toll of thirty-six years of military state counterinsurgency and revolutionary mobilization by saying every extended family had lost at least one person—so everyone is minus one" (2). Beyond this, the anthropologist emphasizes, a plurality of minuses is inherent to Guatemalan thought—minus 45,000 disappeared persons and minus 200,000 murdered war victims (3). Certainly, there are a plethora of reasons for which families are at least minus one: accidents, adoption in the form of human trafficking, gang extortion, natural disasters, narcoactivity, migration para el Norte, and now the pandemic, to name but a few possibilities. While in most cases, we are "still at a distance and free to be in some other place," as Jean Franco (2013, 251) cautions observers of state

violence at the end of *Cruel Modernity*, social media nevertheless offers prompt delivery of photos, videos, and the reactions of followers.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the limits of social media inclusivity, given its reliance on cell phone towers, the internet, and devices with Wi-Fi capability. In Guatemala, the Tigo carrier provides 4G, 4G+, and 5G coverage, mostly in the capital region, western highlands, and Pacific coast, while Claro covers roughly the same area but with more 4G+ and 5G coverage (nPerf, n.d.). In general terms, Jennifer Gómez Menjívar and Gloria Chacón (2019, 16) tell us, “While the non-Indigenous elites in Mesoamerica continue to determine the direction of their nation-states and encroach upon the self-determination of Indigenous communities, there is a growing number of Indigenous users and techies involved in achieving a rearrangement of social dynamics in cyberspace.” While new media interfaces can certainly create social inequalities, they also originate “cyberspatial possibilities” for Indigenous peoples, which transcend local and global perceptions of Central Americans (13–14). Correspondingly, I turn to four social media posts that encapsulate both the coronavirus pandemic and migration, as an open access collaborative witnessing project. The four texts under consideration are a Facebook post, which Suyapa Portillo originally shared on the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) Central America section page, and three Instagram posts, one about social distancing, by Wuqu’ Kawoq (@mayahealthalliance), and two by Esteban Biba (@estebanbiba), a Guatemalan photojournalist. These specific posts, which appeared between October 2018 and January 2021, represent two distinct turns of migrants traveling en masse to seek asylum in the United States, defined by overt white supremacy and later contrasted by the illusion of easier entry into the country with the incoming Biden presidency. As demonstrated through the internationalization of LASA, the Maya Health Alliance, and Esteban Biba’s work, the content of the individual posts represents a larger collective story of late migration dynamics.

Taken together, the posts construct a historical-visual arc of Central American migration in the second half of the Trump administration to accentuate the reasons for its evolution during the pandemic. The posts also invite followers and other observers on social media, at once distanced from the event as well as drawn into it by the World Wide Web, to navigate “the entry into literature of persons who would normally, in

those societies where literature is a form of class privilege, be excluded from direct literary expression, who have had to be ‘represented’ by professional writers” (Beverley 1996, 29). In this case, literary expression and representation take new visual forms, as the technology through which the subaltern is represented becomes social media and the professional writer is replaced by the person or entity who makes the post.

THE TESTIMONIAL GENRE

As an inherently political undertaking, testimonio addresses representation. Nancy Gates-Madsen points out that the genre has been defined as “a first-person, mediated text, in which a member of a subaltern class shares a story with an interlocutor in order to provide a testimony of an event or significant life experience” (2018, 16). For her part, Elzbieta Sklodowska argues for testimonio’s collaborative qualities. In reference to the genre’s intertextuality, she states, “el testimonio no puede—ni tiene por qué—esquivar los mecanismos que rigen otros discursos” (testimonio cannot—nor does it have to—avoid the mechanisms that govern other discourses) (1992, 181, my translation). There is a partnership (however asymmetrical) between the elite, lettered mediator and the marginalized narrator who has witnessed the events firsthand, with Elizabeth Burgos-Debray and Rigoberta Menchú serving as a paradigmatic example of this asymmetry in the Guatemalan context.

Debra Castillo and Guadalupe Escobar have explored how this asymmetrical relationship manifests in more recent cultural production. In light of Jayro Bustamante’s 2015 film *Ixcánul*, Castillo writes that “[non Kaqchikel] Bustamante evokes his nanny as his point of entry into the world of the Kaqchikel speaking community of his youth, and in his film—based on a true story, but not strictly ethnographic—also tells a tale that lingers between individual and collective, national and international” (2019, 135). Tracing the continuities between the earliest inception of testimonio as a distinct genre and its recent turn toward documentary film, Escobar suggests that Pamela Yates’s *500 Years: Life in Resistance* (2017) and Katia Lara’s *Berta vive* (2016) “represent an emerging new genre of films that engages in memory making and denouncing unresolved human rights abuses, largely bridging the Cold War period and

the postwar/postcoup moment” (2021, 20). In my view, the role of the subaltern has necessarily experienced a paradigm shift parallel to new technologies of representation that depict transnational Central American subjectivities. And, with the regional spread of COVID-19 as a locus of more recent migration posts on social media, the act of seeking asylum further emphasizes collective marginality.

The contemporaneity of Central American migration propelled by the pandemic, the “unspeakable experience of collective suffering that would otherwise go untold” (Skłodowska 2001, 253), may, perhaps, best be shared via a more immediate channel than would be offered by a mainstream publishing outlet. While Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1994) long-held argument contends that the subaltern is the subject whose voice does not register with hegemonic discourse, I concur with Sophie Esch, who argues that, to an extent, the subaltern subject *does* speak through the circulation of their images (2018, 15). Indeed, photographers such as Susan Meiselas have stepped in to create visual representations of the subaltern during the Salvadoran Civil War and the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, about which Esch and others have written at length.³ If social media takes the place of lettered forms of mediation, then the mediator is the person or organization who makes the post. The subaltern subjects are those who are represented not necessarily by oral narration alone, but also by visuals, captions to posts, and public commentary that accompany the visual representations.

NECROPOLITICS AND/AS CULTURE

As a salient aspect of Guatemalan collaborative witnessing, death further mediates both the experiences and representations of migrants. Social media posts about COVID-19-era migration tell stories that are at once individual *and* representative of the community that the subaltern subjects transcend, often defined by proximity to death. More specifically, according to Achille Mbembe, necropolitics has emerged as a dominant paradigm not only of the Global South (though his work has pinpointed exemplar southern deathscapes such as Palestine or Rwanda) but also, more generally, of terroristic forces set on excluding and killing those perceived as the Other in our contemporary world.⁴ Modalities of deadly

exclusion are present in everything from the inception of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) under George W. Bush to Obama-era detention practices, which set the tone for his successor Trump's failed border wall, to the brutal murders of Guatemalan migrants at the hands of Mexican drug cartels, police, and military.⁵ For her part, Yajaira Padilla maps anti-Central American political discourse, with racist terms such as "threatening guerrillas" or "forever illegals" employed over a period of forty years from the Reagan through the Trump presidencies. Beyond this, on June 7, 2021, on her first international trip since taking office, U.S. vice president Kamala Harris urged Guatemalans not to migrate, stating how "the United States will continue to enforce our laws and secure our border" (Naylor and Keith 2021). Her implicit reference to ICE serves as a reminder of how easily Central American life can be taken away en route to (and even if they arrive in) the North.

It bears mentioning that Guatemala itself, as with other Central American nations, presents a decidedly necropolitical climate. In a manner of defining necropolitics, Mbembe states that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (2019, 66). The act of governing necropolitically is pervasive in Guatemala, as visible, for example, in former president Óscar Berger's lackluster response to an astonishing rise in femicides during his four-year term in office.⁶ Drug and gang violence also constitute necropolitical acts, since the transnational criminal organizations operate under the premise that they not only can decide who will be killed to achieve their ends, but they also will display allegiance to their groups for the short periods they are expected to stay alive. In the latter case, gangs such as Barrio 18 and Mara Salvatrucha, among many others, victimize individuals, families, store owners, and public transportation workers through extortion, a multi-million-dollar industry throughout Central America, often cited as one of the principal reasons for which people are forced to leave the region.⁷

To echo Mbembe's points, Deborah Levenson imagines necropolitics in a specifically Guatemalan context. With an eye toward gangs and their control over life through their ability to take it away, she remarks, "The

apolitical Maras have crystallized necropolitics into what I call necroliving” (2013, 6). Gang members imagine death to generate income and to maintain control over their territories, but they also expect to die in their twenties or thirties because of the perilous conditions of their work. The negation of life is the force that dictates governability, both on a national scale and in gang activity, which replicates the war machine in its very infrastructure. Indeed, the army was, in many cases in the highlands, destined to destroy signs of (Indigenous) life, with guns, massacres, soldiers, and tanks as constant reminders of the state’s determination to kill. This mentality comes to the surface of everyday life in the present, through new quests for sovereignty at the state level, as in the Berger example, and by way of Giammattei’s response to COVID-19. War tropes in gang-controlled areas, with barbed wire enclosures and security guards, not only act as building blocks of the urban milieu but also are affixed in the national consciousness to symbolize insecurity on a broader scale. In Levenson’s words, the gangs are “immersed in the legacy of political sovereignty through the manufacture of horrific deaths and surrounded by violent deaths” (6). The historian is right to problematize Guatemalan necropolitics in this way, for, as if to replicate necropolitical state forces, the desire for supreme power or authority is reignited through gang activity, especially in Guatemala City.

In a related vein, as demonstrated in the examples of the proposed wall that Mexico would finance, detention centers, ICE agents, and the act of traversing Mexico, a deadly cycle that I term “necropolitical dislocation” emerges. This pattern dictates that some migrants will either die somewhere on their journey north—in ICE custody, in the unrelenting desert of the U.S. American Southwest, as the result of a COVID-19 diagnosis, or by being sent back to their Central American country of origin, either because of their inability to treat the virus or from a violent form of death. Thus, Mbembe’s assertion that “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*” (2019, 92, italics in the original) is relevant for Central Americans both in the isthmus and among the diaspora. With emphasis on specific social media posts from Facebook and Instagram, the remainder of this chapter will chart a path through which to understand collaborative witnessing of COVID-19

and migration in addition to its captures of necropolitics and/as culture where applicable.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS COLLABORATIVE WITNESSING PROJECT

Padilla offers the terminology of “non-belonging” to understand how Central American migrants “have been constituted as Others who don’t belong on a symbolic and material level” (2022, 5). Indeed, in the U.S. popular imaginary, Central America occupies a bewildering position that perpetually oscillates between invisibility and hypervisibility, depending on the political climate. In October 2018, after a massive group of migrants set out from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, largely seeking asylum in the United States, the region’s visibility via global mediascapes became more conspicuous. In one example, in a cycle popularly known as the “Central American migrant caravans,” between four thousand and seven thousand people from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras joined forces to pass through Mexico in its entirety with the intent of eventually crossing the U.S.-Mexico border (Lind 2018). Returning to Escobar’s idea that newer testimonio bridges the Cold War and postwar periods, Facebook (among other sources) instantly became a platform for sharing news articles, opinions, and unabashed political debates about Central American migrants.

On October 30, 2018, Suyapa Portillo, a historian of Chicana/o and Latina/o transnational studies, shared a post to the Central America section of the LASA Facebook page. It depicts a Mexican police helicopter descending on a group of Honduran migrants in the Suchiate River, between the Mexican state of Chiapas and the department of San Marcos, Guatemala (figure 5.1). The four-frame post is dominated by a nineteen-second video clip that shows the helicopter deliberately hovering over the people below, many of whom had already experienced extreme exhaustion after they crossed the entirety of Guatemala from Honduras. One of the photographs shows most people at least waist deep in the murky water, paused beneath the helicopter’s force, with the Mexican side of the border in maddening proximity.

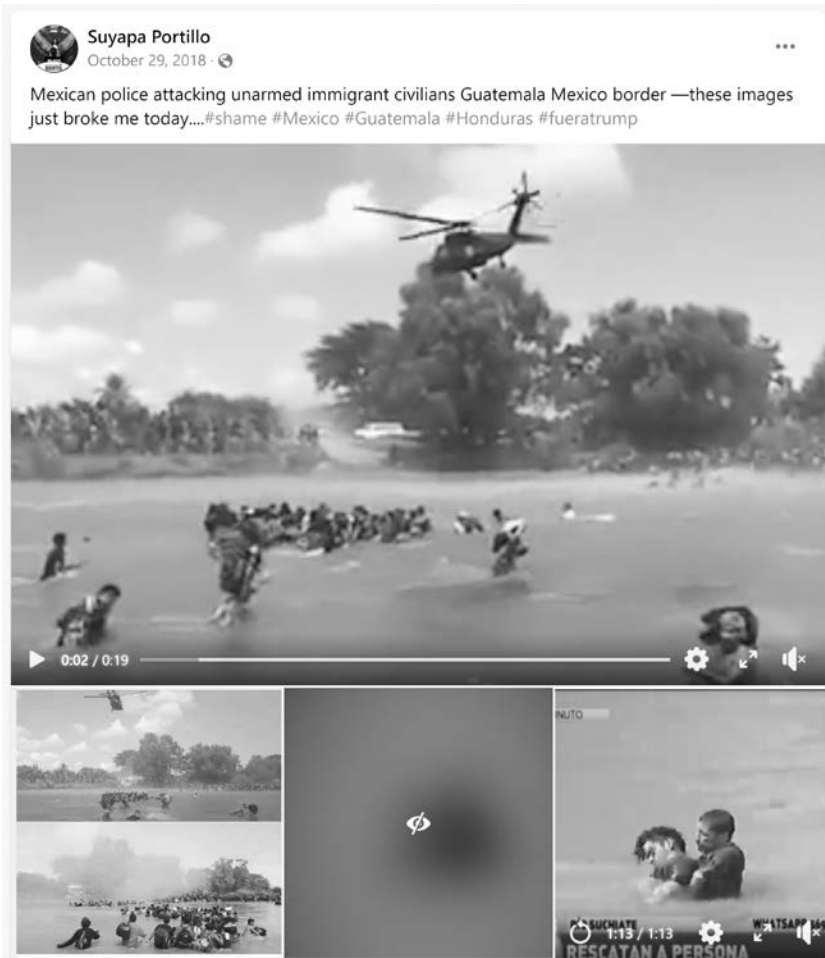


FIGURE 5.1 Facebook post (LASA Central America Section), Mexican police helicopter descends on Central American migrants in the Suchiate River (original post by Suyapa Portillo). (Reproduced by permission from LASA Central American Section.)

In a similar use of a helicopter as a weapon in a grisly episode of the Guatemalan Civil War in which troops execute a gang rape, Jean Franco invites us to “think of the difference and force in sophistication between the machine, the modernity of technology, and the elemental nature of the act, which, far from being bestial, is all too human in its intent” (2013, 81). In the incident in the Suchiate River, a deliberate attempt to drown the Central Americans constitutes the mediation of Facebook to show us

these powerless people, whose subjecthood, in a necropolitical manner, is defined by the deadliness of crossing the river. While Levenson's reference to "the state's successful use of spectacular and reverberating necropolitics" (2013, 6) relates to Guatemalan state sovereignty, her words can also be used to describe the Mexican state's power to negate Central American life. Although the water appears to be shallow, the migrants' probable inability to swim in some cases, coupled with their efforts to cross against the unmatched force of the helicopter, makes their subalternity all the more apparent. In this sense, both distant observers via Facebook and the people in the images experience an act of deadly collaborative witnessing in motion.

Indeed, as the last two images in the frame demonstrate, at least one man lost his life because his exhaustion was no match for the helicopter. One of the final items in the frame is a video, obscured with the slashed eye icon now synonymous with mature content. Once unlocked, it portrays the victim's lifeless body being pulled from the water by another male migrant, also shown in the last photo of the frame. It is this victim's fate that solidifies the images in this Facebook post as a necropolitical collage, at once deeply attuned to the act of collaboratively witnessing the helicopter, with death or the intent on killing at the forefront of the clash between Mexico and Central America. Moreover, because the river *is* the border between Mexico and Guatemala, the Honduran man was effectively stateless when he lost his life, accentuating both the magnitude of his own death and perpetual necropolitical dislocation. Portillo's comment that "these images just broke me today" (2021), together with the inclusion of her hashtag #fueratrump, speaks to the migrants' multilayered marginality and at a great distance, to followers of the page as sympathizers with their quest for asylum.

Here, the discursive power of Facebook constructs a Central American migratory text and, more generally, provides an outlet for observers to draw on lived experiences as a framework to make representational sense of a painfully violent act. As Adam Coon suggests, "A challenge that arises when working with Facebook, if we think of it as a book, is how to study this perpetual text" (2019, 229). Undeniable to anyone familiar with the often unpredictable algorithms of social media, posts are easily rearranged and "pushed down" the timeline by more recent ones, although the search option on individual Facebook pages is particularly helpful

in salvaging posts from oblivion. These inevitable navigation challenges notwithstanding, I see the images of the migrant exodus as but one page in an ongoing digital book of Central American migration that circulates via mediascapes, sometimes faster than family members can receive news about the northerly whereabouts of their loved ones. By virtue of the post in a special interest group for Central America with almost three hundred members, within the realm of the largest professional organization in the world on the study of Latin America (LASA, which has nearly thirty-nine thousand followers on Facebook), I am convinced of the multiple discourses that construct the migrants' narrative, characterized by imminent death in the case of the Hondurans in the river.

Instagram users can similarly conceive of the app as a book, with its own set of challenges presented by unpredictable algorithms and open forums that have left us as hopeless observers of anti-Central American sentiments, overt racism in the #BlackLivesMatter era, and proud anti-vaxxer proclamations. Seemingly at the forefront of the ongoing exodus and related enactments of memory, migration, necropolitics, and the pandemic as harbingers of Central American cultures, Guatemalan photojournalist Esteban Biba's Instagram page (@estebanbiba) presents a formidable display of the present. Trained at the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Biba is known for his images of high-risk events and matters of interest to the public. In Guatemala, this has included same-day coverage of political manifestations, pride parades, sinkholes, tropical storms, and Kamala Harris's official visit. Elsewhere, his work has included the Russia-Ukraine War. The global reach of Biba's work is evidenced by the fact that his work has circulated in such venues as Spain's *El País*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. His Instagram page manifests as a digital book dedicated to the rapidly shifting cartographies of everyday Guatemalan life.

In a sharply testimonial fashion, Biba becomes a conduit via his Instagram account to narrate the stories of a wide range of Guatemalans, from Rigoberta Menchú, to Indigenous peoples in their everyday lives, to migrants at border crossings. Of course, this representation is not without flaws, since non-Indigenous representations of Indigenous peoples, in this case in Spanish, produces its own erasures. In one such post early into the pandemic, from March 28, 2020, Biba (2020) presents a photograph of a K'iche' Maya *chuchqajaw* (spiritual guide) in Chichicastenango,



FIGURE 5.2 Instagram post, Maya *chuchqajaw* protects Chichicastenango from COVID-19. Reproduced by permission from Esteban Biba (@estebanbiba).

who performs a ceremony to protect the village from the virus (figure 5.2). The vibrantly colored clothing of the *chuchqajaw*, particularly his headdress, clashes with a medical mask he wears to protect himself and others from contagion. The mask serves to announce that it, too, has become a main feature of Indigenous dress, to protect from the forces of globalization evident in how quickly the virus spread across the world. The whiteness of the mask speaks to the purity of the ritual, which the *chuchqajaw* performs for the greater good. Incense accompanies the scene, an ancient element of Maya rituals.

The caption is worthy of discussion because, on the one hand, it is significant that the *chuchqajaw* performs the ceremony in front of the Iglesia de Santo Tomás, a focal point of Chichicastenango. Maya spiritual leaders have used the church for centuries to perform rituals and processions along the eighteen steps that symbolize each month of the Maya calendar year, marking its importance as an Indigenous site. The church is also part of the Chichicastenango marketplace, where international tourists and Guatemalans alike gather to trade. When processions are not taking place, women often fill the same steps to sell flowers and woven goods. The location of the image suggests that the tourists are present in

the subconscious of the chuchqajaw, with his probable wish to protect them as well as to protect the livelihood of the village marketplace itself. Details of the Indigenous knowledges that construct the protection ceremony are absent in Biba's post, in tune with Bécquer Seguí's conclusion that "subalternists must, in fact, withhold agency from colonial subjects in order to maintain the narrative of their victimhood" (2018, 214–15). Biba, as the photographer, and other non-Indigenous observers via his Instagram page are at a distance from the spiritual leader's knowledge, the full scope of which he necessarily withholds. It is as if the chuchqajaw purposely conceals full awareness of the ceremony while at the same time pointing out that under normal circumstances, the ceremony would have taken place before packed crowds in the marketplace.

Furthermore, the hashtags that Biba includes with his post provide intertextuality with other Guatemalan Instagram posts in general and with Guatemalan experiences with the pandemic, more specifically. As one would expect, the hashtag #mycoronaphoto provides more panoramic access to posts from around the world and direct links to the account by the same name (@mycoronaphoto), broadcasting a collection of over four hundred photos from such disparate locations as Bolivia and Singapore (My Corona Photo 2020). As a result, the hashtags provide evidence for multiple discourses in the construction of Biba's original text and for the global reach of the photographed chuchqajaw, whose image circulates by way of the public Instagram account. The asymmetrical relationship between Biba and the spiritual leader is evident here, which showcases the K'iche' man's lived experience of the pandemic.

A related post provided by the nonprofit Maya Health Alliance (2020) from March 26, 2020, shows guidelines for social distancing in Spanish, K'iche', and Kaqchikel (figures 5.3 and 5.4). The post has three frames for the different languages, and each frame presents the same drawing of an x-ed out group of seven people. The imposing red X speaks against the formation of large groups. At least two of the people in the image are wearing masks. The woman in the foreground appears to be Indigenous, as if to foreshadow how Maya peoples would be disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Each frame conveys the same message in each language, with "daily tips" (Tips Diarios, Chutin Taq Na'oj, and No'jib'aj Q'ij Q'ij) in the form of a hotline that people can call if they



FIGURE 5.3 Instagram post about social distancing with frames in Spanish, K'iche', and Kaqchikel, @mayahealthalliance. Reproduced by permission from Maya Health Alliance.



FIGURE 5.4 Instagram post about social distancing with frames in Spanish, K'iche', and Kaqchikel, @mayahealthalliance. Reproduced by permission from Maya Health Alliance.

suspect any symptoms of COVID-19. The phone number extensions suggest that operators would be able to help people in any of the three languages, showing how, reminiscent of testimonio's key traits, Guatemala's linguistic plurality constitutes a collective speech act. The inclusion of K'iche' and Kacqchikel, though dominated by the @mayahealthalliance whose Instagram profile homepage is written in English, also evidences

a decolonial effort to decenter, as *testimonio* scholarship has called it, a “bourgeois protagonist” (Atencio 2006, 279; Beverley 1996, 27).

The urgency of the post is underscored by the hashtag “stay at home” (#QuedateenCasa, #Kak’ojePaAwachöch, or #K’ola_chochri_a_wochoch), present both as part of the images and in the comments that @mayahealthalliance includes in the post. While the Quedateen-Casa hashtag elicits such diverse posts as amateur recipes and memes that speak to the global act of staying at home to stop the spread, the two Mayan hashtags link only to other posts by @mayahealthalliance. Nevertheless, their inclusion signals a decolonial gesture to incorporate twenty-first-century indigeneity into the world of metadata, which identifies digital content on the pandemic from distinctly Maya perspectives. The pandemic’s ability to control Indigenous life (and possible death) is conveyed through the hashtags, coupled with the deadly grip of genocide that still lingers. As Escobar states in her observations of visual *testimonio*, these newer forms of the genre “compel us to reflect on how Indigenous feminisms in Central America have changed from the Cold War era to the new era of state terror and economic precarity” (2021, 19). As with the @mayahealthalliance and related accounts, Indigenous lived experiences emerge as a defining feature of Guatemalan collective witnessing, modernity, and transformations of how social inequality is represented.

Put another way, in relation to the hashtag #NiUnaMenos (not one woman less), inspired by the Argentinian (and now global) movement of the same name, founder Florencia Abbate elaborates on how the initial June 2015 event in Buenos Aires immediately resonated with digital audiences in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and beyond. To paraphrase Abbate, social media has become a virtual public space, defined by its ability to generate new frameworks through which to interpret reality and mobilize public opinion. Mediation by social media, she suggests, communicates the emergence of new political subjectivities influenced by online representations and perceptions (2018, 153). In the case of @mayahealthalliance, with over 1,500 Instagram followers at the time of writing, Spanish-, K’iche’-, and Kaqchikel-speaking peoples face the reality that multiple sources (including and apart from their own) narrate the story of how the pandemic has created an indelible impact on their everyday lives. At the root of what Gómez Menjívar and Chacón call “strategic network building with the purpose of remaining connected to land and kin in

order to ensure cultural survival” (2019, 14), the virtual communities enable @mayahealthalliance posts to dialogue with Maya community leaders and their followers. This reality, as demonstrated by the trilingual social distancing post, is present in the evolving vocabularies of the languages and the visual representations themselves, inviting us to consider the @mayahealthalliance Instagram page as a form of resistance and, thus, as a new facet of testimonio that addresses the politics of memory. It is an *Indigenous Interface*, to use the title of Gómez Menjívar and Chacón’s volume.

Memory as “not just a subject matter for scholars to study or even a duty for postconflict societies, but a *right* to which citizens are entitled” (Lazzara 2018, 25–26, italics in the original), further enhances the collaborative witnessing process. As a recent aspect of this process, the pandemic has also evolved as a major factor of Central American migratory movements across and beyond the isthmus. State sovereignty as exercised by Central American nations, Mexico, and the United States acts violently against migrants, whose everyday lives mold narratives and, with the mediation of social media, visualize legacies of resistance to that sovereignty. To conclude this chapter, I turn again to the photographic work of Esteban Biba, who in a post from January 18, 2021, captures an image of a young boy standing at the roadblock between Guatemalan policemen and Honduran migrants (figure 5.5). The photograph, which Biba (2021c) presents on the eve of President Biden’s inaugural, rekindles images of the Honduran toddler whose picture appeared on the cover



FIGURE 5.5 Instagram post, Honduran migrants clash with Guatemalan police, @estebanbiba. Reproduced by permission from Esteban Biba.

of the July 2, 2018, issue of *Time* magazine.⁸ While that girl became the face of Trump's zero tolerance immigration policy, the boy in Biba's post surfaces on one of the last days of his administration. The hashtag #CaravanaDeMigrantes divides Biba's caption, as if to mirror how the child creates a barrier between the uniformed men, the roadblock, and beleaguered migrants. When a digital spectator zooms in on the photograph, the masked faces on either side of the divide come sharper into focus, infusing, in a sharply necropolitical manner, the deadly path northward with the fatal reach of COVID-19.

Continued migration northward rests in part on interpretations of President Joe Biden's planned amnesty for migrants in the earliest phase of his term. His incoming presidency played a role in the group of two thousand Honduran migrants entering Guatemala, with at least one hundred of them clashing with police.⁹ Biba geotags the location of his post as Chiquimula, Chiquimula, and then in his comment describes it more specifically as kilometer highway location marker 177 in Vado Hondo, Chiquimula department. A series of seventeen photographs across eleven posts from the same week in January 2021, including a man riding in a spare tire under a tractor trailer and a boy playing directly beneath the Bienvenidos a Honduras sign at the Guatemala-Honduras border, produce real-time pages of Biba's book ("Josué," "Un niño hondureño"). In reference to this period, a *Los Angeles Times* article from the same date as the post in figure 5.5 tells us that "Guatemalan police and soldiers launched tear gas and wielded batons and shields against a group of Honduran migrants who tried to push through their roadblock Sunday" (*Los Angeles Times* 2021).

As of June 1, 2021, the Guatemalan government still required a negative COVID-19 test for entry into the country, the main reason for which the authorities reacted against the migrants with such deadly force, most of whom were unable to produce negative results. The pandemic, along with the devastating impact of back-to-back Hurricanes Eta and Iota, two weeks apart in November 2020, were the obvious reasons for such desperation to cross the roadblock. As the *Los Angeles Times* article indicates, at least twenty-one of the Honduran migrants who were injured by baton strikes sought medical attention at Guatemalan health centers, where they tested positive for the virus (*Los Angeles Times* 2021). With our view cast back on Biba's image, we observe that not everyone wears

a mask, including the young child at the center. The standoff with police is thus profoundly marked by extreme proximity to potential death. The migrants fled the aftermath of two hurricanes and the impact of the pandemic in Honduras to be met with the technologies of war and viral exposure, even in the case of those who wore masks. Their necropolitical dislocation—the condition of being cyclically, permanently close to death whether in Honduras, Guatemala, beyond, in the North, or as they are sent between these locations—is subsequently in full view here.

The asymmetrical relationship between Biba, his subjects, and observers of his work on Instagram also materializes in the public commentary attached to his post. Undoubtedly with the little boy in mind, a person on one account comments, “This is the most powerful picture I’ve seen in a long time. It says so much—not just about the tragedy of the caravan, but really about the human condition” (Biba 2021c). Two other comments in Spanish by separate users read, “Tus fotos me hicieron llorar hoy. Gracias por lo que haces. Cuídate mucho” (Your photos made me cry today. Thank you for what you do. Take care of yourself.), with the prayer hands emoji, and “La deshumanidad total. Qué tristeza” (Total inhumanity. What sadness.) (Biba 2021c, my translation). Other minimal comments only take the form of emojis, such as flames or thumbs up in the Brown skin tone to indicate approval of the capture. In this way, viewers of the Instagram post experience both the speaker (Biba) and the subjects/situation (Honduran migrants in Guatemala) as “real” rather than fictional, to recall Beverley’s conceptualization of testimonio (1996, 27). The public commentary sheds light on the collective mode of witnessing, in some cases with viewers imagining themselves in the migrants’ place. The act of bearing witness in a legal sense is visible in the egalitarian nature of the comments, which completely clash with the fact that the Mexican Foreign Relations Department lauded Guatemalan armed forces for treatment of “migrants that violated its sovereignty” (*Los Angeles Times* 2021). Both the representational value of “the real thing,” as experienced by subaltern groups, and the control over them embodies a clearly defined necropolitical ethos.

These thoughts conclude the chapter but not the trajectory of social media as an ongoing text through which we bear witness to shifting dynamics of Central Americanness in the era of COVID-19 and migration. As Menchú taught us after the publication of her testimonio, and as the

aforementioned posts demonstrate, collaborative witnessing can be a painful endeavor. Beyond following pages of interest on Facebook or Instagram as passive consumers, these technologies provide documentation of post-war Guatemala. In the process, the content providers, public commentary, and social media followers mediate how images of the subaltern circulate in the global waves of cyberspace via visual representations, hashtags, and other defining features of these digital books. In the posts described here and countless others, social media generates its own snapshot of Guatemalans, inviting them and us to witness from new angles.

NOTES

1. Vaccination availability is constantly evolving in Guatemala. In February 2021, Israel pledged support for the country in this regard (Federman 2021). In June 2021, the Biden-Harris administration released a strategy for global vaccine sharing with Latin American and Caribbean countries, including Guatemala (White House 2021).
2. Kaitlin Murphy (2018, 10) coins the term “memory mapping,” which she defines as “the aesthetic process of representing the affective, sensorial, polyvocal, and temporally layered relationship between past and present, anchored within the specificities of place.”
3. For insightful analyses of Meiselas, see Franco (2013), Perkowska (2010), and Esch (2018).
4. I am grateful to Joseba Gabilondo for sustained dialogue on this point.
5. On January 22, 2021, Mexican police officers in Camargo, Tamaulipas, killed nineteen people, some of whom were Guatemalan migrants. See Peña (2021).
6. Berger’s deeply misogynistic attitudes are especially apparent in the BBC documentary *Killer’s Paradise* (Portenier 2007).
7. For critical readings of Central American gang extortion, see Fontes (2018), Levenson (2013), and Zilberg (2011).
8. That photograph was taken by Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer John Moore, of Getty Images.
9. The Associated Press (2021) makes note of both points, stating that migrants “hope for a warmer reception from the incoming administration.”

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6

WOMEN TO POWER

Art, Politics, and Migration in Regina José Galindo
and Tania Bruguera

MARÍA VICTORIA VÉLIZ

IN 2010, on the occasion of the second iteration of the *Corpus. Arte in azione* event in Naples, Italy, a newspaper identified Regina José Galindo (Guatemala, 1974), Tania Bruguera (Cuba, 1968), and Teresa Margolles (Mexico, 1963) as the Latin American women artists with the greatest political influence in the continent at that moment.¹ This reference is one of those memories associated with my life in Guatemala, that I have not been able to confirm.² Regardless of whether the newspaper quote, my memories, or the political influence of Galindo, Bruguera, and Margolles could be substantiated, I will use this memory as a starting point for this chapter. In the capricious way that memories present themselves, there is something to be discovered, to be made our own.

The political effect of the work of these artists has been lingering in my mind, since it operates in an array of levels that are far from being homogenous. While Bruguera's work resonates politically at the institutional level, Galindo's and Margolles's art pieces aim at the body. Often shockingly, seldom subtlety, their works tend to activate bodily reactions in the audience. In such a way, they act politically. To further explore these different approaches to politics, this chapter focuses on a comparative study between Galindo and Bruguera regarding migration to or

in the United States. That is, how their work with immigrants and their notion of mobility can give an account of the political.

Furthermore, this chapter is an attempt to situate their knowledge. U.S. migration laws for Cubans and Guatemalans, Caribbean and Central American people, carry a long history of disparities, which inescapably inform the work of both artists. At the same time, their careers as performance artists cannot be delinked from other pioneer female performers who in the same context questioned notions such as sovereignty and territories.

A FEMININE CONSTELLATION

Women have been reappropriating the public sphere to challenge male dominant power as well as the forms in which it operates, embedded within the modern state apparatus. In Central America, for example, Guatemalan Margarita Azurdia was one of the first visual artists from the region to present a performance in an international event in 1970 (Pérez-Rattón 2013, 3). Although there were earlier attempts mainly by male artists toward the end of the 1960s, these artists still seemed focused on the vision and the limits of the fine arts.³ Conversely, since the beginning, Azurdia's work invited the audience to explore all the senses. In her piece *Favor de quitarse los zapatos* (Please take off your shoes), she created a dimly lit wooden cubicle with wet sand on the floor. At the entrance a sign asked visitors to take off their shoes, consequently pushing them to sensorially explore a dark space and unstable ground. Previously, in California, she had studied art under the influences of the Hard-edge Abstraction movement at a time that experienced the vibrancy of the Civil Rights Movement from 1957 to 1963. This moment seemed to influence her path towards performance, although it became a practice after her divorce.

Azurdia was victim of severe machismo. She married at seventeen years old and, for years, she could not find a lawyer in Guatemala willing to face the power of her husband and process the divorce (Pellecer 2011, 43). Once "free," she almost turned into a kind of urban legend within the Guatemalan art circles and among the economic elite. "She liked to shock society. One time she went to a public space dressed in a bishop cape,

led by a prostitute" (Pellecer 2011, 44).⁴ Guatemalan philosopher Rodolfo Arévalo used to tell publicly that he ran into Azurdia one night in a gas station in Guatemala City zone 10 during the 1990s. She was accompanied by friends and artists that all of a sudden started to dance and that at times she said, "The space should be broken."⁵ The phrase was a metaphorical way to call for action, for movements able to change the energy and dynamic of the space. Through performance, Azurdia addressed movement and spirituality, which simultaneously with poetry, accompanied her journey of self-discovery (FUNBA Guatemala 2020, 1:39–3:30). In 1983, Azurdia founded a creativity laboratory. It gathered dancers and artists interested in exploring bodily expressions. They spontaneously took over streets and plazas, although they also performed in theaters and art galleries. Based on conversations, readings, movement techniques, and meditation, among other resources, the group's goal was to foster everyone's creativity. In Azurdia's view, this uniqueness expressed at the same time a sense of communality. An artist's poem entitled "UNA" (One), which reflects on the interconnectedness of everything, was also the name of a dance the group presented in 1987 (Pellecer 2011, 73–77). Through performance, Azurdia discovered a cathartic medium that also turned into a journey of self-knowledge, healing, empowerment, and liberation. Considered for many as one more madwoman in her time, she never gave up the right to decide her own life and make public her explorations and struggles.

Decades later, in the second half of the 1990s, Regina José Galindo continued on and expanded this path, also putting her body on the line to visualize other women's struggles. While Azurdia rebels against the model of behavior that Guatemalan society imposed on her, Galindo shows how women's disobedience triggers multiple expressions of violence and is punished. Dealing with rapes, femicides, domestic abuse, lack of agency, and intertwining oppressions that fall onto women's bodies, Galindo's performances denounce the brutality with which women are often treated. In so doing, she seems to have expanded Azurdia's defiance. Although in a very different fashion, the struggle against the colonization of women's bodies connects the work of Azurdia and Galindo, regardless of the periods of silences that existed between these two artists. They both fight against a predatory system of power that authorizes the control of women and, consequently, all forms of gender violence.

Similarly, Tania Bruguera's work could be connected to the Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta, although they appear to be tied by their shared homeland and the reconfiguration of a greater Cuba. Influenced by Mendieta, Bruguera became a performance artist in a way that did not exist in Cuba before. She appropriated performance art as her medium in a context where this language was part of the contemporary experimentation of many artists but was not their main way of expression. Like Galindo, Bruguera continues a female lineage that embraces the experience of becoming and of recognizing others. But, unlike Galindo, her approach to performance arose from a strong artistic system of education.

Bruguera studied art from elementary to higher education within the system created by the Cuban Revolution, in 1959. Whereas performance art emerged in other Latin American countries in the 1960s in the context of political upheavals and military interventions, it did not develop in Cuba until the 1980s. During the sixties, the state began taking control of public spaces and eliminating private property in Cuba. Consequently, performance art arose within art institutions. Only artists accredited by the artistic educational system had the freedom to perform and cope with the state power. Under the revolutionary model, artists were to be large-scale educators, key collaborators for the construction of a new society (Machado 2020). By the end of the 1970s, some artists started to question the spirit of these ideas, and performance became a discussed topic within the artistic higher education system in the 1980s. *La vida* (Life), a performance by Manuel Mendive, was awarded with the prize of the Galería Espacio Latinoamericano in Paris, during the second Havana Biennial in 1986.⁶ The same year, Bruguera initiated her homage to Ana Mendieta, which, aside from being a feminine gesture of acknowledgment, attempted to connect the two Cubas divided by the exile.

Mendieta was part of the children's exodus from Cuba known as Operation Peter Pan. She arrived in the United States in 1961.⁷ She earned an MFA from the University of Iowa and moved to New York, where she gained recognition as a performance artist. Mendieta returned to Cuba in 1980 as part of El Círculo de la Cultura Cubana (CCC) (Cuban Culture Circle) and traveled there seven more times promoting intercultural exchanges until 1983 (Roulet 2012, 22).⁸ Her encounters, particularly with Cuban visual artists, greatly influenced the contemporary art scene. She

passed away abruptly in 1985. Bruguera, still a student of the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) (Higher Institute of Art), shortly after started to re-perform some of Mendieta's works and continued to do so for a decade. Bruguera's homage to Mendieta inspired her own career as a solo performance artist. Bruguera belongs to the artistic generation that during the eighties questioned the model of national identity imposed by the revolution. These artists were interested in connecting to currents within international contemporary art (Weiss 2011, 3) and employed performance, often loaded with humor, as a way of subverting the rigid policies of art education and cultural institutions. Yet, Bruguera went further. By re-performing Mendieta's pieces, she, in fact, was sketching the cartography of a Cuba reunited with its exile and migrations (which she still addresses in her work) as well as congealing her artistic language within the performance art practice. In a similar manner, Galindo, by embodying the history of other abused women, links herself and her work to Azurdia and establishes a distinctive language. In that light, I argue here that by identifying and bodily connecting with other women through performance art, Galindo and Bruguera, first, empower themselves and, second, empower others, such as minoritarian subjects, like the immigrants that are the main focus of this chapter.

Both artists work on establishing a "feminized" force that seems to unify otherness in political power. Although they took different paths and have different creative methodologies, their artistic practices are rooted in the identification with others who are excluded from the benefits of the socioeconomic system. Galindo and Bruguera were born during the Cold War era and grew up marked by narratives of displacements produced by ideological clashes, violence, and poverty. The history of performance that they both have expanded is also a consequence of a transnational communication. That is why I will analyze the political influences of these artists and focus on their work on migration. In doing so, this chapter examines the performances of Galindo's *Curso de supervivencia para hombres y mujeres que viajan a Estados Unidos* (Survival course for men and women who will travel illegally to the United States) (2007) and *America's Family Prison* (2008) and Bruguera's *Movimiento Inmigrante Internacional* (Immigrant Movement International) (2010–15) and *El Partido del Pueblo Migrante* (Migrant People's Party) (2010–15). Bruguera's and Galindo's performances, seen through the lens of these particular

works, function as a declaration against the nation and its institutions, though from very different repertoires and artistic positions. But in what manner? What is their contribution to the reconfiguration of politics? Could the repertoire of migration become more than political art?

Diana Taylor, in her book *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), defines two categories to better understand performance in the Americas: the archive and the repertoire. The former is a container of history or knowledge classified by categories. The second is shaped by memories, remembrances, stories, traditions, songs, oral transmission—all of which continue to persist, without clear traces, as embodied knowledge. Performance is what unifies them. Therefore, the repertoire could be seen as an archive of embodied knowledge that stays alive through performance. As seen in this chapter, Galindo's and Bruguera's works stem from very different repertoires of migration. While Galindo's repertoire is informed by undocumented migration from Central America to the United States, as the consequence of civil wars in the region and the remaining legacy of violence, Bruguera's repertoire is informed by her own nomadic experience as an artist based mainly between Cuba, the United States, and France. During the late nineties, Bruguera began to reside in the United States, which along with the development of her personal career, placed her in a position of power. Henceforth, her approach to migration focused on human rights within the legal frame of current political systems. Conversely, Galindo's performances highlighted particularly Central American migratory conditions and the economic chain behind undocumented migration in contemporary times. In the work of both performers, what seems to be missing is the political force of memory and trauma as cultural materials.

A WOMAN INHABITED BY MANY OTHERS

Regina José Galindo used to cut articles from the local newspapers when she was a teenager. She grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Guatemala City during the 1980s, the cruelest years of the Guatemalan civil war. The city was in a permanent state of alert, with curfews and military deployments that intimidated the population, who were sheltered in their homes with no way out. Thus, social life was reduced to the

private, walled-in life of each family. There, silently, all fears were reproduced, and through them, a microcosm of the structure of domination and power and its violent language. The war reinforced the model of authoritarian males, who could act freely in the privacy of their homes. By the 1990s, newspapers increasingly reported cases of violence against women. In her solitary moments, Galindo read, cut articles out of newspapers, wrote poems, and created collages (Galindo, pers. comm. August 25, 2021). That is why it is not by chance that her first performance, *El dolor en un pañuelo* (The pain in a handkerchief) (1999), consists of slides from her newspaper clippings projected over her nude body. This live action revealed the topic that would distinguish her entire artist career. Violence against women and women's social subordination have driven Galindo's performances and poetry, although it is in fact her empathy that has led her toward an understanding of the victim, of the subordinated other.

The end of the 1990s in Guatemala was a moment of cultural explosion. After the peace accords in 1996, some exiled people returned to the country, and among them were many intellectuals. In addition, as part of the peace agenda, several international organizations, such as Hivos, Norad, Soros, Helvetas, and Christian Aid, sponsored cultural events (Cazali 2003, 40). The development of arts and culture was thought of as a key ingredient to rebuild a peaceful environment. Consequently, several programs economically favored editorial and audiovisual productions, exhibitions, concerts, and artistic research. These programs were vital to reestablishing public life. Along with a countercultural movement that previously had been in the making and mostly linked to the rock scene, gatherings in El Café de Oro, later the organization of Casa Bizarra, and private initiatives such as Galería Contexto, were all elements that contributed to the formation of what was called Arte Urbano (Urban Art), the movement that framed the initial stage of Galindo's career as a performance artist.⁹

In 1999, the artist performed three more times, once in a public space, suspended from the arch of the post office building in downtown Guatemala City (zona 1). The piece's title was *Lo voy a gritar al viento* (I am going to scream to the wind) and was part of the second Festival of the Historic Center. Photographs of the performance were on the front cover of the three most-read newspapers in the country at that time:

Prensa Libre, *Nuestro Diario*, and *El Periódico*. From that moment on, Galindo began to be known for shocking her audience, either because of her freedom to appear nude, or because of herself becoming a victim of violence through her performances, exposing her body to resist all sorts of aggressions. She continued to actively perform in Guatemala and later in the neighboring countries with cultural infrastructure, like Mexico and Costa Rica, which allowed her to also be recognized within the Central American region. Although she was part of a movement integrated by other female and male performance artists, the way that she embodied and denounced the multiple forms of violence in Guatemala quickly became a benchmark of the contemporary art scene in the Central American isthmus.

In 2001, she was invited, along with five other regional artists, by pioneer art curator Harald Szeemann to the Venice Biennale (Acuña, Wallner, and Pérez 2012, 74–75). It was the first time Central American artists were invited to integrate the main curatorial project of the oldest biennial in the world. Galindo became an international artist who received the attention of art critics, feminist activists, and the academic world. By 2005, she had participated in numerous exhibitions and art events (Dávila 2019, 149). However, the artist considers that the Golden Lion Prize at the 2005 Venice Biennale in the young artist category was what opened doors for her at many art institutions internationally. The award also motivated the Italian gallerist Ida Pisani, from the Prometeo Gallery, to ask Galindo to work together with her, assuring her a salary that permitted her to quit her day job and focus only on her artistic projects. The Golden Lion Prize and Pisani's support gave her the financial freedom that would have been very difficult for her to achieve as a professional artist in Guatemala (Galindo, pers. comm., August 25, 2021). Both factors contributed to the production of pieces such as *Survival Course for Men and Women Who Will Travel Illegally to the US*. She created independently, without any institutional financial support. Unexpectedly, the babysitter who cared for her daughter told Galindo she had decided to leave the country and that a family member who was a coyote (smuggler) would help her (Galindo, pers. comm. August 25, 2021). Galindo contacted him and later organized the survival course, along with a professional in dangerous sports. The coyote, who worked as a type of manager recruiting people who later would travel with a

guide, gathered the people who were planning their journey, and Galindo offered them training and a little money.

The origin of this performance demonstrates the process of identification with others that the artist often expands while performing and the kind of performance that Galindo has continuously created as a result of having never left her birthplace. Many of Galindo's performances are translations of events from Guatemalan contemporary history, as is the case of *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* (Who can erase the traces?) (2003), *Himenoplastia* (Hymenoplasty) (2004), and more recently *Presencia* (Presence) (2017). All of these, among many other of her performances, seem to point out the experiences of others who are not distant, others who are not so Other, but who are part of the Guatemalan survival collective culture who have to make their living every day. In Guatemala, performance is everywhere: people sell poems on buses, children swallow fire at traffic lights, God-possessed evangelist preachers recite the Bible on the streets; clairvoyants advise about the future in the central park. It is not by chance that performance art practice is perhaps the distinctive condition of Guatemalan contemporary art. Artists grow up within this language, which works almost as a national lingua franca, and in addition, barely have formal education in the arts. Given that in a territory of 108,890 square kilometers and with a population of 16.3 million (census 2015) where twenty-four languages are spoken, orality, embodied knowledge, and performance serve as primary source of communication.¹⁰ This helps to understand why many of Galindo's works could be seen as reenactments of everyday life and also why she easily empathizes with minoritarian subjects globally. Performances such as *Camisa de fuerza* (Straitjacket) (2006), *Cepo* (Stocks) (2007), and *America's Family Prison* (2008) are the result of site specificity. When Galindo has time and institutional support to conduct research, she creates pieces informed by the social tensions in the location from which she performs. Galindo's idea for *America's Family Prison*, for example, was triggered by a question that a U.S. journalist asked her while she was presenting her work at a university. At the time, she didn't know anything about prisons exclusively for Central American immigrants. Months later, as an artist in residence at Artpace in San Antonio, Texas, she began the research. It finished when she, her young daughter, and her husband lived together in one of the cells produced by a private prison company in the

United States (Golinda and Turner 2021). Although this work is connected to Guatemala's recent history, its methodology gives an account of the artist's *modus operandi* outside of Guatemala. Although Galindo's performances have contributed to the disclosing of Guatemalan modern history, they have also defined a way of making performance based on empathy and of embodying the forces that oppress others. The success of Galindo's work has also played an important role in bringing scholars' and curators' attention to Guatemala and the Central American region, connecting artists and cultural agents, reinforcing, overall, the sense of feminist struggles in Guatemala and around the globe.

THE STATELESS OTHERS

In *Survival Course for Men and Women Who Will Travel Illegally to the U.S.*, Regina José Galindo hired an instructor and rented a space to gather ten people who planned to migrate to the United States. During the course/performance, the future migrants received practical training on survival. The work was developed "with the collaboration of a Guatemala-based professional smuggler and an instructor in dangerous sports, [and] the course taught skills in fire making, map reading, navigation by sun and stars, first aid, self-defense, as well as the location of water sources and edible bugs and plants" (Cornejo 2015, 32). In addition, the participants learned how to climb walls and were given money to pay any necessary bribes along the way. The women were also taught to hide condoms in their belts and were advised to pass as HIV-positive Guatemalan prostitutes to keep rapists at bay. This event gives way to some questions: Does the Guatemalan state ensure the protection of human life? What do Guatemalan migrants represent to the state of Guatemala? Are they citizens? Are they a mere number in government economic statistics?

Guatemala is a country marked by both its thirty-six years of civil war, recognized by their official history (1960–96), and its ethnic and linguistic diversity. It has the third-largest Indigenous population in Latin America in absolute numbers, and second largest (39.5 percent) as a share of the country's population (PDBA 2006).¹¹ Yet, such diversity is administered by a monocultural state with scarce Indigenous representation, which has been the root cause of its history of incessant violence since colonial

times. The last period of their officially recognized civil war started with the intervention of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States in 1954 and the expulsion of then president Jacobo Árbenz. Árbenz was expanding the modernization plan initiated by his predecessor Juan José Arévalo (1945–51), which initially mainly affected the urban sector.¹² However, in order to transform the feudal agricultural system, an agrarian reform had to be undertaken. Agrarian reform became law in 1952, and it highly benefited Indigenous peasants but affected the lands and interests of the United Fruit Company, who requested the CIA help to overthrow Árbenz. The aftermath of this coup d'état was not only the installation of a military regime but also the persecution of Indigenous supporters and those benefited by the agrarian reform (Guzmán-Böckler 2008, 36–39). This conflict triggered the formation of guerrilla groups, the war, and consequently a wave of displaced persons, who fled mainly to Mexico, Canada, and the United States. One of the outcomes of the Peace Accord Agreements was the creation of the Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEC) (Commission for Historical Clarification). A CEC report published in 1999 determined that 626 villages were massacred, 1.5 million people were displaced, 150,000 people fled to Mexico, and more than 200,000 were dead or disappeared (Sandford 2008, 106).¹³ Indigenous peoples were the most affected sector of the Guatemalan population, particularly under the tactics of *tierra arrasada* (scorched earth), practiced by Generals Romeo Lucas García and Efraín Ríos Montt between 1981 and 1983 (Farfán 2017). The Guatemalan army's scorched earth genocidal tactics included the destruction of villages and their surroundings and the relentless hunt for and massacre of survivors (Sandford 2003, 147).¹⁴ Consequently, during the 1980s the number of Maya refugees fleeing toward the North substantially increased.¹⁵

The journey toward the United States was also taken by other Central Americans, mainly from El Salvador and Nicaragua, who were besieged by armed conflicts in their countries. The war in El Salvador (1980–92), which was also plagued by extreme cruelty after the revolution's triumph in Nicaragua (1979), when U.S.-backed right-wing armed groups (los contras) maintained operations in mainly rural areas, also increased the displacement of people from the countryside. As a consequence, Central Americans' migration to the United States tripled between 1980 and 1990 (Batalova et al., 2019). While Nicaraguans were considered refugees

because they were fleeing from Communism, during Ronald Reagan's presidency (1981–89), 97 percent of Salvadorans and 98 percent of Guatemalans were denied asylum (Jonas 2013). This situation gave rise to the U.S. sanctuary movement, a campaign promoted by a network of churches to provide shelter, goods, and protection for Central American victims of state-sponsored violence. Simultaneously, the migrants' precarious political and living conditions propelled the increase of neighborhood youth criminal gangs in Southern California, among them gangs made up of Central Americans, known as *maras*. In Los Angeles, the city that received the greatest number of mostly rural and poor immigrants from Central America, many immigrants were segregated again and ended up in cliques within the 18th Street gang, one of the largest Latinx gangs in the area, primarily formed by Mexicans in the 1960s. Already immersed within the dynamics of ethnic gang culture, between 1985 and 1989, Salvadorans formed Mara Salvatrucha. By the beginning of the 1990s, both groups had grown considerably and were affecting the lives of many Californians (Valdez 2011, 23–26). Like churches, gangs provided a sense of belonging. From the very fringes of the social, *maras* became a self-organized network that protected, assisted, and employed Central Americans, first by trafficking drugs at the street level and extorting business owners, and later as a transnational organization.

In 1996, when the armed conflicts in Central America had ceased, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act expanded the definition of deportable to include lesser offenses, resulting in the deportation of a large number of young Central Americans who had grown up mostly in the United States. They, as their parents had before, felt alienated in their “native” countries, with scarce opportunities and no plans to assimilate. Therefore, they reproduced *mara* lifestyle and organization, in turn, expanding the gangs' network. The lack of opportunities and the high rates of unemployment, along with the legitimization of violent means and military tactics that the war imparted on the population, opened the door for the expansion of the Central American *maras*, mainly from the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras). They also became, simultaneously, a cause of migration and internal displacements and a source of employment. In addition, natural disasters from the end of the 1990s through to today have greatly fostered new flows of migration. A cartography of the contemporary Central

American migration would show a complex map of relations, where populations fleeing from armed conflict, supported by the United States, are at the same time unrecognized as political refugees, criminalized, and deported from the United States. Despite all these adversities, these populations have established themselves within Latinx communities. And as they strive, they also prove to their impoverished fellow nationals in the isthmus that, paradoxically, only in the United States could they get a job and make a living. Postwar violence and corruption, the maras, natural disasters, and the media's influence have continuously driven new waves of migrants from Central America, particularly over the last fifty years. From 2010 until 2017, according to the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), Central American immigration in the United States grew from 2,026,000 to 3,527,000 people (Batalova et al. 2019).

Understanding Guatemala's political history and the web of Central American migration enhance an interpretation of Regina José Galindo's performances, from *Survival Course* to *America's Family Prison*. In 2008, Galindo participated in the international residency program at Artpace in San Antonio, Texas (the state with the second-largest Central American population, according to the MPI). During her two-month residency, Galindo conceived *America's Family Prison*, for which she rented a family cell for \$8,000 from Sweeper Metal Fabricators, the company that builds detention modules. She moved the cell into the gallery at Artpace, and she stayed locked inside it with her husband and her one-year-old daughter for thirty-six hours. This work was a direct response to what she learned in the San Antonio area during her residency, and it was also in direct dialogue with *Survival Course*. *America's Family Prison* intended to redirect the experience of the viewers to the T. Don Hutto Residential Center, a family penitentiary in the town of Taylor, north of Austin, administered by CoreCivic, the largest private prison corporation in the world and one of the highest rated on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) at that time. T. Don Hutto is the first prison authorized by the state of Texas to "lodge" entire families, including children and newborn babies. The majority of these families were waiting for the clarification of their migratory status in the United States. At the time, the government paid about \$77 per day for each detainee. The business of private prisons needs clients, and undocumented immigrants are the easiest prey; they do not even have to commit a crime. Their crime is to exist. They are

bodies that have violated the territorial limits that the power over them has designated for them (Holloway 2011). They are condemned to confinement for this reason. What the government pays every day for each one of these prisoners is more than the monthly base salary for many of them in their countries. Galindo's *America's Family Prison* shows how important undocumented immigrants (mostly Central Americans) are for the prison business. They will never cease to exist as chain links of the economy. Seen from an economic perspective, they matter as arms, as working tools, and as bodies from which a labor force can be extracted, their rights and dignity as subjects disregarded.¹⁶ In that sense, they are used according to the financial dynamics of the context in which they are placed, be it their country of origin or the country that receives them. They, as Achille Mbembe (2019) states, are as borders in themselves. Injured by a damaged planet, their movements threaten the sovereignty of corporations, which in response, contain, enclose, and also trade them. Wherever they are, they establish the limits, the fringes of social development. They are the others that in *America's Family Prison*, as in many of her performances, Galindo seeks to embody.

The artist chooses to live a story she knows that up until that moment had not been her own. In that manner, she balks at distancing herself from such experiences, thus highlighting the transmission of knowledge through the body and its affects.¹⁷ However, no matter how much she can embody, the artist's body is not the body of an undocumented immigrant; therefore, she becomes a thespian. In this theater, the artist and the spectators form a community where there is no place for the illusion of perspective, the detachment of the gaze; by observing, the spectator is performing. The spectators had to watch this work through a narrow window from which the interior light escaped, signaling that there was something inside to be observed. The work invites the audience to avoid the passivity of the gaze. In his essay *El espectador emancipado* (2009), Jacques Rancière poses that the spectator's gaze can also be an action, a process of embodiment of the theatrical representation that transforms them into participants. Theater connects living bodies through the same experience, thus creating a community, a sense of interconnectedness around its actions. Galindo's *mise-en-scène* in *America's Family Prison* is attuned with Rancière's ideas. The spectator's gaze is as if it were the incarcerator's. They are cast in this role without their knowledge,

following in the steps of a prison guard. In that sense, they cannot dissociate gazing and acting as binary oppositions. They are also part of the drama, actors on the stage, therefore, accomplices of the political scenario that profits from incarceration and undocumented immigration. *America's Family Prison* as well as *Survival Course* expose the subordination of the Central American states to the United States, and by extension their citizenry. At the same time, both performances reveal the antilife politics of the modern state: in the country of reception, immigrants are traded, while their countries of origins expulse them and paradoxically receive the economic benefits of their remittances. Through these works, Galindo's performances seek to affect the political approach and behaviors regarding immigration, an aspect that the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera has also explored.

BEHAVIORAL ART

At the crossroads between Richard Schechner's theory of performance as a twice-behaved behavior and the role that "good behavior" has played in Cuban revolutionary society, Tania Bruguera found a way to explore performance studies and practices and developed a working methodology. According to Schechner, behavior circulates as part of a cultural system. In that sense, behaviors can be taken as if they were scripts; therefore, they can be edited, reassembled. In the conscious restoration of behavior, there is a creative possibility of making and remaking who we are.¹⁸ Behavior was also key for the construction of socialism in Cuba. It turned into a type of currency for the New Man that the social project wanted to create.¹⁹ Behavior granted social value and economic position, a link Bruguera has been committed to intervening throughout her entire career as a performance artist. After having graduated from the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) (Higher Superior School) in Havana in 1992, her work has been divided between creating art, teaching art, and teaching through art.

After finishing her studies, Bruguera became an art professor at the ISA (1992–97) and coordinated a program that used art as a transformative tool for social reinsertion for children in behavioral school (*escuela de conducta*).²⁰ In 1998, she became the first Cuban visual artist to be

awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. Between 1999 and 2001, she worked toward a master of fine arts in performance at the Art Institute of Chicago, where she continued as a professor. This divided her life between Havana and the United States and in fact, the world, which led her to live in a nomadic way. Unlike many Cubans of her generation, she had resided abroad and experienced the Cold War firsthand since she was little. Her father was a diplomat, and for this reason she was in Lebanon during the civil war (1974–77), and later in Panama during the U.S. intervention (1989–90) (Moran 2012, 0:00–1:37). All of these lived experiences seem to inform her understanding of migration, connecting vulnerability and mobility in addition to the legal situation.

When Bruguera was already an internationally recognized artist, she created the Cátedra Arte de Conducta (Behavior Art School) in Cuba (2002–9), a semi-independent artistic space in Havana that included a performance program, which until then had been nonexistent in Latin America and the Caribbean.²¹ Her teaching/learning and artistic research work led her toward a fundamental political material: social behavior. By examining and working on behavior, the artist developed a lexicon that functions as conceptual architecture to better understand her work. It also shows how the work on behavior affects language. Among the constellation of terms that she created are “useful art” and “long-term projects,” which are at the basis of her works on immigration: the *Immigrant Movement International* (IMI) (2010–15) and the *Migrant People Party* (MPP), which in this chapter is seen as part of the former (Bruguera, n.d.).

Useful art refers to practices that through art modify social aspects and behaviors, beyond metaphors and representations (Bruguera, n.d.). It is art as a tool or as a working methodology that addresses action and involvement with the social reality. It might fail, but it involves participants who are part of a learning process, learn from mistakes, and can reformulate and/or recontextualize the project and its goals (Bruguera 2014, 57–58). Subsequently, this kind of art cannot be done in short periods of time. Useful art is frequently tied to long-term projects. These are projects stretched over years and involving participants beyond the artistic institutions that initially commissioned the projects (Bruguera, n.d.). In addition, long-term projects respond to political conditions, which is related to what the artist calls “political timing specific.” The

concept refers to the deployment of artistic actions triggered by a political moment. Once it passes, the artwork loses its impact and becomes a document (Ileen and Wingate 2020, 135-136).

The political timing specific of IMI is located in Paris in 2005. While Bruguera was living there, social protests in marginalized neighborhoods resulted in the deaths of two African teenagers. The event triggered her awareness about how immigrants were seen, and continue to be seen, through the language of violence and crime, stripped of political rights. This, in turn, brought about IMI, a project originally conceived as a political party but launched in another context in 2010 and spanning five years. It was an educative project in the neighborhood of Corona, supported by Creative Time and the Queens Museum of Art, which also served as its headquarters. Bruguera's idea was about political participation, since she considers that what immigrants lose is their capacity to act politically. She thought that a political party would allow immigrants to gain such rights; however, she discovered that in both Paris and New York, immigrants did not believe in the political system. Additionally, when she started to work on the project with the Queens Museum, she learned that art institutions in the United States cannot participate in politics. They cannot support any political candidate (Bruguera 2014, 38-42). Because of that, IMI became an educative project oriented at empowering immigrants through a wide spectrum of courses and workshops designed according to their needs.

IMI began as part of a one-year residency, which involved Bruguera living with eleven immigrants in a four-bedroom house, so she could learn the local dynamics of the neighborhood.²² Bruguera responded to a For Rent ad posted on the street and started to experience the vicissitudes of the day-to-day life of an immigrant. There was no heating in the house during the winter, and she pushed for them to call the landlord so he would assume his responsibilities and encouraged them to exercise their rights (Moran 2012, 2:27-2:51). Simultaneous to the immersion of the artist in the community, a series of events were planned for the first Sunday of every month, including conversations about the definition of useful art, immigrants as a social class, English classes through artistic creation, as well as legal instruction. Bruguera's intention was to convert the Queens Museum into a space open to the public, where people could learn, through creativity and art, to face the fears that made them socially vulnerable.

Following the information provided by the IMI website, in 2011, the project functioned as a think tank and included local teachers, artists, politicians, activists, and coordinators.²³ They contributed to the writing of an (im)migrant manifesto and put a call out to over two hundred artists to undertake actions on December 18, designated by the United Nations as International Migrants Day. On that same day in 1990, the UN adopted the international convention for the protection of the legal rights of all migrant workers and their families. The *(Im)migrant Manifesto* was read at the UN's annual Student Conference on Human Rights in November 2011. The following year, funds were running out, and the project focused on strengthening the community, providing legal services, and working with women, healing, and domestic violence issues. In its third year, IMI was announced as a long-term project with the intention of creating a global movement and taking on a unique form in each location, according to social and political specificities. The project is associated with a collaboration with the exhibition *Museum of Arte Útil* (2013–14) at the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands. Although the project persists in the personal work of the artist, who has great drawing power in the artistic and academic world, particularly in First World countries, it has been hard to sustain because of the lack of external financial resources. Bruguera declared that she requested multiple grants that were denied (Bruguera 2014, 48). Because of the involvement of some participants from the Corona community, especially mothers whose children benefited from many of the free courses offered through IMI, the project transitioned in 2018/19 into an independent community center.²⁴ The focus of this chapter, however, is the first five years that the project was active as IMI at the Queens Museum.

As previously mentioned, IMI's focus was on education, from subjects such as painting, dance, and printing, to health, immigration law, and activism, to workshops combining theory and practice in order to elaborate methodologies, the contents and formats of which were based on the participants' needs. This program also considered flexible schedules, since many migrants have more than one job, work tirelessly, and, in some cases, were paid to ensure their attendance (Bruguera 2014, 42). By participating in IMI, immigrants would ideally obtain knowledge that would potentially improve their living conditions. In this sense, the usefulness of art deployed by IMI seems aligned with the efforts of religious

organizations and churches that work with immigrants in the United States. They share a common purpose of working on human rights in situ, by providing legal support and educational tools that often favor assimilation, dignity, and individual growth. Indeed, Bruguera mentioned that the beauty of this project relies on the result that she witnessed, the changes of behaviors of many participants (Bruguera 2014, 38). Consequently, she understands that art and aesthetics are performative notions that dwell in the educational growth that IMI promoted. It is creativity that empowers and fosters human transformation. In this sense, the social and economic disparities that cause migration do not matter.

In her essay “What Is Useful? The Paradox of Rights in Tania Bruguera’s ‘Useful Art’” (2012), Ellen Feiss asks, “Can there be consensus or a stable point of reference to deduct if something is useful for achieving social gains?” In that same text, using as her main theoretical reference the work of political theorist Wendy Brown, “Suffering the Paradoxes of Rights” (2002), Feiss problematizes the idea of usefulness before the supposed universal nature of the rights Bruguera works with in IMI, where she completely ignores categories such as race or the economic and migratory context that has created a legal void or an impossibility to exercise rights. She adds that, in this way, the project misses the opportunity of opening a political conversation about Latinx immigration in the United States, for instance, by subscribing to the logic of multiculturalism: “IMI does not explicitly name the most contentious group in the U.S., leaving the ‘migrant,’ it refers to ‘purified of all inflection of race’” (6). Bruguera’s understanding of migrants appears to be linked more to the idea of starting over a new life from scratch, learning and inserting into new cultural patterns of behaviors, rather than to race or any other variable. In fact, when she recognizes herself as a migrant, she highlights this aspect (Moran 2012, 1:06–1:18). Moreover, she adds that in the art world, 90 percent of people are immigrants, but they don’t see themselves as such because they think that immigrants are uneducated and illegal and do dirty jobs (Bruguera 2014, 48).²⁵ IMI echoes this view on immigration. In fact, the project does not distinguish between documented and undocumented immigrants. What matters is migration as a culture, as an experience of displacement and interculturality. The artist’s main concern is the political rights that immigrants lose and their lack of participation in public issues when they move from their native countries.

While Bruguera was already immersed in IMI, she accepted an invitation to work in Sala Siqueiros, in Mexico City. The work turned into a new long-term project, the *Migrant People's Party* (MPP).²⁶ Based on the history of massive Mexican migrations to the United States and the reception of groups in transit toward the North, especially from Central America, the artist conceived the formation of a political party that could participate in the Mexican elections in 2012. In order to achieve her goal, Bruguera organized a program with conversations about migration in Mexico and public interventions. One such intervention was *Voceadores (Newsboys)*, a collective performance by newspaper sellers on the streets, announcing "You can be the next migrant" or "Migrant Vote" in Mexico City's downtown. They also wore newspaper hats with the same slogans printed on them. They helped to visualize the political platform that Bruguera was organizing leading up to the elections that year. The MPP was more than a political party and seemed to play a role in putting the candidates' political agendas on the topic of migration. For the artist, what mattered was the formation of a national movement in favor of migrants. Similar to Galindo's *Americas' Family Prison*, the theatricality staged by the MPP aimed to transform its spectators into actors, in this case, voters into political participants. By creating a community that was aware of contemporary migration fluxes, Bruguera expected those who could vote and act politically to become actors in the transformation of migration treatment. This communitarian perspective, in addition to the upraising of the artist in a socialist context, can be linked anew to Rancière's premises for an emancipated spectator. According to the French author, an individual's disidentification process is at the basis of drama because living bodies act together and end up becoming the action (2009, 191). Rancière bets on the co-presence of performers and spectators as a mechanism of involvement and dissolution of spectatorship in favor of a theatrical experience. Subsequently, he understands that the sensorial and symbolic communication generated while performing creates one community of translators and storytellers (207), spokespeople of new knowledge. That is to say, the transference of embodied knowledge can establish new meanings and ways of seeing that acts politically. This new knowledge looks for its place in society. In this light, Bruguera seems to believe in the power of the MPP to build up a community with the ability to intervene in the

Mexican political reconfiguration. She insisted on working with those who have rights and who vote despite the fact that she had already learned about immigrants' general distrust of political parties and political participation. In the performance's agenda, this community was not made up exclusively of Mexicans aware of national migrants looking for better opportunities in the United States. The project pointed out immigrants from many different places who were stuck in the country, without any rights, including Central American immigrants targeted by the media. Consequently, as in any other political campaign, the MPP intended for Mexicans to empathize with the immigrants who stay in or pass through their country. In this sense, the artist considered that there are four types of migrants: (1) those who leave, (2) those who leave and return, (3) those who are in transit, and (4) those who stay (Sierra 2012). All of them represent a political potential; they have become intercultural subjects, experiencing a survival journey, in literal or in emotional terms, and have mobilized the borders of nation-states. In that manner, they actualize the ancestral role of nomadism, of reconfiguring social and political spaces. Consequently, Bruguera's MPP could be seen as a political statement, not only about migrant rights but about the international increase in human mobility and displacement and migrants' lack of political participation.

Long-term projects tend to build communities as if they were micro-societies that can develop and promote changes in laws and changes within the political structure of society. As it is seen in IMI and MPP, long-term projects are also conceived of as an educational work in progress that would probably end if the specific political conditions that originated them changed. But changing laws, policies, and behavior associated with old political practices is, in general, a long process. This is the case of the migratory agenda because it touches on national sovereignty and the limits of nation-states. IMI and MPP tried to challenge them, although working only from the public sphere, aligned with the perspective of international human rights organizations, such as the UN. In that sense, they operate within the structure of the current political system and try to modify it. In doing so, the projects weighed the migrants' living conditions, resilience, and the nomadic features of contemporary life rather than the planetary conditions that often expulse people from their territories.

CONCLUSIONS

The works on migration by Bruguera deserve an independent study that surpasses the focus of this comparative study. However, for the purpose of this text, they matter as global actions, as projects conceived from the vantage point of the reception of (im)migrants. Instead, Galindo's *Survival Course for Men and Women Who Will Travel Illegally to the US* and *America's Family Prison* focused on the specific journey of undocumented immigrants. Such different perspectives relate and sketch a map of contemporary migration across the Americas, as if it were an autonomous territory. In the *Survival Course*, Galindo acts as if she were a public institution. She takes care of and prepares the people who have made the decision to put their life in the hands of those dedicated to profit from human trafficking. These migrants should be prepared for the path. One of the biggest challenges of this travel is overcoming the violence, abuse, discrimination, and disease that they have to cope with in Mexico. There, the MPP campaigned in favor of their human rights, and furthermore, promoted the idea of migration not as an external problem but as a national one that compromises Mexicans as well. The MPP worked as an expansion of the educative program initiated by IMI and organized a network of agents, a community of solidarity around displaced, in transit, or stuck people. By exposing the hardships of contemporary migration, as *America's Family Prison* also does, IMI and the MPP projects turned spectators into participants who become political forces. Based on a repertoire of contemporary migrations in the Americas, they connect micropolitics and creativity aiming to recast social behaviors. Projects such as *Survival Course* and the MPP intertwine with the work of NGOs that from civil society fight for the human rights of migrants and the political challenges they carry. However, as art pieces, they take advantage of the mise-en-scène of the visual art world and the channels of communication that it offers to reach ideologically diverse audiences seduced by the aesthetic experience. In that manner, they connect and expand the outcome of micropolitical networks. On this basis, IMI ran as an independent political institution covered by the museum's institutionality and the concept of useful art. It is through this concept that performance and education merge and impinge on immigrant behaviors rather than on the rest of the society.

Unlike the other projects, IMI is a long-term action whose goal was to work with migrants, as a class, as a residual contemporary mass that questions political and social organization. It aims to be autonomous and self-organized and, in that sense, a network of care, at least for now, without any religious or political agenda for those displaced, vulnerable, or alone, that still today recall the first nomads. Art scholars such as Salvadoran American Kency Cornejo (2015) and Guatemalan Rosina Cazali (2019) have highlighted Galindo's empathy and political actions, not only bringing attention to Central American stateless or excluded subjects but also embodying some of their circumstances, as if her body were one of their bodies. In that way, the artist symbolically incorporates these others into the social system of art, a dimension that through the concept of useful art, Bruguera reshapes, also giving power to immigrants and reinforcing their political agency. Galindo and Bruguera not only point out that immigrants matter, they integrate them, through art, within a broader community. By linking themselves to other women, as they did in their first performances, they trained themselves in the art of embodying the memories of others, particularly of those who like them have to conquer their rights and political agency.

NOTES

1. See *Corpus. Arte in azione* (2010).
2. In a Facebook Messenger chat, Eugenio Viola, who curated the event, says that he believes this is a true memory, but that he would have to look through the press clippings (05/09/2018). Although still uncertain, I would prefer not to ignore this datum. For people like me, migrants, nomads, who have lived in many places and countries, memories are our home. They can be both true and false at the same time, because, more than narratives, they are embodied.
3. Artists such as Costa Rican Juan Luis Rodríguez in Paris, or Guatemalan Luis Díaz, also created performances around the same years. However, Margarita Azurdia found in performance a language that she was continually developing until her death in 1998.
4. "Le gustaba impactar a la sociedad; una vez se presentó en un lugar público vestida con una capa de obispo y del brazo de una prostituta." From now on, all the translations are mine, unless otherwise specified.
5. "Hay que romper el espacio."

6. Cuban art critic Adelaide de Juan (n.d.) poses that this piece officially established the performance genre in the visual arts realm in Cuba. See <https://www.medicci.com/es/manuel-mendive-texto-sobre-el-artista/en-el-monte-suena>.
7. Between January 1961 and October 1962, more than fourteen thousand Cuban children, under the age of sixteen and unaccompanied by their parents, were sent to the United States. The press called this event the Peter Pan Operation. It was the result of an alliance between the Catholic Church in Miami and Cuba, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the counterrevolutionary forces. See also Duvinsky (2014).
8. The Cuban Cultural Circle was an organization created in 1979 by Cubans living abroad (based in New York) that aimed to establish ties with the cultural life of the island and exchanges in both directions. It was invested in promoting Cuban culture among the Latinx communities in the United States. See <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/espionage/ccc-boletin-1981.pdf>.
9. Guatemalan cultural writer and filmmaker Sergio Valdés Pedroni (2016) has repeatedly questioned the term “urban art.” However, other authors, such as Javier Payeras (2019) and Rosina Cazali, and reports from NGOs from that time popularized the term. In fact, in 2004, Casa Comal (2004) published the book *Arte Urbano*. It was a study of the cultural institutions and artists working in Guatemala City at that time. To expand this topic, see “Reconstructing Accumulated Poetry” by Javier Payeras (2019) and “Una no-generación de arte y cultura urbana” by Sergio Valdés Pedroni (2016).
10. See <https://www.iom.int/countries/guatemala> and <https://www.mineduc.gob.gt/digebi/mapalinguistico.html>.
11. See PDBA (2006).
12. Juan José Arévalo was democratically elected in 1945, only one year after the revolt that overthrew Jorge Ubico’s dictatorship. The period between 1944 and 1954 is known as *La primavera democrática* (Democratic Spring). In 2000, many of the artists involved in the Urban Art movement and in the first two editions of the Festival of the Historic Center decided to pay homage to the revolution of 1944 that favored the democratic period. The event was called *Octubre Azul* (Blue October), and it turned in a large performance festival. It is a landmark in contemporary Central American culture.
13. Aside from the CEC report, the Human Rights Office of the Catholic Church in Guatemala, created in 1989 by Bishop Juan José Gerardi, was committed to the recovery of historical memory. As part of this task, in 1998, it published *Guatemala: Nunca Más: Informe del proyecto interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*. According to this report, the war resulted in a million refugees and a total of approximately 1,440,000 direct victims. Bishop Gerardi was assassinated two days after the publication’s release. The intricacies of this episode were narrated by Guatemalan American writer Francisco Goldman in the novel *The Art of the Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop?* (2007).

14. Victoria Sanford argues that scorched earth tactics were employed until 1990. See Sanford (2003, 175 and 289n12).
15. I am playing here with the title of the film *El Norte* (The North) (1983). Directed by Gregory Nava, the movie narrates the story of Guatemalan Indigenous siblings who fled the country during the war and went to the United States as undocumented immigrants. To expand the information about Guatemalan immigration to the United States in war times, read <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/guatemalan-migration-times-civil-war-and-post-war-challenges>.
16. Arms are also connected to the bracero history. Bracero, from *brazo*, which means “arm” in English, was the name of the program that allowed Mexican men to come legally to the United States to work short-term, primarily via agricultural contracts, between 1942 and 1964. See <https://www.labor.ucla.edu/what-we-do/research-tools/the-bracero-program/>.
17. For Brian Massumi, an affect is something objective, not a feeling nor an emotion. It is the ability of the body to affect and be affected. It is the experience of intensity, outside of consciousness (Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics and Hemispheric Institute Encuentro 2014).
18. See Schechner (1985).
19. The concept of the New Man (el hombre nuevo) was developed by Ernesto “Che” Guevara in the book *El socialismo y el hombre nuevo en Cuba* [*Man and Socialism in Cuba*], published in 1965. According to him, the New Man should overcome the decadent twentieth century and represent the ideas of the twenty-first century. The New Man was supposed to be the product of the socialist system, the embodiment of a new revolutionary consciousness fully committed to collective welfare. In order to transform the capitalist legacy, artists and intellectuals must be allied to the revolution and the people and work as educators of the New Man, as needed for the creation of a communist society. See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1965/03/man-socialism.htm>.
20. The behavioral school was created in the 1980s as part of the program for special education. It was aimed at children who could not fit into the education system because they had “behavioral disorders,” such as indiscipline, aggressiveness, or criminality. See https://www.ecured.cu/Escuelas_especiales_en_Cuba#Tipos_de_escuelas.
21. Although the behavior school was ascribed to the Higher Education Institute, it was a project created and managed by Bruguera in her own house. She did everything possible to ensure that the behavior school had legitimacy within the Cuban art educational system.
22. At that time, in the Corona neighborhood, 46 percent of the population was made up of immigrants, and up to 138 languages could be heard on the street (Feiss 2012, 5).
23. The information on the project website was reworted in 2020.
24. See <https://queensmuseum.org/immigrant-movement-international>. When I wrote the first draft of this work in 2016, the IMI information on the Queens

Museum website did not include the project's transition into Centro Corona. It is unclear how the project continued after 2015.

25. The art world Bruguera mentions appears to be understood within the Global North.
26. An important precedent to Bruguera's idea of a political party of migrants was El Partido Revolucionario Cubano (PRC) (the Cuban Revolutionary Party), founded by Cuban national hero José Martí, in Key West, Florida, in 1892 with Cuban migrants who were tobacco workers. Cuban migrants were perceived as financial backers for the Cuban independence movement.

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7

READING INTERSECTIONALITY IN CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRANT WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN THE DOCUMENTARY *MARIA EN TIERRA DE NADIE* BY MARCELA ZAMORA CHAMORRO

LEDA CAROLINA LOZIER

BETWEEN 2017 and 2021, Central American migrants were under strong scrutiny because of anti-immigrant policies fueled by political campaign promises and policies under the Trump administration. This administration's racist rhetoric portrayed Central Americans as invaders and undesirable people, which greatly affected women's and children's integrity. In fact, on June 11, 2018, then U.S. attorney general Jeff Sessions issued a statement in which he fomented even more the discrimination of Central American women by denying asylum to victims of domestic and gang violence. His argument stated that this was a form of "private violence," and it did not meet the criteria of real fear for asylum seeking (*Matter of A-B-* 2018). This decision doubly marginalized Central American women as migrants and victims of gendered violence. Although on June 16, 2021, the new administration of President Joseph Biden reversed this policy, women victims of violence who seek asylum are still facing many challenges (Rose 2018).

The scrutiny of Central American migrants, as Suyapa Portillo and Alicia Miklos remind us, was not unique to the Trump administration.¹ And as I contend, the request for proof of "real evidence of violence"

for battered women and victims of domestic violence is not new, either. Although both reasons for questioning the legitimacy of women's claims are forms of discrimination that predate the previous administration, they intensified under Trump's rhetoric that was based on a politics of emotions in which not all narratives of suffering were seen.² In other words, the questioning of real victimhood for migrant women victims of domestic violence becomes a gendered and racialized rhetoric that—beyond minimizing the experience and legitimacy of victims of abuse—dismisses the reality of victims' social, political, and cultural context from where they come from. The latter point is decisive for understanding how the decision of former attorney general Sessions is part of a discourse that criminalizes Central American migrant women in the United States while also putting at risk the lives of those women who are already in transit and of those who are back in their home countries.

At the heart of this chapter is an analysis that focuses on how more than a decade ago Central American women were already migrating in large numbers as a result of poverty and domestic violence—and were already victims of the gendered and anti-immigrant rhetoric that intensified with the Trump administration. This work analyzes the documentary *María en tierra de nadie* (María in no man's land) by Salvadoran filmmaker Marcela Zamora Chamorro, filmed in 2009 and released in 2010. I claim that this documentary portrays a counter-hegemonic discourse that questions the notion of delegitimizing migrant women's experiences with domestic violence and what counts as a "unique legitimate narrative of fear" for these victims. Furthermore, this work delves into how, by using a circular narrative that weaves the testimony of different migrant women, this documentary draws attention to how categories such as class, gender, race, age, nationality, and disability intersect and create patterns of oppression and discrimination that force women to migrate regardless of the dangers along the journey.

CENTRAL AMERICAN WOMEN AND THEIR JOURNEY TO THE UNITED STATES

Most asylum seekers in the United States from Latin America during the last decade have been coming from the Northern Triangle countries of Central America (NTCA): El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.³

This “subregion” of Central America has a long history of social, economic, and political instability, as do the rest of the Central American nations. Nonetheless, currently the NTCA countries are known not only as the most corrupt in the region but also as the most entangled with violence(s)—infamous for having the most dangerous city in the world (San Pedro Sula, Honduras).⁴ In fact, experts agree that criminal gangs and international drug trafficking legally operate along with the state in the NTCA thanks to the fissures caused by systemic and structural violence represented by poverty, unemployment, and lack of medical services, to name a few.

Within this network of violence persists a *machista* and patriarchal system that validates and normalizes male superiority and dismisses violence against women. One clear example is the increase of femicides, or the killing of women for being women. According to data from the three countries of the NTCA, these countries have the highest rates of femicide in Latin America, with El Salvador in first place, Honduras in second, and Guatemala in third (Ziff 2020).

As many reports on the topic have suggested, the complexity in the way multiple forms of violence operate in the NTCA affects marginalized communities and women disproportionately, forcing these groups to migrate regardless of the dangers of the journey. As pointed out by the 2015 report *Women on the Run* from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2015), the asylum seekers they interviewed stated that they were fleeing their countries because they did not feel they were protected by governmental institutions. At the same time, the asylum seekers claimed they feared the increased brutality and power of gangs in their countries (UNHCR 2015). Also, Cecilia Menjívar and Shannon Drysdale Walsh stated in 2017 that women from the NTCA countries opt for migrating because local legal institutions, regardless of their ample knowledge of the ongoing issues with gender-based violence, repeatedly fail to protect them, and this lack of response enables women to be beaten, raped, and killed with impunity (2017).

As we can gather thus far, women’s fears about the overflow of violence in the NTCA are well founded, as they reflect these countries’ gender inequality and their cultural, social, and political context. Domestic violence, like other forms of gender-based violence, is an expression of power and inequality and operates in multifaceted ways. The manner

in which it overlaps in the NTCA with other forms of violence is determined not by one but by several categories that intersect in the lives of women. Therefore, in many ways, as I will develop later with my analysis of *María en tierra de nadie*, it is pivotal to rethink how poverty and domestic violence operate in the lives of women to challenge the claims of skepticism of Central American women's accounts of domestic violence as a non-source of reliable fear and experience with violence.

Furthermore, I contend that viewing how domestic violence meets at the intersection of Central American migrant women's multiple categories, such as class, race, gender, and age, allows us to rethink how in Central America private and public violence, borrowing Mo Hume's words, "are inseparably connected" and have much to do with women's marginalization, oppression, and displacement (Hume 2009).

Indeed, the displacement of Central American women has become a significant pattern in Central American migration flows to the United States, shifting from being primarily men migrating to including a significant proportion of women and children. According to Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Migration (INM), "This increase was noticeable in the fiscal years 2013 and 2015, and two main changes occurred in the flow of migrants from the NTCA: who were mostly women, or minors, accompanied and unaccompanied" (Obinna 2020, 3). Similarly, other sources of data have shown a decrease in the age of women who are primarily migrating from the Northern Triangle. For instance, the most recent data from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agency saw an increase of 32 percent from 2012 to 2017 in the number of migrant women under eighteen years of age at the U.S.-Mexico border (Hallock, Soto, and Fix 2018).

Although new data depicts the impact of the increase in women migrating in the last nine years, for decades Central American women (young and old) have fled their countries to the United States or to other Central American countries, often leaving their children and families behind.⁵ However, it is worth noticing that while the journey to the United States is known to be difficult for everyone, for women it is worse because they have to deal with separation from their children and families, carry the trauma of the violence that forced them to leave, and face perils on their route to the United States—a route that is a paradox as Central American migrant women's "journey to safety [becomes] a journey through hell"

(UNHCR 2015, 1). Still, women migrate alone and face the hardships of the journey and/or deportation.

Indeed, when women are deported, they not only return to the context of trauma and the initial threat but also have their fears and suffering exacerbated after being exposed to other experiences of violence during their time in U.S. detention centers or while traveling through Mexico or waiting at the U.S. border (UNHCR 2015, 35). In many ways, Central American women's lives in their home countries or while transmigrating often involve harsh experiences of violence, and it is worth rethinking how the systems in place allow this to happen in the first place.

In what follows, I analyze how these issues faced by Central American migrant women are portrayed in the documentary *María en tierra de nadie*.⁶ I focus on inquiries on the experiences of domestic violence as a reason for migrating in the testimonies of Central American migrant women. Migrant women give testimonies on multiple accounts of violence, which should be considered in their request for asylum and international support. One point I pay close attention to is how the testimonies of the migrant women in the documentary create a narrative that challenges the gendered and anti-immigrant narrative that seeks to delegitimize women's experiences with violence and to silence their voices. Although in the film none of the migrant women are planning to seek asylum, I claim that the experiences with violence that motivated them to migrate echo those of many women in recent years who have left their countries with hopes of applying for asylum either in Mexico or in the United States. In this sense, I look at how Central American migrant women's testimonies are presented in a circular narrative that depicts how their reasons to migrate are a consequence of gender inequality, where poverty as a form of domestic violence (or IPV) is a key component. I come to this conclusion by applying the theoretical approach of intersectionality developed by Black feminist scholars. I contend that intersectionality in juxtaposition with the testimonies given in the documentary by four women (Doña Inés, Sandra Campos, Marta Muñoz, and Marilú) demonstrates how intersecting categories of race, class, and gender force women to migrate in secrecy and alone, because they are placed in a precarious condition that is symptomatic of the large gender-inequality system that exists in Central America as well as in the United States.

UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF CENTRAL AMERICA

Intersectionality is a term coined and developed by legal expert Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 as an analytical category that would help name and understand Black women's multiple dimensions of discrimination, particularly with employment experiences, as they "were neither understood nor solved by both feminist and anti-racist discourses" (1989, 140). Crenshaw notes, "The problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (140). What is critical for this chapter about Crenshaw's position in this quote about intersectionality is the possibility that this framework offers to study a woman's multiplicity of categories and how they overlap—bringing to light the different levels of discrimination against Central American migrant women.

Black women, like Central American women, are plural subjects, and their situated experiences should not be subsumed in traditional categories of gender, race, or class, particularly when observing the ways in which gender violence operates in their lives. As Crenshaw writes about Black women and Latinas in shelters for victims of domestic violence, "The violence that women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities such as race and class" (1991, 1242). In the context of Central America, women's many categories intersect and are expressed in daily aspects and practices of their lives. Consequently, Central American Indigenous, poor, mestiza, African-descended, trans, and Garifuna women, among others, are subordinated and discriminated by different structures of the patriarchal system—in which power dynamics lead to unequal life opportunities for women and where the state fails to protect them and their rights, not only in their own countries but also outside of them.

Following this statement, I suggest that to understand Central American migrant women's vulnerabilities, it is fundamental to consider the categories that intersect, especially when taking into account poverty as one common pattern that plays a large part in their reasons to migrate.

Poverty, for Central American migrant women, is a cause and effect of gender-based violence, particularly in the realities of neoliberalism and globalization we live in today—where poor women must negotiate with new demands and needs that go beyond their financial possibilities. These demands, as stated in the documentary, do nothing less than urge women to cross physical, linguistic, cultural, and abstract borders.

CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRANT WOMEN IN FILM

The representation of migration in *María in tierra de nadie* precedes many other films that have gained recognition in popular media and academic circles that focus on Central American migration. Indeed, in the last decade, Central Americans' migrant journey through Mexico has been a main topic explored in such films as *Which Way Home* (2009), *La Bestia* (2011), *Who Is Dayani Cristal?* (2013), and *La jaula de oro* (2013), among others. These films have focused on exposing the harsh traveling experiences of Central American migrants, such as riding on the dangerous cargo train known as La Bestia, being robbed by police or gang members, and being killed or disappeared. However, none of these works has focused solely on the different experience(s) of migrant women, except for *Sin nombre* (2009), directed by Cary Fukunaga. And whenever there have been female protagonists in these migration films, such as Sabina Rivas in *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas* (2012), directed by Luis Mandoki, and *De nadie* (2005), a documentary by Tin Dirdamal, their migratory journey is mediated through the representation of other male migrant characters. Likewise, migrant women's experiences with violence in their transit are embellished with uncomfortable questions where they are forced to reveal the painful trauma about sexual violence, while they themselves are still negotiating with their traumatic experiences.⁷ In this study, I do not intend to disregard these films' importance and the effective way they portray the human tragedy of the Central American migrant, but I want to point out how the approach to migrant women's experiences while migrating, particularly with sexual violence, has been harsh.

The point I want to make here is that exposing migrant women and their encounters with sexual violence, such as rape and sexual assault, in

front of a camera does not necessarily enlighten in an adequate manner the experiences of migrant women with violence as they travel from Central America to the United States. As scholar Wendy Vogt has observed in her study about migrant shelters in Mexico and the media, there is a profound interest to record detailed explanations of women's experiences with sexual violence. The problem with this interest, she notes, is that this way of collecting migrant women's experiences does not address the issues of violence against migrant female bodies. If anything, what it does is make gender violence tolerated in the public eye because "there is so much sensationalized discourse around violence against women that it has become almost normalized. Women being raped is the status quo" (Vogt 2018, 17). As Vogt claims, sexual violence against migrant women crossing Mexico is a *macro-issue* that depends not only on making people aware of it but also on approaching it from a different perspective. A depatriarchal and humanitarian perspective, I claim, gives migrant women dignity and empowers them by allowing them to share what they want, when they want, and however they want.

Although Vogt is talking about the media, her argument also resonates with the fictional presentation of migrant women. It is not necessary, as some have done, to put the victims through the trauma and pain of rape and sexual assault in their journey when providing details to tell their story. Rather than that, migrant women should have the right to control their own narrative. Meanwhile, we need to visualize and hold accountable the systems in place that allow such acts of violence against Central American migrant women to occur.

As a road movie, *María en tierra de nadie* is a film that works around the latter point.⁸ The female characters in the documentary are portrayed to represent a collective, they are always allowed to decide when and how to do it. The film has a circular narrative in which Zamora accompanies them for most of the trip and chronicles the emotional and physical journey they go through while transmigrating through Mexico. While traveling together, Zamora does not intervene in their journey or narrative but remains as a witness to what they want to narrate.

The film starts and ends in El Salvador with the story of Doña Inés, who during the film travels along the "legal and safe route" through Mexico, in the company of other mothers from the caravan organized by the Committee of Family Members of Deceased and Disappeared Migrants (COFAMIDE).

At the beginning, Doña Inés's story mainly parallels the journey of two other migrant women—Sandra Campos and Marta Muñoz—while she is looking for her daughter, Sandra Mabel Sánchez Méndez, who disappeared on her way to the United States four years earlier.

The parallelism of the women's journeys in the film helps portray how undocumented migrant women are forced to travel through clandestine and dangerous back routes. Undocumented migrants take these dangerous paths because of the "funnel effect" of the militarization of Mexico resulting from U.S. immigration policies toward Central American migrants.⁹ The funnel effect of the dangerous path for migrants becomes clearer in the documentary with Zamora's use of a mapping technique that shows the geographical location of the route each character takes. This technique is accompanied with informational slides about the danger of each site the main characters, Sandra and Marta, are about to transit.¹⁰ These visual elements create a timeframe that not only helps separate the stories of each woman at certain moments but also invites us, the viewers, to join their journey. Indeed, after we read about or watch the map with information of the next town Sandra and Marta are going to walk through, it is up to us if we want to continue the journey with them until the end of the film or stop along the way there and never finish it—as many migrants do.

As the film continues to show the journey of Doña Inés, Sandra, and Marta, it weaves in the testimony of other migrants, such as Jazmín, who was sold to a brothel; Janet and Irma, who were kidnapped and raped by the Mexican drug cartel Los Zetas; and Marilú, who suffered an accident while riding La Bestia.¹¹

The majority of the characters in the film are mothers; therefore, the role of motherhood has been one of the focuses of other analyses of the film. For instance, concentrating on the idea of mothering across borders, developed by Heather Hewett, Yajaira Padilla (2007) argues that the representation of migrant women in this documentary is necessary because it challenges the image of Latin American undocumented women that has been reproduced by U.S. popular media and by the image of Mexican migrant mothers. Padilla notes,

In highlighting the experiences of Sandra, Marta, and Doña Inés as mothers and, more generally, the reality of Central American female migrants

transiting through Mexico, Chamorro's [Zamora's] film helps to address the silence with regard to narratives of immigrant mothers that Hewett rightfully underscores. More than providing these women with a forum to voice their experiences, however, this film makes these women legible in a US (and Mexican) context in which, as the above discussion suggests, they are readily posited as threats to American society and national security. . . . The film accomplishes this objective by providing an apt context for understanding these women's reasons for migrating and the obstacles they face in route, as well as by emphasizing the enduring commitment of these women to their children and their suffering. (104)

Indeed, of all the characters in the documentary, only one of them does not identify herself as a mother, nor is it mentioned whether she left any children behind as the other women had. Yet, at a symbolic level, her reasons for migrating are based on her hopes to financially support her parents and her desire to help her sisters have a different life experience than she did—resembling the stories of the other women in the film. Perhaps because of her commitment to caring and providing for her family, it is possible to say that her reasons to migrate also take on a “mothering” or nurturing condition, which makes her and her reason for migrating, taking Padilla's words, “legible in a U.S. (and Mexican) context” (104).

While I agree with Padilla's and Hewett's arguments that motherhood is one of the key components and identities that women share in Zamora's documentary that portrays them more as human beings and challenges the image of them as threats, I consider that it is also important to explore these women's experiences under other categories—such as young, old, disabled, poor, and single subjects who experienced gender violence such as IPV or domestic violence before they traveled. I claim that adding these other categories as characteristics of analysis is central given that it is important to highlight the multiple and situated experiences that intersect in migrant women's lives as we explore their reasons to migrate. Besides, I posit that this form of analysis is critical because these women shape and reshape their identity as undocumented migrant women when they decide to make the journey, once they cross the Suchiate River, the physical division between Guatemala and Mexico, and once they arrive in the United States.¹² In this sense, I contend that it is through the intersectionality of categories that converge in migrant

women from Central America, and not just through motherhood, that we can further explore how to disrupt the systems of oppression and discrimination that operate in their lives.

INTERSECTION OF POVERTY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN MIGRANT WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

Moving forward with the previous notion, I consider that in the testimonies of migrant women in *María en tierra de nadie* there is a visible effect of poverty as part of a system of gender discrimination that connects with other recognizable forms of violence. For instance, this is evident in the lives of women who were left alone and with no financial support by their partners. This common aspect in their testimonies depicts poverty as something common, or even worse, as something taken for granted and experienced by multigenerational women.

This vision of poverty as an effect of the intersection of class and gender takes place from the first scene of the film, in Sensuntepeque, El Salvador. Here the viewer is introduced to a humbly dressed elderly woman who transits the streets of a small town, where the image of two peasants riding their horses on the paved streets clash. In a closer camera angle, this woman is introduced as Doña Inés, as she arrives at a small grocery store and greets the owner with a blessing. Following this greeting, Doña Inés pulls out of a tote bag a small package of candies to sell for one dollar. This image of Doña Inés immediately acquires a symbolic meaning in the representation of the gender oppression and the intersectionality of class and gender, as the viewer discovers that this informal business transaction is something Doña Inés does periodically when the neighbor asks her, "Are you planning another trip to go look for your daughter?"

This first introduction of Doña Inés to the audience is a powerful one because her interaction with the neighbor depicts how she is part of a community where her pain is recognized. Second, this image depicts the elderly woman's precarious condition through her humble way of sponsoring her trip to look for her disappeared daughter across geographical borders.

Now, while the fist image in the documentary exposes Doña Inés's physical and social condition, it is not until the next scene, in her house, where

her precarious emotional and economic condition is thoroughly revealed. In this scene, while stirring boiled beans in a kitchen with no walls, Doña Inés talks in a broken voice to Zamora about trying to dissuade her daughter from traveling north. She notes, “I was telling her [my daughter] not to leave, because we already had the house, but you know that we need more than a house. She had the two girls and also to help me because I cannot work any longer. She migrated to help me, her daughters. And I ask the Lord to find her because I do miss her.”¹³ In this final phrase, Doña Inés adds emotional emphasis as she stares with sorrow at the camera lens. This reaction not only makes Doña Inés connect with the audience and transmits her pain, but it also makes her mourning for her disappeared daughter, in Judith Butler’s words, a *collective mourning*. Indeed, this emotional connection between the audience and Doña Inés’s pain and loss just increase as one of her granddaughters, the oldest, who is sitting next to her, looks up in silence with an innocent face that reflects hope and faith—but also mirrors a heartbreaking look of pain and no future.

Furthermore, Doña Inés’s oldest granddaughter’s reaction shows how pain unites them and also depicts the lingering effects of poverty on both women from two generations apart. In many ways, Doña Inés’s testimony and her granddaughter’s are a shared one as they correspond to the disheartening story of poverty and desolation that, as she herself points out while talking about her daughter, forces Central American women to migrate not just as mothers but also as single women and daughters.

Indeed, Doña Inés’s testimony about her daughter illustrates how the *distribution of precarity*, in Butler’s terms, operates in circularity. When Doña Inés tells us her story, it calls attention to how her life and her granddaughters’ lives as poor women in El Salvador are part of a circle of poverty that is hard to break. Her testimony as a grandmother performing as a mother shows how her life is a sad paradox when she reveals that while her daughter’s reason for migrating was to financially support her (“I am getting old and unable to work”), the role has been reversed. The contradiction could not be worse for Doña Inés, who is taking on the role of main provider once again. But this time, she is physically weak, sixty years old but looking much older, and unemployed. In addition, her burden as the main provider for her granddaughters is bigger now because she is also bearing a precarious life full of pain and trauma because of the loss of her daughter.

To this point, the way Zamora presents Doña Inés's testimony teaches us how poverty in marginalized populations is part of the intersectionality of class and gender. Also, it depicts how its circularity intensifies not only in the life of the person who migrates but also in those who stay behind. Indeed, in her testimony, Doña Inés reveals how her precarious situation after her daughter's disappearance has only worsened. She is powerless to leave and go look for her not only because she lives in an economically disadvantaged situation but also because she is the only responsible adult for her young granddaughters' well-being—a situation that only becomes worse as she gets older.

A similar story of precarity and violence where class and gender intersect (as it does in the lives of Doña Inés, her daughter and granddaughters) is told by the two other main female characters in the film, Sandra and Marta. Both women are younger than Doña Inés, from El Salvador, and identify as single mothers who had to leave their country because of the precarious situation of poverty in which they lived. The first introduction to these women happens in the shelter of Tecúm Uman, in Guatemala. Here the viewer learns that for Sandra, unlike for Marta, this is her second time migrating. As Sandra points out, "The first time I went to the United States was because my children's father left me, and I did not have a way to support them. There wasn't enough [money]." Following these remarks, Sandra states that in the United States, she was working in a restaurant when she was deported without her new daughter because "[my daughter] was American. They deported me alone; my daughter is still there."

By now we have become familiar with the humanitarian crisis of children being separated from their parents because of the anti-migrant rhetoric and policies reinforced by the Trump administration. Indeed, Sandra's story may not even surprise us now, after all the media attention and reports on the topic, as the one from the *New York Times* about 545 children who were separated from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2018, and who in 2020 still had not been reunited with their parents (Dickerson 2020). Nonetheless, Sandra's story—besides being heart-breaking—is an omen that attests to the migratory crisis of women and their children because of poverty and gang and domestic violence and to the parent-child separation policy under the Trump administration.

Certainly, when Sandra gives her testimony, sitting in a rustic garden of green plants and plantain trees at the migrant shelter, she brings

to light the injustice and the lack of attention paid to the parent-child separation practice—which clearly, as evidenced by her testimony, has been going on for more than a decade, just not at the massive level seen in recent years. By giving her testimony to Zamora about her experience of being separated from her daughter, Sandra puts a face to reports like the one about the 545 children who were separated from their parents and confirms that the parent-child separation is not just a number to add but a verifiable experience of a woman and a female child whose human rights have been violated.

Furthermore, with Sandra's humanity depicted in her story of love and desire to migrate for her daughter, regardless of the dangers, her testimony not only brings to light the racist and anti-migrant policies that for decades have abused the human rights of Central Americans but also challenges the discourse of the United States as an international defender of democracy and human rights.

Now, while this is not the only child Sandra has been separated from in her life (because she left her other kids behind the first time she migrated to the United States in hopes of attaining a better life for them), the fact is that her separation from her daughter in the United States further depicts the politics of the patriarchal and colonial power relation between the United States and Central America. Consequently, when in her testimony Sandra states that she was not allowed to take her daughter to El Salvador because she was a U.S. citizen, her words exemplify how this is an act of discrimination that carries a sign of a gender-racial exclusion that criminalizes and punishes her and her daughter.

Likewise, Sandra's detention at her job at the restaurant by U.S. immigration officials, presumably for not having legal documentation to work (and her later separation from her daughter, who was left with a friend when she was deported to El Salvador), resembles U.S. history of racialized policies against Black people. As seen in the history of Black families, policing, incarcerating, disrupting, and separating families with parent incarceration are some of the many dehumanizing forms of discrimination against African Americans perpetrated by the U.S. federal government (Robert and Weiss 2022, 5). The power of state agencies that scrutinize Black people without caring for the trauma and outcome this may have on their children operates in similar ways as the subordination and criminalization of Sandra, as related in her testimony. Sandra's

criminalization while working and the removal of her daughter and her placement in the care of someone else, while her mother is incarcerated and later deported to El Salvador, only paved the way for more impoverishment and the infliction of physical and psychological harm for both of them. The trauma of mother and daughter from being separated is reflected in Sandra when she is forced to migrate again, taking new clandestine routes that involve higher risks for her and her daughter—who runs the risk of losing her mother forever.

As Sandra's situation predates the parent-child separation crisis that started in 2018, the handling of her case resonates with the tactics used in the more recent separations. To the U.S. government, her humanity and her pain from leaving her daughter are not valid—and likewise her life is not seen as a human life worthy of respect and consideration. Indeed, when Sandra is deported, her precarious and vulnerable condition as undocumented is recognized by the authorities, which constitutes, in Judith Butler's words, a marking used to justify the infliction of injury upon her (Butler 2018, 144). In other words, in Sandra's testimony we can see that there is a moment in which she becomes "visible" in the U.S. imaginary, but only because she is spotted as an "illegal migrant"—a threat to the nation that must be expelled and punished. In many ways, Sandra's existence as a "lesser human," or better yet as "nonbelonging," in Padilla's terms, is mediated through the act of othering her. This othering operates by placing her as an undesirable outsider, in a *they* versus an *us*.

Meanwhile, when Sandra's daughter is not allowed to go with her mother, the daughter is ironically placed with an *us* because of her birth-right. With this I do not mean that Sandra's daughter is not seen as a future internal threat, as Padilla has noted about the view of U.S.-born minority women, but at the moment of Sandra's deportation, her daughter is placed in a "sort of" human position that is not exactly that of a collective of subjects deemed as "illegal immigrants" or a "danger for the nation" but as a "sort of citizen" who does not quite "belong" to the U.S. imaginary. The decision to place the daughter in the home and care of someone else instead of with her mother reflects a lack of consideration for her pain.

The gender and racial discrimination that Sandra experiences has a parallelism with the denial of credibility and victimhood that former attorney general Jeff Sessions exhibited in denying asylum to Central

American women victims of domestic and gang violence. As portrayed in the film, women have many experiences with violence in their home countries that place their lives at risk. Therefore, to question Central American migrant women's "real" experience with violence is just a perpetuation of a racialized discourse that portrays these women and asylum seekers as *illegitimate subjects*, people unworthy of being believed or being given any kind of human treatment, much less given U.S. state protection.

Furthermore, with the insertion of Sandra's testimony in the circular narrative of this film, Zamora draws attention to the complexity of social injustice in child separation policies and the abuse of human and women's rights. As stated earlier, when Sandra is deported without her daughter, there is an act of cruelty to the humanity and dignity not only of Sandra but of her daughter as well. As a child and a U.S. citizen, her daughter's right to be with her mother is taken away and—as the audience can witness at the end of the film when Marta says that after Sandra left the shelter at the northern border of Mexico, she never heard anything else about her—the harm caused may be permanent.

The latter point illustrates how the separated female child and her deported mother are placed in a liminal space where there is not a system or structure to hold accountable for their lives on either side of the border or country. This is true, in Sandra's case, when she is deported and instead of seeking help from the Salvadoran government to bring her child to El Salvador with her, she is forced to leave her family and other kids alone again in El Salvador. This new physical and emotional separation from her kids not only affects Sandra but also subjects her children to a further precarious condition in which they must relive the trauma of seeing their mother leave again and perhaps never seeing her return.

In many ways, Sandra's personal story as part of Zamora's circular narrative in the film is a dissident one. It resists being left in silence, while making visible the traumatic separation that probably other women like her have suffered. Without a doubt, many migrant women over the last decade, like Sandra, have been separated from their children, but their stories have not been brought to light. In this sense, Sandra's testimony and this documentary shed light on the exclusion of women that may be symptomatic, taking Padilla's words, of the exclusionary category given to Central Americans in the United States—an effect, I add, that lies at

the intersectionality of class, race, and gender and that starts in their home country.

Following Sandra's testimony is Marta's narrative, where she acknowledges how after planning her trip for a year, she finally became Sandra's traveling companion. Her narrative is pivotal, because it offers an opportunity to consider how women traveling undocumented to the United States is not a new or secret phenomenon, nor a phenomenon driven by political strategies, as has been argued about the most-recent migrant caravan movements. It also depicts how even thinking about migrating undocumented becomes an act of performance in which the migrant subject is mentally and emotionally displaced even before they have left the country of origin.

In Marta's case, this latter point involves part of her narrative, as she notes that on several occasions she had the opportunity to travel but "did not have the money to do it." Consequently, she states that it was after learning through a friend about Sandra that she saw the opportunity to travel. Marta's decision to embark on this journey can be seen as a traveling strategy by women based on gender solidarity; although Marta does not specifically address this point at this moment, in her voice and attitude it is possible to see that there is a strong value placed on other women's migration experiences. Precisely, this is further noticed throughout the film when Marta trusts Sandra's knowledge of the journey and believes in her drive to get both of them to the Mexico-U.S. border. This act of trust is observed even though later in their journey both women travel in the company of two other migrant men. Still, Sandra remains Marta's *guía* (guide) until they arrive at the northern border of Mexico, where in a sad goodbye, Sandra separates and takes another route because her family is not able to pay the money needed to hire a coyote (smuggler) to cross the border.

Marta and Sandra traveling together based only on Sandra's knowledge of the route gives way to an interpretation of these women's journeys as part of the feminization process of Central American migration and, in particular, as an effect of the intersectionality of class, race, and gender discrimination. Indeed, as Marta continues narrating about her decision to migrate, her account shows that she had a similar life experience to Sandra's while living in El Salvador, where the only way out for her and her family was by migrating. For instance, when Marta states she

is leaving because she is not able to provide for her children, she notes: "What's the use of me staying with them, all three of us starving." Here, her narrative demonstrates how financial instability as a form of gender discrimination for women, in a way, makes migration a default. Although Marta does not explicitly link her economic limitations as a consequence of her involvement in an unequal power relationship, this is understood when she states that she is the only one providing for her children.

Poverty in Marta's testimony, as well as in those of Sandra and Doña Inés, depicts the complex interactions between class, race, gender, and geographical location as a long-term viability. This notion resonates with what Lisa Goodman et al. (2009) state about the intersection between poverty and domestic violence as a cause and effect of women's oppression and mental health issues. Although the authors' focus is on poor and battered women of color in the United States, their argument to a certain degree relates to the context of Central America, and in particular to the testimony of Marta. For the authors, the intersectionality of poverty with domestic violence not only affects women physically, it also impacts them emotionally, and their mental health as it relates with stress and powerlessness as a risk. Goodman et al. note, "Numerous dimensions of daily living that others take for granted are sources of worry, stress, and even trauma for very low-income women. Many, if not most, poor women wake up every morning . . . with insufficient resources with which to parent their children, dangerous streets, hunger or food insecurity and social systems that often thwart their efforts to help themselves" (311). These observations on stress and powerlessness are strongly echoed in Marta's words when she questions what for some privileged subjects is unquestionable: the value of caring for and staying with her children if they have no future remaining together.

Furthermore, Marta's stress as an effect of the intersection of poverty and domestic violence is also visible on other occasions, including when she explains that once she made the decision to travel with Sandra, she did not announce it to her children's father "for fear that he would say something and because I was afraid that he would even hit me." In addition, later in the film, when Marta is in a shelter and calls home to talk to her daughter, she is concerned with her former partner's opinion, and when she asks her daughter if she and her brother moved to their father's house, her first inquiry is, "What did your father say about me

[migrating]?” Even more, Marta’s conversation with her daughter reveals two important points in terms of her relationship with her children and her fear of their father. First, she has begun (according to Heather Hewett) mothering across borders. In other words, she is seeking to protect and nurture her daughter as she tries to calm her down when she cries and tells her mother that she misses her. Second, it illustrates how Marta’s concerns about her former partner haunt her and continue to stress her across physical and geographical borders. Beyond revealing how much Marta worries about this man’s opinion, this situation depicts the extent of his power over her. While it could be argued that one of Marta’s reasons to fear her former partner’s reaction is that she left her children in his care without discussing it with him first, her fear could be in line with Menjívar’s observation about the symbolic power of men over women and how that continues to control their bodies and behaviors even when they are far away (Eternal 2014, 85). In any case, what’s clear in Marta’s experience is that poverty as a form of violence is not isolated but part of a social and political structure that affects women physically, economically, emotionally, and mentally.

“THE WOMAN THAT IS TOUGH . . . ON THE WAY BECOMES TOUGHER FROM SO MUCH SUFFERING AND HUMILIATION”

Sandra’s and Marta’s testimonies, in which poverty and domestic violence in their own country intersect with other forms of gender violence during their journey, do not differ from those of the other women featured in the film, such as Marilú—whose words serve as this section’s title. Marilú’s character is introduced almost halfway through the documentary, when Sandra and Marta arrive from their first train ride to the shelter in Ixtepéc, Mexico. It is in this scene that Sandra and Marta share with Zamora their experiences with sexual assault and robbery on the train. At this moment in the film, it is worth noticing that when Zamora is waiting for Sandra and Marta to arrive from their first train ride, from Arriaga (where the most dangerous stretch of the train ride through Mexico starts), it gives a different meaning to the experience of these migrant women. It gives them confidence to debrief their experiences during the

train ride with someone who waits for them, unlike other migrants who do not have someone waiting for them. Indeed, both Sandra and Marta, even before Zamora asks them anything, begin sharing what happened to them while on the train. Marta goes first and with a sad voice full of incredulity notes, "If you saw what happened to us." Right after saying that, both women go back and forth telling Zamora about how they were robbed, how their male traveling partners were forced to take off their clothing, and how the women in the group were sexually harassed. Sandra without any hesitation says, "They groped us." Meanwhile, Zamora's only response to this "confession" is to ask, "What did they tell you?" To Zamora's question, Sandra answers, "They opened the top of my shirt, pulled my pants down to see if I had money," but she leaves out other details for a second. At this moment it is Marta who further explains how Sandra was groped. Marta's interjection is pivotal to the experience and testimony of Central American migrant women. In a sense it echoes what Vogt has observed about how migrant women choose not to talk about their own experiences of sexual violence but to point to that of others, choosing what to tell and what to hide.

For instance, in the following shot of both women, Zamora depicts how Marta continues her testimony as they all casually walk to the migrant shelter. During this time, Martha shares more information about their experience by saying, "When they were searching for me and had my pants halfway down, I told them all I have on me is this, and I showed them this, the image of the Father of the migrant. 'I am praying,' I said to them. And he did not try to pull my pants down lower." The differences in the narrations of both women's experiences with sexual assault illustrate how although both of them were sexually assaulted at the same time and place, their experiences and the way they cope with it differ. While Sandra does not give many details about her own experience, Marta does not seem to be fully ashamed of hers. In fact, at some point it gives the impression that Marta feels comfortable sharing her experience as it connects with her religious belief. This aspect of her testimony beyond depicting her own way of seeing and narrating her sexual assault compared with Sandra's denotes the multiplicity of migrant women's survival strategies for dealing with violence on their journey.

After Sandra and Marta's experience on the train, Marilú is introduced to the narrative. Her testimony differs from that of the other two women,

but it is instrumental for understanding the multiplicity of dangers for Central American migrant women. Her testimony not only reflects on how her experience with the train ride shortened her journey but also depicts the circularity of gender violence and its position in the intersectionality of gender, class, and disability.

Marilú's story begins with her giving testimony, at a radio station, of the struggle for Central American migrant women. In her company is the priest Alejandro Solalinde, the director of the shelter where she has sought refuge for a year. While at the radio station, Marilú notes, "The woman that comes from their country if she is tough, she needs to become tougher, from so much suffering and humiliation. . . . I have heard women complain about their decision [to migrate], sometimes they said 'why did I come, why didn't I stay? We were stupid to have left everything behind, our kids, everything for a better future and we found more suffering and humiliation.'" At this moment, while Marilú's words do not explicitly state what kind of suffering and humiliation she and the other women have undergone in their journey, it can be noticed that she creates a collective narrative about her personal experience and that of other women. This collectiveness can be understood as a way to stress the physical and economic burden as well as the psychological complexity for women regarding their decision to migrate, as Marta also explains at the beginning of the documentary regarding her own experience. When Marilú states that sometimes there are conflicting feelings of resentment and doubt in women about their decision to migrate, she creates an alternative narrative that contends with those narratives that have suggested otherwise, to justify the denial of humanitarian help for migrants in the United States as well as in Mexico. As stated earlier, Central American women who are physically, economically, and mentally distressed with poverty and violence choose to migrate and to take dangerous routes that put their lives and integrity at risk because they are forced to do so.

Although Zamora does not reveal much more about Marilú's traumatic experience in her first appearance in the documentary—the director keeps the camera fixed on a close-up position that shows Marilú's upper body behind the radio station's desk and a crutch camouflaged among the radio's objects around her—the following scene shows Marilú's entire body. In this scene, the camera starts with a general pan

shot of the train's tracks and then stops with a close-up of Marilú sitting on the tracks talking to Zamora. The viewer realizes that the suffering and humiliation that Marilú was talking about before is related to an accident that will have a lasting impact on her, both physically and emotionally. Marilú lost her right foot while riding on top of a train car. Her harsh experience with La Bestia, unlike Sandra's and Marta's and many migrants', was not initiated by criminals but by another migrant: "A drunk man, who got on the train and stepped on my face and pushed me off." According to Marilú, this happened as she was making sure immigration officers were not near, because she heard someone yell something about it at the front of the train.

Marilú's experience is sad and unfortunate but not unique. Many migrants' bodies are permanently marked by La Bestia while trying to skip immigration checkpoints or while running away from criminals (Vogt 2018, 106). The situation with these "accidents" suffered by migrants, as Vogt has noted, "moves us beyond the notion that migration is abstract and a disembodied action, but a reality that leaves corporeal marks, which at times makes the image of the dismembered migrant become almost iconic of the journey in Mexico" (108).

The depiction of Marilú's testimony and the corporeal effect of forced migration create a compelling image of her experience, particularly as her journey was not straightforward as planned because of the accident on the train, leaving her in a liminal state, or if we use Padilla's words again, in a non-belonging state, where she has to cope with her new reality as a disabled migrant woman.¹⁴ Indeed, regardless of her physical appearance, Marilú tells Zamora she is pleased to be alive and is happy waiting for a prosthetic leg. She also tells Zamora that she is indecisive about what her next move will be. Marilú contemplates whether the best option for her at this point is to return to Guatemala, her home country, or to stay in Mexico, working and bringing her kids to reunite with her. Her unstable positionality comes across to the audience as incomprehensible, but it renders an important point that is relevant when talking about what converges in the oppression of Central American migrant women who are deported or forcefully returned regardless of their physical state. Indeed, at this point Marilú's internal struggle to return can be interpreted in several ways given her new limited physical condition; however, at the end of the documentary, Zamora reveals through an informational slide

the origin of her fear: "After two months with her family in Guatemala, Marilú is once again victim of her ex-husband's violence and once again heads north to the U.S. alone."

Marilú's new journey as a disabled migrant woman who leaves her family for a second time to escape from domestic violence illustrates, in Crenshaw's words, the dynamics of structural intersectionality. As Crenshaw reminds us, in societies where there is a system of race, gender, and class domination in place, women do not get the proper care and assistance. On the contrary, there is a system in place that allows violence to operate at all levels, making women suffer from multiple forms of subordination (Crenshaw 1991, 8–10). Based on Crenshaw's observation and taking into account the circular narrative that Zamora creates in the film with Marilú's testimony, I claim that Marilú's decision to migrate for a second time draws attention to the circularity that domestic violence in all its forms has on the lives of Central America women.

Indeed, the depiction of Marilú's story toward the end of the film and the way the viewer is informed of her departure demonstrates that she migrated for a second time alone and clandestinely because of fear. When Marilú returns to Guatemala, she confesses that when she migrated the first time, she left only a letter for her mother. According to Marilú, "It was hard to say goodbye and ask her mother" (an older, single woman) "to take care of her children, to love and raise them the way she did with [her]." Marilú's new cycle of migration in silence and her request for her mother depict a pattern that is observable in many migrant women who fear for their lives because of domestic violence and poverty.

Likewise, Marilú's request for her mother in her goodbye letter draws several parallelisms with Doña Inés and her paradox of being the main provider and caretaker for her granddaughters at a much older age, because her daughter had migrated without notice, just as Marilú did the first time. However, it is Marilú's *retorno* to Guatemala with only a small bag, marked by the journey with one foot amputated and on crutches, that further connects both women's stories. At the end of the documentary, Doña Inés returns to El Salvador also empty handed and emotionally and physically marked from her search in vain for her daughter—and like Marilú, she is committed to making the trip again.

CONCLUSION

The last image of Doña Inés in the film, holding a picture of her disappeared daughter between her and her granddaughter in their humble living space, reminds viewers how poverty operates as a structural system of subordination for women—which makes us wonder if at the end, Doña Inés’s granddaughter will also soon be forced to migrate and risk her life, just as her mother did (see figure 7.1).

When women and children have limited resources and are structurally, socially, and politically induced to a position of maximized vulnerability, poverty and violence traverse all aspects of their lives. As depicted in *María en tierra de nadie* through Doña Inés, her disappeared daughter Sandra, Marta, and Marilú, in the absence of viable alternatives for women’s socioeconomic situation and of reliable systems that protect their rights, women are forced to migrate. Consequently, the effect of informal migration makes, among other categories, *undocumented*, *poor*, *migrant*, and *disabled* intersect in Central American women’s lives and experiences. Therefore, recognizing the intersection of these categories is key, as they unfold new forms of subordination and violence that not only are “real” but also make gender violence in the many forms it manifests itself undetectable in the eyes of “normalcy.”



FIGURE 7.1 Doña Inés and her granddaughter holding a picture of Sandra Mabel Sánchez Méndez.

NOTES

1. According to Suyapa Portillo and Alicia Miklos (2017), one example of anti-immigrant policies toward Central Americans previous to the Trump administration is the rhetoric of the Ronald Reagan administration in the 1980s.
2. I take this term from Sara Ahmed (2014), who employs it to argue about England's anti-immigrant rhetoric. For Ahmed, England's idea of protection of the "soft nation" works as a way of creating a collective "other," who are a threat to the nation's "soft" migration policies. I argue that Ahmed's observation echoes with the rhetoric of the Trump administration.
3. NTCA is the acronym used to refer to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador as the countries in the Northern Triangle of Central America.
4. This notion of entanglement of violence is proposed based on the recommendation by the International Crisis Group (ICG) for new plans to "break the cycle" in the NTCA countries. According to the ICG, there is a "convenience amongst the organized crime, politicians and businesspeople to control the illicit resources."
5. For a study on the representation of migration of Nicaraguan women to Costa Rica in film, see Mauricio Espinoza (2016).
6. Although this article deals with poverty and domestic violence on migrant women, I acknowledge that trans women are also victims. As an effect of homophobic responses, trans women are placed at a higher risk of gender-based violence in their home countries and while migrating. Likewise, I recognize that in their cases it is important to consider the intersectionality of sexuality and race as well.
7. Here in particular I am referring to María, a Honduran migrant woman in *De nadie*, and the way in which in the documentary a group of men traveling with her reveal during a conversation with Dirdamal the moment when she was raped "as an animal" by members of the drug cartel Los Zetas. Although María's traveling companions show empathy for her suffering, the point I want to make here is the fact that they felt entitled to reveal the secret that María clearly throughout the film was struggling to cope with—because of the trauma and the social and cultural stigma of rape for the image of a "decent woman" while migrating alone in search of a better life for her and her family.
8. I use the term *road movie* for this documentary based on the definition provided by Veronica Garibatto and Jorge Pérez (2018) and the analysis that Yajaira M. Padilla (2016) offers about migration films.
9. See Vogt (2017).
10. From now on I use only Sandra Campos's and Marta Muñoz's first names when talking about these two characters.
11. The full name of Doña Inés is María Inés Mendez. However, I use Doña Inés in this chapter because it depicts the development of empathy for her story, similar to how Zamora uses it at the end of the documentary with the informational

slides to update the viewer about the current state of her life and of her search for her daughter.

12. Since the signing of the El Convenio Centroamericano de Libre Movilidad (CA-4) in 1991, Central Americans from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador can travel among the three countries without a passport. See <https://www.sica.int/ocam/ca4>.
13. All translations of documentary dialogue are mine unless otherwise noted.
14. Here I use the term *liminal state* as Carla Angulo Pasel (2019) suggests it. Angulo states that migrating or being in transit represents a liminal state for migrant women because migration is not a straightforward process. "Rather, it evolves in stages where expectations surrounding the journey prior to leaving home may differ significantly from the reality" (10).

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8

THE CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRANT

Mexico, the Never-Ending Border

JUDITH MARTÍNEZ

What is called society, with its law and order, is as frail, as precarious, as flesh and can be snuffed out and assimilated back into the desert as easily as a corpse can.

—THOMAS PYNCHON

THIS ESSAY intends to focus on the infliction of violence on the Central American migrant in Mexico. For analysis, I have selected *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail* (2010) by Oscar Martínez—a text that addresses the current geopolitical situation of Central American migrants and their journey through Mexico during the War on Drugs. This journalistic work depicts the systematic violence taking place in Mexico's southern and northern borders, as well as the journey of many Central Americans through Mexico to reach the mythical American Dream. Martínez's work portrays the representation of the border as a lawless land, and Mexico itself as a continuous desert that allegorizes the never-ending situation of the dispossessed, who belong nowhere. The current context of Central America and Mexico is faced with the transformation of violence and new processes of economic accumulation. This chapter, then, will try to provide an analysis of the massive waves of migrations and the uprooting of Central Americans as part of inherent processes of the neoliberal practices these countries acquired. It will study the migrant as the current figure of the

homo sacer, a theory developed by Walter Benjamin and later expanded by Giorgio Agamben.

As these forced migrants arrive in Mexico, it becomes pertinent to understand the Mexican crisis of the country's sovereignty and the complex situation Mexico faces within its territory in connection with the role of the narco. As the migrants cross the Mexican border, they enter a lawless land. The figure of the Central American migrant exposes the precarization of life, the migrant as permanent "homo sacer (sacred man), *who may be killed and yet not sacrificed*" (Agamben 1998, 8). Central American migrants become the embodiment of the failure of a global system in a post-hegemonic time as well as of the failure of the community and its social bonds as we know it.

As Latin America has shifted its economic and political policies to neoliberal systems, processes of accumulation have rearticulated themselves as well. Violence has become part of a system that is imbedded as a way of life with no other choice for people who live in those communities but to escape. It would be impossible to understand the figure of the migrant and the massive waves of migration, specifically from Central America into Mexico, without understanding the main systemic reasons that translate into these forms of contemporary violence that expulses people from their communities. As Hannah Arendt states, the worse cases of violence are where "no one can be held responsible."¹ In other words, there is almost no possibility to find an accountable party for the atrocities that are resulting in the undoing of community in these areas. Aspects such as a fractured sovereignty, shifts to neoliberalism, the permanent state of exception, the narco business and its complicity with the Mexican state, and the production of bare life are some of the main practices that maintain the new processes of accumulation that have become inherent parts of late capitalism. All these characteristics affect at different levels the journey of the Central American migrant through Mexico in recent years, transforming the migrant into a commodity that exists only as one more form of profit in a lawless land.

In consideration of the geopolitical importance of migration, Martínez's *The Beast* was selected for analysis. Through testimonies, this text exemplifies the atrocities inflicted on Central American migrants, coming mainly from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as they

attempt to cross both the southern and northern border of Mexico. A journalist from El Salvador, Martínez portrays a Mexico that allegorizes a continuous wilderness for these migrants, who must endure a never-ending situation of constant horror. The book accounts the testimonies of the dispossessed, who are dispossessed not only of their home but of their dignity as humans; those who belong nowhere.

FORCED MIGRANTS

The Beast was first published in Spanish in 2010, as *Los migrantes que no importan* (The migrants that don't matter) through a collaboration with the Salvadoran newspaper *El Faro*. Alicia Miklos highlights the fact that "since 2017, migrant caravans have drawn a great deal of attention to Central American migration through Mexico, but for many years these groups seemed invisible" (2020, 25). Martínez engaged in exhaustive journalistic work to gather facts to build a narrative around the testimony and chronicles he witnessed firsthand during his very own journey along the migratory route. He states that "for more than two years [he] traveled with these people in their attempt to cross that colossal obstacle—Mexico" (2010, 271). The text gathers from his personal experience and from the testimonies of many other Central American migrants, mainly from the countries mentioned above, who share similar but unique stories. The stories Martínez narrates in his book are from people who have been driven from their homelands as a result of civil wars, gang violence, different forms of corruption, unemployment, and hunger. These people are left with no other choice but to begin a deadly journey through Mexico. The definition of migrants seems to be deficient to describe the characters of Martínez's work, as he writes, "There are those who migrate to reunite with family members. And there are those . . . who don't migrate. They flee" (1). Besides these reasons, processes of compulsive modernization produce new forms of exploitation and exclusion. Since the consolidation of a neoliberal state, the market has priority over people; according to David Harvey, this "anarchy of the market . . . generates a situation that becomes increasingly ungovernable. It may even lead to a breakdown of all bonds of solidarity and a condition verging on social anarchy and nihilism" (2005, 82).

This economic policy becomes palpable as groups of individuals are uprooted from their homelands and thrust into unknown futures, seeking for ways to survive. Saskia Sassen describes this as processes of expulsion. She states that “inequality . . . can . . . be more accurately described as a type of expulsion” (2014, 15). People in their own country are already “always on the verge of becoming a nameless dead body lying on the street” (Martínez 2010, 10). Violence and fear of death are simply part of their lives. The three brothers interviewed by Martínez in the first chapter described their country as a “purgatory . . . [that] . . . spit people out or dropped them dead” (19). This is precisely the distinction between migration and forced migration—the lack of status and citizenship regardless of the country of origin. The book isn’t just about migration. The narrative Martínez presents expands to depict the current situation that migrants face as they strive to survive as “non-citizens” of the global world. Thus, it is clear as one reads the book, that the process of migration is not a choice but a case of mere survival. As the author starts the chronicle, he writes on the first page that “there are those who migrate to El Norte because of poverty. There are those who migrate to reunite with family members. And there are those, like the Alfaro brothers, who don’t migrate. They flee” (1). Modernization partially sustains the development and progress of specific places or circles of power by perpetuating contemporary slavery of those expelled within their own communities or into other places of the globe. As Sassen (2014, 83) explains, the meaning of citizenship is degraded.

The logics of international trade agreements have an uneven result, as the side of the “refugees, the displaced, asylum seekers, [forced] migrants, the sans papiers . . . the ‘economic migrants’ . . . stand for ‘wasted humans,’ and . . . [are] used to arouse resentment and anger, the object of the resentment and the target on which the anger is to be unloaded remains much the same” (Bauman 2004, 58). Many citizens of Latin American countries, who were never able to be integrated into the economic system or to act politically in their societies, are forced to migrate to the northern countries until they make their way to the Mexico-U.S. border to wait their turn to cross. According to Zygmunt Bauman, in order to produce the new, waste must be produced simultaneously. He goes on to suggest that “the production of ‘human waste,’ or more correctly wasted humans (the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant,’ that is the population of those

who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay), is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity" (5). This side of modernity affects the most vulnerable and places them into the most precarious situations, which include but are not limited to forced journeys for the sake of survival. The reality is that these people are risking their lives and are well aware they might never make it through Mexico. They are also aware of their inability to remain alive in their own home countries, where pure survival is an everyday struggle. According to Esposito, this kind of "violence inherent in a community is related to the incapacity of community merely to preserve the life of its members" (2010, 3). Thus, people are forced to flee their lands and embark on a journey fully conscious that they are at the expense of corrupt coyotes (smugglers), who might exploit them—because their lives were already at risk in their countries of "citizenship." As they "travel," their only certainty is their uncertainty to retain their lives through an eternal hellish border. Their best bet is to keep themselves invisible. Forced migrants, who have been stripped of their humanity, understand their journey as mere survival. Uncertainty is the only truth about their lives, since they never have any certainty of what comes next or that they will ever arrive at a final destination. *The Beast* portrays Central American migrants as the displaced, the forced migrants whose only status of protection is their ability to remain invisible before they depart their homelands, as they flee, and if they ever arrive.

THE NARCO BUSINESS: A BESTIAL SYSTEM IN THE MEXICAN STATE OF EXCEPTION

As Central Americans are forced to migrate, their journey continues only if they can cross the southern border of Mexico, often by riding La Bestia (The Beast), a cargo train that transports undocumented immigrants within parts of Mexico. It is also interesting to note that there is a street gang in El Salvador called La Bestia. It almost appears as if the train were named after the monster that is evicting people from their homes, pushing them to a life of constant fear and a permanent state of survival. It is as if the migrants escape one Beast only to encounter

another. However, the situation for Central American forced migrants has worsened in recent years because of two main factors. One, the state of exception Mexico faces, and two, the takeover by the narcos of some of the pathways migrants follow to the border with the United States. The narco-trafficking cartels and the corrupt Mexican state are also in charge of human trafficking and benefit from the vulnerability of the migrants. One of the testimonies from Martínez's book recounts "that every day Los Zeta and their allies kidnap tons of undocumented Central Americans, in the broad light of the day, and that migrants are kept in safe houses which everybody, including authorities, knows about" (2010, 92–93).² The migrant has become a source of profit in a country where corruption has eroded the state and has transformed it into a lawless land. The shift to a neoliberal system in the early 1990s, the consolidation of the conservative party with former president Vicente Fox, and the questioning of the legitimacy of the victory of former president Felipe Calderón unleashed a series of ruptures in Mexico's social tissue.

The corruption in Mexico and the reduction of state intervention in favor of transnational corporations have gradually contributed to a weakening of the state and its sovereignty. This deterioration of the state itself has created a rupture, or fissure, in the state apparatus, according to Gareth Williams, because "since the end of the Institutional Party's (PRI) domination in the 2000 presidential election, Mexico has become a particularly significant arena for reconsideration of the mere fact of sovereignty" (2011, 2). In a way, the legal apparatus has been bending its limits to allow for the constant corruption and illicit remuneration of government members in complicity with powerful interests, whether from the big companies or the heads of the cartels. This complicity also allowed for an implicit compromise or contract to rule the country, since the cartels have power of decision-making over the actions of the state. It is important to understand the situation of a state of exception that Mexico faces because "it introduces a zone of anomie into the law in order to make the effective regulation . . . of the real possible" (Agamben 2005, 36). In other words, as Central American migrants enter Mexico, they are entering into multiple states of vulnerability. First, Central American migrants enter as criminals because of their undocumented status. Second, they are entering a country whose current state is precisely the state of exception, "that appears as the legal form of what cannot have

legal form . . . if the law employs an exception—that is the suspension of the law itself” (Agamben 2005, 1). Last, Mexico’s level of corruption at the government level could be understood by definitions of a parallel or adulterated state since “there is complicity of the governmental entities and the organized crime, allowing for impunity and the perpetuation of crimes” (Valenzuela 2012, 181).³ Therefore, the Central American migrant is entering a lawless land, an eternal desert where the law of the strongest (as in the animal kingdom) is not a metaphor but the authenticity of the Mexican state.

The Mexican government has not been able to protect its people, to grant them security, or to provide them with basic needs, such as decent labor, health care, or education. However, the fact is that the modes of production have been transformed by the multinational era. This has also led to a change in violence and forms of crime. The business of what is illicit—drug trafficking, kidnapping, and piracy, for instance—has become part of the platform for the functioning of the state. Drug trafficking and illegal trade have evolved into a mode of production that reflects the era of multinational industry; in other words, the neoliberalization of the narco. One of Martínez’s testimonies exemplifies this situation in the following words: “Organization is one of the cartels’ strongest characteristics. They are involved in everything: kidnapping, drug trafficking, human trafficking. We don’t even know which cartel is responsible for what. It is impossible to identify them” (2010, 81–82).

The narcos have moved into power and decision-making elite circles. Anabel Hernández emphasizes a key point in her research, stating that “farmers almost illiterate such as Caro Quintero, Don Neto, El Azul, El Mayo and El Chapo [all important drug bosses] would have never made it that far without the complicity of businessmen, politicians, cops, those who every day execute power from false places of legality” (2011, 124). It is just as important to note that under these same lines, Zavala (2018) also proposes a theory of the subsumption of the narco into new forms of accumulation.⁴ In other words, whether or not there is an agreement regarding the whole theory of Zavala (if the cartels exist or not), it is certain that the narco has played a key role in the production of wealth for certain groups in power, for politicians and businessmen. It is also imperative to understand that the figure of the narco might no longer be a common enemy, but that there needs to be a meta-awareness of

knowledge that many narco-narratives contribute to depoliticizing the main issues—such as human rights to protect the migrants and the accountability of the state, as the works of Zavala and Hernández have suggested. The narco-business is not working under mere autonomy from the state, but for the state and with the state, and therefore it is important to maintain this critical perspective as we try to analyze how narco-narratives might be mediated by the state to construct an enemy rather than to disguise major state failures—protecting what Hernández calls “los verdaderos señores del narco.”⁵

This is the context of the border Central American forced migrants must survive. Their task as they enter this lawless land is to continue to be invisible. Yet, it is precisely because of this invisibility that “migrants are perfect prey because they are invisible, always hiding from the authorities” (Martínez 2013, 14). These humans, non-citizens, are born to try to gamble riding a bestial system in which they may be mutilated or brutally killed. The author describes an organized system, not an old idea of a thief dressed in cowboy regalia but a transnational, business-like entity that feeds itself with any kind of illegal or criminal activity. Drug trafficking is now merely one of the cartel’s many businesses. They have updated their modes of production to diversify the forms of extraction: express kidnapping, prostitution, human trafficking, drug mules, and undocumented migration. The testimonies in Martínez’s book narrate the stories of those who are victims of a business that has established an extensive network throughout Mexico. The migrants are victims of the cartels, which have colluded with or are working for the state—which owns both the southern and northern borders. It is important to highlight here that the land Central American forced migrants enter is not necessarily in danger from the narcos only, although this is certainly a reality. Beyond this, the complexity of the current situation of Mexico is the systemic violence of a state whose sovereignty is fractured and whose war against drugs is nothing but a myth. As Bowden has stated it, “This is a war for drugs, not against drugs” (2010, 236). The narco-state is a business, a business that has now expended to profit from anything, including the lives of Central American forced migrants as they attempt to traverse the country toward the United States.

The discussion of the commodification of migrants by the Mexican cartels must be maintained under the perspective of the current state of

exception Mexico is facing. The militarization of the country with the discourse of a war against drugs has, in a way, perpetuated a “normative aspect of the law [that] can thus be obliterated and contradicted with impunity by a governmental violence that—while ignoring international law externally and producing a permanent state of exception internally—nevertheless still claims to be applying the law” (Agamben 2005, 87). The combination of a state of exception (Agamben) and an adulterated state (Valenzuela 2012) creates a bestial system and an unbearable way of subsistence. This situation portrays Mexico as an allegory of the eternal border where the lives of the dispossessed, of forced migrants, lack any value or at least the possibility that their basic human rights are protected by the authorities, regardless of this state’s claims to the contrary.

THE CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRANT AS THE EMBODIMENT OF HOMO SACER

Martínez presents a narrative with two types of bodies. First, those characters who exist to reproduce death and live a life in which violence is their only tool to survive. Then the author presents other bodies, those who are nameless, the semi-characters of the world, some of whom become forced migrants who cross borders. This second group embodies the figure of the homo sacer, those who do not belong to the community, who are reduced to their bare existence, unable to speak because they do not exist under the law. According to Herlinghause, “Bare life still cannot be understood as a self-evident category. We might retain the basic attribute of ‘precarious.’ Bare life can be understood as precarious, to the extent that it is prevented from delivering an intelligible linguistic utterance that could account for existence exposed to violent or latent death, together with exploitations, intimidation, and exhaustion” (2019, 6). This is how Martínez constructs this collection of testimonies from individuals whose identities must be protected to keep them safe from former enemies in their countries, or for fear of deportation. Martínez intends to advocate for his sources by amplifying their voices, which might never be known otherwise.

The Beast describes the cruelty the Mexican military and government inflicted on Central American forced migrants. These individuals

flee their lands because of fear only to live in constant fear during their journey. The work of Martínez reveals fear, humiliation, and death not only as emergent emotions for the reader but as the reality for some of the main characters in the book. One of the individuals Martínez quotes states that “my fear turned to helplessness, then to rage, then finally to acceptance. . . . And a body is little more than a ticket from one hell to another hell” (2013, 67). Fear and humiliation are a way of life. It is not just a matter of migrants who happen to die, but the forms of power that are behind their demise. Foucault suggests that “now we have the emergence of a power that [he] would call the power of regularization, and it, in contrast, consists in making life and letting die” (1997, 247). Central American forced migrants, as they make their way into the Mexican territory, enter as potential corpses. They are not citizens of Mexico, nor citizens of the United States, and their citizenship from their own countries fails to protect them. Hence, Central Americans “live . . . in the ban of a law and a tradition that are maintained solely as the ‘zero point’ of their own content, and that include men within them in the form of a pure relation of abandonment” (Agamben 1998, 51). They have been abandoned by any formal legal system since they were in their homelands. Regardless of the geographic location, they are vulnerable anywhere. Their deaths and their suffering remain unpunished. These descriptions of precarious lives resonate with the definition of those who can kill and those who are “killable,” or as Walter Benjamin designates them, *homo sacer*. Agamben expanded on this figure of the *homo sacer*, based on Benjamin’s theory, that is connected with a “figure of archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order . . . solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)” (1998, 8). The system reduces life to “bare life, that is, the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (8). In a state of exception, as is the case of Mexico, the Central American migrant fits perfectly in this category of *homo sacer*, especially because of the impunity that follows the aftermath of the continuous deaths of these uprooted human beings. The Central American forced migrant could certainly be considered under Agamben’s definition, since a “*homo sacer*’s life [is that] which can be killed by anyone without committing homicide” (103). No one is accountable in a lawless land where these individuals are nothing but disposable corpses.

The Central American forced migrant constitutes a life that does not appear to have the same value as others, since the legal consequence of their deaths is only impunity. The work of Martínez exposes the actual perception of the immigrants from the central part of the Americas, and the inability of state apparatuses and international organizations to comply with the laws of basic human rights. Mexico's complex situation allows for the precarization of the lives of these forced migrants, whose only role in the community is to be walking corpses who might or might not make it, but whose potential death does not constitute a crime to be prosecuted. However, though we mention the word "community," this is merely a theory. Esposito explains that "members of a community are such if and because they are bound by a common law" (Esposito 2012, 14). Nevertheless, this is not the case with Central American migrants as they enter Mexico. Their non-citizen status reduces them to invisibility and consequently impedes them from acquiring any legal protection. In addition, the dispossessed, who are not able to be members of the "economic flow," as Bowman had stated, cannot really belong to any community, though they end up inhabiting an anomic space where regardless of their recognized nationality they remain invisible to the law. They never arrive, there is no destiny other than perhaps a geographical destination. In one of the testimonies Martínez gathers from a female, she states that "I'm from Honduras but I never had papers. I never had a birth certificate either. I'm like an animal" (2010, 71). These people were already expelled from their states, being nonmembers and non-citizens and being invisible to the common law long before they fled their birth places.

TESTIMONIES AND THE POLITICAL WORK OF MARTÍNEZ

Martínez writes in *The Beast's* afterword that one of the objectives for his work is "that [he hopes] the book generates respect for these men and women, for those who have done something for their families that many of us could hardly find strength to do. Respect for this drive that migrants have, a drive which is stronger than the criminal cartels, a drive more powerful than the train engine and a drive more vital than any limb—a leg, for example—of our very body" (274). Although this awareness is

certainly the beginning of the fight against systemic forms of oppressions and a voice for countless silent stories of death that remain hidden, it is also critical to remain cognizant that the writing of a successful journalistic chronicle is a form of privilege for those who can speak and be heard over those who are born and continue to (un)exist in precarious situations, with nothing but their bodies as currency. As the book presents us with testimonies of people fleeing their countries, it does accomplish Martínez's objective stated at the end of the book; that is, it generates respect for and a disruption of a narrative of peace.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to reflect holistically on Martínez's work without considering what a testimonial fully entails. Acosta warns us about the understanding of "testimonio . . . [which] . . . simply cannot be understood without cultural mediation" (2014, 169). Along these same lines, the compilation of oral stories and testimonials that Martínez gathers for his written work also reminds us of the extensive efforts we still need to develop as a society. Acosta explains that "orality is therefore not a constitutive outside to literacy but its founding and innermost severing exclusion" (73). I say this not with the intention to minimize journalism's valuable work to make visible the stories, experiences, and voices of those who are cruelly dehumanized, but rather to continue to think that the emancipation process will not be complete until there is no longer a need to translate stories or provide "a voice" for the voiceless, faceless, or nameless people of this world. According to Rancière, "Symbolic distribution of bodies . . . those that one sees and those that one does not see, those who have logos—memorial speech, an account to be kept up—and those who have no logos. . . . They do not speak because they are beings without a name, deprived of logos—meaning, of symbolic enrolment in the city. . . . whoever is nameless cannot speak" (1999, 22–23). In other words, we should aim for everyone to have a voice without the need for mediation to keep them safe.

As previously stated, Central American forced migrants leave their homelands because of the system that pushes them out (Sassen 2014). They risk crossing Mexico and subsequently strive to reach the border with the United States. However, whether they cross it or not, or leave their countries or not, and regardless of the geographic area where they live, these non-citizens remain foreigners of the global system, continuously living in precarious situations. The transition of the national state

into the neoliberal order has made evident the exhaustion of the meaning of language, as Gareth Williams states, “In the current order of global accumulation it is becoming increasingly obvious that words such as ‘nation,’ ‘the people,’ ‘development’ or ‘national culture’ can no longer mean what they used to mean in Latin America. The notion of subalternity in this context also is at its epistemological limit” (Williams 2002, 11).⁶ Therefore, the repeated notion of silence because of fear, unrecognizable corpses, and victims with no names in Martínez’s text needs to be emphasized as it demonstrates not just the obvious psychological or emotional state people are facing because of the violence and a system of corrupt governments but, as Acosta states, because “silence (like orality) is contained within the semiotic system of Western literacy as a marker of subordination, nothing more” (2014, 173). In other words, forced migrants live invisible and die invisible, as non-citizens, constantly lacking a status that would entail them legal rights, or simply the right to live. There is no narrative for that; there is no language to describe it. That is the very act of resistance Martínez’s work does in exhibiting the inability of the dispossessed to speak up for themselves.

CONCLUSION

The Beast depicts the precarious lives and unique experiences of Central American forced migrants, uprooted peasants who are unable to join the economic exchange. They are expelled from their own countries and never become members of a community—if they ever make it to the United States alive. These waves of migration make visible the failure of creating an inclusive community and expose the lack of congruency of the state discourse and the reality of those whose existence does not matter. The displaced represent the incarnation of potential corpses, as they never acquire an identity. Therefore, their main goal continues to be mere survival. The moment they are born, they seek to survive, first by fleeing, then by staying alive as they cross Mexico. Once they arrive in the United States, if they do, they seek invisibility, destined to remain in the never-ending border, in the lawless land they traded for food, shelter, and conditional safety. The border and this in-betweenness it embodies is their new home, though they might never acquire the very right to live.

The production of death, corpses, and body parts is written all over the pages of Martínez's text, implicitly or explicitly. Again, as Rancière had pointed out, politics consists of making visible what was not, of listening to those who have no speech and to those who were only considered to be animals (2005, 15). Corpses cannot become invisible even though, more and more, new forms of extermination are now being developed to vanish the bodies of the victims. Death is present in literature as it is imprinted on the pages of *The Beast*. The pages of this book become a canvas, to rewrite the silent voices that the state's discourse is trying to deny. Esposito argues that "the problem of our times is that there exists a barrier between language and politics; politics escapes language; language has no longer words for politics" (2010, 8). Nonetheless, the value of our analysis should rely in distinguishing the tension between the state's discourse and any euphoric celebration of globalization that does not consider the stories of the dispossessed. The narrative that Oscar Martínez provides through a lens of this other reality challenges the status quo with a subversive piece of comprehensive data and reliable material. Martínez opens a space to continue to move forward to a different level of debate of resistance, in the absence of actual humanitarian action. Contemporary society is facing a culture of death, a culture of corpses everywhere: the corpse of many nation-states and the corpse of the global community, which are ultimately reflected in the corpses of the unclaimed and invisible Central American forced migrants described in Martínez's work, *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos in the Migrant Trail*.

NOTES

1. "Today we ought to add the latest and perhaps most formidable form of such dominance: bureaucracy or the rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men . . . can be held responsible . . . rule by Nobody is clearly the most tyrannical of all" (Arendt 1970, 38).
2. One of the main drug cartels operating in Mexico.
3. Translated from Spanish by the author.
4. "En el campo del poder, los traficantes han estado históricamente subordinados al poder político, no han competido con éste ni han estado intentando hacerlo creando asociaciones o partidos políticos; tampoco han desarrollado

una estrategia de ‘infiltración’ de largo alcance para invertir la relación de subordinación” (Zavala 2018, 184).

5. “The real drug lords” (my translation).
6. Williams (2002, 11) defines subalternity as “the name for the multifarious points of excess within the national and postnational histories of Latin American developmentalism. It is the limit at which hegemonic narratives and dominant modes of social and intellectual reproduction encounter their points of radical unworkability.”

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9

THE CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION THROUGH CINEMA

The Wretched of the Earth, Reality, and the Practices of
Representation

MANUEL SÁNCHEZ CABRERA

IN THIS chapter, I contend that Cary Fukunaga's *Sin nombre* (2009), Luis Mandoki's *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas* (2012), and Diego Quemada-Díez's *La jaula de oro* (2013) give emphasis to a preconceived colonial condition in the experiences of Central American migrants to the United States. These films do not offer a profound understanding of Central Americans and their thoughts about their own migration.¹ As a consequence, the films reinforce the idea that Central Americans are both "simply victims" of their circumstances and "dangerous others" because of them. The films' claims to reality hide the fact that what they are actually doing is fixing these meanings in relation to Central American migration. For this reason, I also contend that the films are part of a discourse that puts Central American migration as a hopeless event in which migrants do not have any say or agency in the matter and that makes the viewer accept what they see on the screen as natural or normal. The problem is that there seems to be no alternative to think differently about Central American migration. Therefore, we—Central Americans and those who care about Central America—must question how migration films such as *Sin nombre*, *Sabina Rivas*, and *La jaula de oro* are representing the migrant experience and how they are portraying Central American migrants on screen.

Sin nombre, *Sabina Rivas*, and *La jaula de oro* have tried to offer a more insightful, more nuanced, or simply a more realistic representation of Central American migrants and their odyssey. They offer a kind of visual ethnography of Central Americans and their migratory path across Mexico. They center their narratives on the malignant role of the Mexican authorities, violent gangs, and drug cartels and on the innocence and suffering of Central Americans. In other words, their representations seem to be presenting or depicting the migration of Central Americans to the United States. In his essay "The Work of Representation," Stuart Hall (1997c) mentions that this is how the concept of representation has been commonly defined: as presenting or depicting something or someone else. The word carries the notion that the thing or the person depicted or presented was already there (10). Hall also mentions that a representation is also defined as the notion of standing for or taking the place of something or someone else (11). Both of these ideas are brought together in the notion of representation, and within it, the idea of giving meaning to things, topics, types of peoples, events, etc. Hall points out that if one thinks that the meaning that is given in a representation is very different from or is a kind of distortion of what really is, then one's work on representation will be measuring the gap between what one might think is the true meaning of an event or an object and how it is presented in cultural productions (whether it is in the media, cinema, nonfiction narratives, etc.).² In this chapter, I am not measuring the gap between any "true" or "false" meaning in these migration films. I aim to explore the meanings we can get from them and the ways, I believe, they are presenting Central American migrants.

For instance, the last chapter of Oscar Martínez's *Los migrantes que no importan* (2010; published in English as *The Beast*) tells the story of Julio César, a Honduran migrant who understands that being cautious is important for survival. Through Julio César's story, Martínez shows us that the difference between knowing and not knowing is a determining factor for succeeding in the migratory path across Mexico. Martínez portrays Julio César as a farsighted man who knows how to ask questions, who studies his route, and, more importantly, who knows how to wait. The reader knows that there is a harsh reality out there, but there is no pity for Julio César, nor for any other migrant. There is misery and desperation when we talk about Central American migrants, but there is also

hope and learning. This is in some way how Martínez tells his story of Central Americans and their migration to the United States. Martínez is not reflecting the reality he is encountering, nor is he distorting it. The fact that he is representing the migration of Central Americans to the United States means that throughout his work he is giving meaning to the event. That is, his representation of Central American migration is not a practice that comes after the event as a mere reflection of the world; his representation is in fact entering the very constitution of it. Hall points out that the process of representation does not happen after the event, nor outside the event, but within the event itself. He argues that a representation enters into the constitution of the object in discussion; it is part of the object itself; it is constitutive of it.³ In a way, as Hall suggests, an event—people, thing, topic, etc.—does not exist meaningfully until it has been represented.

Hall suggests then that it is more useful to think of representation as “the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning” (1997c, 45). He argues that this definition carries the important premise that things—objects, people, events in the world—do not have in themselves any fixed, final, or true meaning. “It is us—in society, within human cultures—who make things mean, who signify” (1997c, 45).⁴ This is why “representation functions less like the model of a one-way transmitter and more like the model of a dialogue—it is . . . *dialogic*” (Hall 1997a, xxvi; italics in the original).⁵ Hence, much of what the Central American migration means, or what the Central American migration seems to be and how the event in itself is represented in cultural productions, depends on the practices of representation. Hall asks, Do events in the world have one, essential, fixed, or true meaning, against which distortions can be measured? If we consider, for example, the images we see in the media today about Central Americans, what do they mean? What is the meaning of an event when there are multiple interpretations of it? Hall suggests that there is no one true fixed meaning and there was nothing absolutely fixed in the first place to represent. If we consider this notion on representation as a process, *Sin nombre*, *Sabina Rivas*, and *La jaula de oro* share a common understanding of the Central American experience. Their representations are dialoguing with each other and are constitutive, as it is Martínez’s portrayal of the event. The problem is that

the films suggest that what the viewer is watching was already there and that the films are simply reflecting that reality. Therefore, this chapter explores how Central American migrants are represented in these films and tries to answer, based on the notion of representation as a process and in some ways in contrast with Martínez's depiction, the question of what these films' representations say about how Central American migrants tend to be represented.

Thus, the question I want to pose is, How are these films signifying Central American migration and, more importantly, Central American migrants? First, I am going to explore how these films depict Central Americans as the wretched of the earth. Second, I question their claims to be offering a somewhat objective and accurate picture of Central Americans' experiences. Finally, I conclude that the films are part of a discourse that tries to define and fix what Central American migration has come to be in our collective imagination.

CENTRAL AMERICANS AS THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH

Sin nombre, *Sabina Rivas*, and *La jaula de oro* represent Central American migrants on the basis of a presupposed colonial condition.⁶ This taken-for-granted idea exists because for most people in the United States and Central America alike, Central America has been subjected to U.S. imperialism. That is why on screen, the films situate Central American migrants as the wretched of the earth.⁷ The result for the viewer is, all too often, the idea that Central Americans have been both—and contradictorily—targets and perpetrators of violence. Thus, one of the many possible meanings we get from the films is that Central Americans have been mere victims of the circumstances, and they have become “dangerous” because of them.

Sin nombre focuses on Sayra's (Paulina Gaitan) coming-of-age story of migration. Sayra and her family endure the long and dangerous journey through Mexico and the violence and discrimination it involves. It seems there would be no difference if they had stayed back in Honduras. *Sin nombre* also depicts the life and *modus operandi* of the Mara Salvatrucha, or the MS-13, as well as the gang's network in most of the

migratory path. Sayra meets Willy “El Casper” (Edgar Flores), a gang member of the MS-13 who saves her from being raped on top of the dangerous freight train called La Bestia by another MS-13 member, “Lil’ Mago” (Tenoch Huerta)—who happens to be the leader of the gang in the region. Lil’ Mago killed Willy’s girlfriend, which motivated Willy to murder the leader. Thus, Willy becomes a fugitive from his own gang. Willy has no choice but to endure the migratory route. Sayra leaves her family to follow Willy, endangering her own life. At the end of the journey, Willy is murdered by the gang, and Sayra is the only one who makes it into the United States.

La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas portrays the atrocities suffered by migrants who are constantly abused or killed by gangs, corrupt police officers, drug traffickers, and the Mexican army at the Guatemala-Mexico border.⁸ The film emphasizes, however, the story of violence and abuse of Sabina Rivas (Greisy Mena), a young Honduran who has fallen victim to human trafficking. Sabina strives to survive in a world dominated by corruption and patriarchy and at the same time tries to achieve her dream of becoming a singer. She works in the Tijuana brothel on the Guatemalan side of the border. Her story involves sexual abuse and incestuous relationships. The film offers an excessive rawness in its portrayal that makes it difficult to watch.

La jaula de oro portrays the story of a group of young Guatemalans who embark on the journey to the United States because, again, there is no future for them in their country. Juan (Brandon López) and Sara (Karen Martínez) cross the Mexican border and find Chauk (Rodolfo Domínguez), a Tzotzil native who does not know Spanish but is able to befriend Sara.⁹ It is important to mention that Sara disguises herself as a boy to hide her femininity, but it is not enough, since migrants, especially women, are subjected to assaults by the authorities, forced labor, kidnappings, extortion, human and drug trafficking, and ultimately death. Juan is the only one who makes it to the United States and ends up working in a meat-processing plant.

The three films, in sum, portray the Central American migrant experience through the perspective of young people without a future. People who, instead of migrating, are fleeing the region, as Óscar Martínez puts it (2010, 22–23).¹⁰ Nonetheless, the films do not give much attention to Central America itself. Instead, like many other stories on Central

American migration, they emphasize the ways in which Mexico determines a before and after for any Central American who attempts the journey. It is notable, for example, the way in which the films portray how many Central Americans travel thousands of miles on top of La Bestia and how rape is a common type of violence to which women are subjected.¹¹ According to Amnesty International, the journey through Mexico is “one of the most dangerous in the world” (2010, 5). Hence, the films show how rape “es el pan de cada día” (Martínez 2010, 47) and “la migración . . . es un mundo de sálvese quien pueda” (87).¹² When these films were released, between 2009 and 2013, Central American migration was not as visible as it is today.¹³ Arias and Milian (2013, 131) point out that Central America is, in fact, increasingly “over here,” in the United States: it “is a real site and a sight, a working representation of a place that has gained visibility and significance in the United States vis-à-vis discourses, cultural productions and visual practices.” What is important is that the films expect that the viewer will get an idea of what this migration is like.

The films, therefore, seem to begin from the conception that the characters are colonial subjects and are part of some sort of modern colonialism. In the opening shot of *La jaula de oro*, the camera follows Juan walking in a crowded space, for example. A shantytown. A poor and overpopulated settlement made of cardboard, scrap metal, and wood. From the very beginning, the film establishes something akin to the life of the colonized. A few minutes later, an establishing shot shows an enormous garbage dump. This shot orients the viewer to see that this is Juan’s world. In Franz Fanon’s (2004) words, this would be a crouching place, a hungry town. Fanon states that the colonized world is a world without spaciousness, people live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The viewer feels this proximity through the use of tracking shots that closely follow the characters.¹⁴ In *Sin nombre*, Willy—“El Casper”—takes Smiley (Kristian Ferrer) to see La destroyer (the gang’s hideout). The camera’s long take reveals an overcrowded place. Casper introduces the gang members to Smiley as well as to the viewer who follows them. Pans are slowed, giving us the opportunity not to miss any detail. Throughout this scene, the point of view does not seem to come from any of the characters, making us feel everybody else’s proximity as if we were there. In fact, the first part of *Sin nombre* is dedicated to

introducing (like a documentary) the underworld of the Mara Salvatrucha. The viewer is saturated with objects depicting death, such as crucifixes, rosary beads, pendants, charms, graffiti on the walls with the legend Rest in Peace, and cemetery crosses, as well as the gang members' bodies full of skull and Rest in Peace graveyard tattoos. The colonized live not only in poverty but also at "the nearness of death" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 259). The presence of death is so pervasive that the viewer only senses some sort of suicidal behavior, which proves that these are not "reasonable human beings" (Fanon 2004). This scene—the visit to the gang's hideout—ends with an impressive close-up of Smiley's face, a buzzing noise, and the sense that we as viewers have become eyewitnesses to the murder of a rival gang member. These images introduce us to the colonial world but set a tone of neutrality for the viewer. They put the audience as neutral individuals, witnesses of this madness. So, the films "used the people against the people" (Fanon 2004, 39–40). For Fanon, neutrality was an invention of the Cold War; it never helped the underdeveloped regions of the world the way it should have (41). Thus in this case, a neutral viewer does not help Central American migrants at all.

In addition, Fanon points out that the colonized world is (for the Western gaze of course) a space of ill fame, inhabited by people of evil repute (2004, 4). In "'People Without History': Central America in the Literary Imagination of the Metropolis," Neil Larsen (1995, 47) analyzes this Western gaze in films depicting the Central American wars of the 1980s and points out that

Central America is imagined as the victim, in its Historylessness, of an abstract Evil manifesting itself on all sides as a generic Violence. A world "abandoned by God" has become in its turn a world inhabited by a sinister metaphysical presence. From the Paradise that the texts of "discovery" and early colonization typically evoked in their descriptions of this green and fertile quadrant of the New World, "Central America" has become a metaphor for Hell.¹⁵

Hence, since this place is depicted as "Hell," it is necessary to show it as a violent one. The first shot in *Sabina Rivas*, for example, shows the sunrise and many undistinguishable gang members. They walk toward the camera showing the marks of their belonging. They are on a riverbank,

ready for what happens to be a ritual of initiation. The leader shouts and explains that they will never support someone who does not belong to their gang, but in order to be admitted, fearlessness has to be demonstrated, and violence is the means to do it. Jovany's (Fernando Moreno) initiation into the gang requires him to be beaten up badly. In *Sin nombre* there is also a scene of initiation into the gang where camera movements and close-ups provide some proximity to the beating. At the same time, on-screen, the characters evidently are not speaking to each other; however off-screen, conversations about Smiley's strength and worth as a new member emphasize the fact that in this story, violence is paramount. Violence frees gang members (like the colonized people in Fanon's sense) from that inferiority complex; it makes them fearless, and it restores their self-respect. In other words, the films depict violence as a cleansing force. Camera movements and close-ups provide different point-of-view shots that allow the viewer to feel that violence on-screen.

It is important to point out that these films about Central America are produced in Mexico and the United States, so there might be a commonsensical assumption in relation to this meaning—the supposed colonial condition of Central Americans—because it is uncommon to question the apparent naturalness of the condition of most Central Americans. Stuart Hall reminds us that common sense is one of the most dangerous forms of knowledge because it tends to be unconscious; it has the power to organize everyday conducts as well as practices from one group toward another. In short, commonsense forms of knowledge “enter deeply into, and profoundly disfigure, the culture of the societies in which they are operative over long periods” of time (Hall 2017, 68). In this case, the notions of victim and dangerous other have the power to organize the way Central Americans see themselves, as well as the ways they strike up conversations with other groups in the United States.¹⁶ The films, in line with what Alicia Ivonne Estrada argues in her analysis of Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (1983) and *La jaula de oro*, seem to privilege a Western sociopolitical thought or viewpoint (2016, 177).¹⁷ Thus, the films normalize an inhuman world to the viewer, and with it they also normalize the idea—through the use of two motives, garbage and invisibility—that Central Americans are disposable and have a devalued existence. This normalization seems to be of the utmost importance if we want to talk about Central American migration in cinema.¹⁸

Sin nombre's opening shot, for instance, shows the image of a forest in which the camera zooms into a path that guides our gaze to a future "full of promise." However, as the camera zooms out, we soon realize that we are actually looking through Willy's eyes at a picture on a wall. Willy is in a place that seems to be the gang's hideout, and he is located at the center of the frame. A glass of orange juice, Willy's yellow cross in his rosary, and dull yellow walls indicate decay and sickness. The old furniture and the table full of leftovers and garbage amplify the dominant mood of the film and stress a "trashy" existence. The film not only portrays a physical trashy existence but also shows it as an internalized subjective aspect. Later on in the film, there is a sequence in which Willy and Sayra are on a trailer truck—which is transporting junk cars—that will take them to the U.S.-Mexico border. Willy and Sayra hide inside the junk cars. After a melodramatic conversation in which Sayra tells Willy how safe she feels with him, Willy tells her not to trust him, that "todo lo que sé es que toda mi vida ha sido una mierda."¹⁹ Willy is depicted as someone who sees himself as worthless.

In the films, the motif of garbage highlights a perception of what it is to be a Central American migrant. Inadvertently though, the films seem to be fixing that meaning on Central Americans. For instance, the shot in which Willy and Sayra travel inside the junk cars ends at night when the trailer truck has been stopped by the Mexican police. The police are checking the cargo (the junk cars), and in a very imperceptible way, the driver—after being asked what he is carrying in the trailer—tells the police that he is not carrying anything but pure garbage. Does this not suggest that Central Americans are a sort of an invisible entity, beings who are not there?²⁰ Anthropologist Robin Nagle argues that garbage "is quite highly visible, and constant, and invisibilized. . . . Every single thing you see is future trash. Everything. So we are surrounded by ephemera, but we can't acknowledge that, because it's kind of scary . . . it points to our own temporariness" (quoted in Arias and Milian 2013, 141). In addition, Arias and Milian point out that trash is not merely useless, worthless, or discarded matter. It can also indicate "something" akin to a devalued, short-lived existence (141). Garbage not only fulfills this sense of a devalued existence but also reveals the inherent exclusion of migrants.

Hence, the combination of the migration film genre and Central Americanness seems to be a cinematic version of the coloniality of being.

The coloniality of being makes reference to the lived experiences of the colonized. It is the product of the combination between the coloniality of power—the interrelation among modern forms of exploitation and domination—and the coloniality of knowledge—colonization’s impact on the different areas of knowledge production (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 242).²¹ Nelson Maldonado-Torres points out that the coloniality of being indicates those aspects that create exceptions of what life is worth caring for and those that are dispensable. It determines whose populations deserve to live and those that are not going to make it into the future (257). “In this logic, Central Americans, as ‘unwholesome’ American ‘neighbors,’ can be defined as a preferential target of the violence spelled out by the coloniality of power” (Arias and Milian 2013, 142). The problem when we see these representations is that this devaluation is associated with Central Americanness and migration. But there is a difference when someone witnesses violence (rape, massacres, etc.)—or “originary terrors” as Arias called them—rather than a representation of it. The films suggest that Central Americans are a “disposable” population, and it is dangerous when a representation filters and fixes that meaning. As a consequence, Central Americans would be seen as those “human waste,” or more correctly, as Zygmunt Bauman suggests, “wasted humans”—“the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant,’ that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay” (2004, 5).²² The viewer might tend to naturalize the idea of a devalued existence, of a disposable population, as being the essence of Central Americanness (if such a thing exists).²³

That is why, I believe, the films’ narratives are centered on young migrants. These are coming-of-age stories in which many of the young characters do not survive. Their taken-for granted ideas come from colonial discourses that usually create harmful stereotypes when they represent non-Western subjects. According to Hall, “Stereotypes get hold of the few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and fix them without change or development to eternity” (1997b, 247–48). In *La jaula de oro*, for example, there is no clear indication that Chauk is Guatemalan. In the film he is deported back to Guatemala with the other characters. Oscar Moralde describes him as the outsider figure and puts him as a

“youth who joins the migrant group” (2014, 238). Richard Curry, in his essay, simply describes him as “a Mayan adolescent who does not speak Spanish” (2018, 57). When we talk about Central American migration and film, the producers of the films seem to forget cultural specificities. This may be a symptom of how even Mexicans see Mayans from southern Mexico as “not Mexican enough,” ethnically and historically closer to Central America. In addition, these Indigenous people may not “culturally” belong to the Mexican nation, even if politically they do. Estrada points out that the incorporation of the Maya language in the film is a way of characterizing the plight of Indigenous immigrants, a sign of the isolation experienced by non-Spanish speakers (in this case Chauk, the Maya Tzotzil protagonist). However, Estrada alludes to the homogenization of the Maya identity that reproduces colonial legacies and erases Indigenous cultural and socioeconomic diversities (2016, 179). This tension between mobilizing awareness around immigrant struggles and the formulaic representation of Indigenous peoples is evident in the ways Chauk is weighted down to a one-dimensional meaning, because according to Estrada, it is ascribed to his racial otherness (179–80). Therefore, and paraphrasing Estrada’s words, Chauk is simple, humble, ethical, and innately connected to the natural environment because of the taken-for-granted ideas of Indigenous cultures by a colonial discourse.

In addition, in this effort to make visible the situation of Central Americans in Mexico, the films portray the characters in a constant struggle for invisibility. Olivia Consentino (2019), in her reading of *Sabina Rivas* and *La jaula de oro*, shows how a spectral aspect in the narrative of these two films allows them to nuance the seen and unseen processes of violence that Central American female migrant bodies experience and the reactionary performances those bodies enact to counter that violence. Consentino argues that the films juxtapose the visible with the invisible, presence with absence (42). For example, after the opening shot in *La jaula de oro*, Sara cuts her hair and dresses as a man to hide her femininity and become invisible to kidnappers. Sabina Rivas carries a Mexican passport to go unnoticed. On the other hand, *Sin nombre* uses the yellow color to create an aesthetic pattern in which both the main character, Willy, and the garbage around him are yellow, which actually makes Willy become part of the environment. However, when Willy leaves the gang, he starts wearing red, making him the target of violence and of the viewer’s gaze.

In other words, the characters are highly visible when discovered. The motif of invisibility is possible in these films because they are founded on a strategy of reversal and inversion that turns “the ‘Manichean aesthetic’ of colonial discourse up-side-down” (Hall 1996, 445). They put the figures of the young, innocent, and victimized protagonist, as well as the essentially good migrant, as positive images. On the other hand, the viewer sees the evil and corrupt migration police officers, the murderous gang members, and the rapist imperial figure as negative ones. Thus, when the positive images lose their veil of invisibility, the negative ones stand out.

Sabina Rivas is the film that gets the most out of these subject depictions. The film puts Sabina as a naïve young woman who suffers the violence and abuse of the men around her. When she tries to cross the Guatemala-Mexico border, she is detained and forced to get off the bus alongside many Central American migrants. They are all put in front of the bus at night. The film uses the diegetic bus lights to emphasize the way they are going to be questioned for how they look and who they seem to be. The corrupt Mexican officer Burrón (Joaquín Cosío) walks in front of them. In a close-up, we see Juan Méndez (Tenoch Huerta) praying. Burrón questions Juan; he asks him where he is from and who the Mexican president is. Juan cannot give a straight answer. Burrón simply laughs at him for thinking he can fool him. Juan is depicted as a naïve and essentially good migrant.²⁴ Juan later finds the evil gang member who assaulted many of the migrants locked up with him. The gang member shows his tattoos to make it clear for the viewer that he is one of the bad guys in the film. He assaults as many migrants as he can.

Later, the camera pans slowly toward the migration offices after Sabina and all the other Central Americans are detained. Then, the left side of the frame shows Sarabia (Mario Zaragoza) and U.S. agent Patrick (Nick Chinlund), who the viewer suspects is the worst for his lewd gaze on Sabina. On the right side, we see Sabina taking her fake Mexican passport out of her purse. The film shows how fragile a woman is in that space. Sarabia knows Sabina is not Mexican, and he laughs at her. He asks where she is from. Burrón and Sarabia dehumanize Sabina by smelling her. The film reproduces the motif of garbage, indicating, as explained above, her devalued existence. “*Esta es catracha*,” they say.²⁵ It seems to be that the film is eager to express this devalued Central Americanness. What the viewer gets, however, is that Sabina and the other Central Americans’

very humanity is invisible. The scene ends when Patrick rapes Sabina. As if saying that the imperial figure literally rapes the colonized. So, instead of looking for a better understanding of Central American women's experiences, *Sabina Rivas* creates a harmful reversal of stereotypes that emphasizes, in the same frame, that in this space there are only two types of people: good and evil ones, and that there is a struggle between good and evil. In so doing, it fixes the notion of the essentially innocent Central American migrant and the evil and corrupt authorities.

However, this representational politics of reversal and inversion not only reproduces the idea that Central Americans are mere victims of a terrible destiny but also reproduces and reflects a Western gaze that includes Central Americans as dangerous others. At some point in *La jaula de oro*, Juan and Chauk are on La Bestia and meet another young Guatemalan. This young Guatemalan misleads them to believe he knows a cheap smuggler who will help them cross the border in exchange for working as loaders. Juan and Chauk soon realize that they have been kidnapped. The film introduces El Vitamina (Ricardo Esquerra), someone who happens to come from the same exact place in which Juan was born: La Zona 3 in Guatemala City.²⁶ The viewer sees the two sides of the same coin: Juan the young and innocent migrant who leaves a wretched place to fulfill his "American Dream" and the violent older kidnapper who took the "wrong" path.²⁷ Chauk, on the other end, who until this moment was depicted as a Maya character with innate wisdom and honest feelings and is gentle and brave (Estrada 2016, 181), is now a passive figure, unable to defend himself from the mestizo characters. Estrada mentions that Chauk is constructed in the film as an "Other that is unceasingly victimized not just by the *ladino* sociopolitical structures that produce his subalternity, but also by his inability to speak, or act, on his behalf" (184).²⁸ These seem to be the preferred ways to represent Central American migration. By pointing out "invisibility and dehumanization," these films and their representations of Central Americans fix what that experience means.²⁹ They say that Central Americans live in hell. The viewer needs to have empathy for them, because there is nothing better to tell about them. The migration genre reveals, at least through these films, that it is necessary to show that precarious and violent world. There seems to be no other way of representing it, and Central American migrants do not have any say in the matter.

There is an irony here, however. If we pay careful attention, we as viewers can notice that Central American migrants—real migrants in the background of these films—are actually the real invisible entities. For Central Americans, Arias argues, “their invisible status, their non-recognition, generates a sense of nonbelonging, of nonbeing, a cruel invisibility that was first imposed on them in their countries of origin and has been carried over [north]” (2007, 186). Thus, to a certain extent, *Sin nombre*, *Sabina Rivas*, and *La jaula de oro* inevitably mirror a larger social process. There is a contradiction between their overt politics and their politics of production. These films expose what they consider is the reality of Central American migrants and their odyssey, while ironically casting real Central American migrants as extras in the films.³⁰ The real Central American migrants (the extras) do not occupy much space in the shots. They are often seen in distant long shots—especially in every scene that includes La Bestia—and more importantly, they are decorative props.

Except for some notable exceptions in *Sin nombre* and *La jaula de oro*, the actors portraying Central American characters in these migration films do not come from Central America. In fact, these films mostly cast Mexican actors, and the two Honduran protagonists in *Sabina Rivas* are of Venezuelan origin. This is not something necessarily bad, it just reflects the practices of dominant cinema, which “turn Third World peoples into substitutable others, interchangeable units who can ‘stand in’ for one another” (Shohat and Stam 2016, 846).³¹ In this case, it turns Mexican and Venezuelan actors into Central American characters. Fukunaga and Quemada-Díez were careful enough to cast Central Americans for some protagonist roles. However, it is interesting that in *Sin nombre*, the Honduran actor (Edgar Flores) comes from a dangerous gang neighborhood in Tegucigalpa, and in *La jaula de oro*, the young innocent migrant (Brandon López) actually comes from the also perilous Zona 3 in Guatemala City. It is interesting because the films try to reduce the gap between their representations and “reality,” assuming that these actors—since they are nonprofessional actors who have lived and struggled with poverty and possibly violence—will provide a more accurate representation of the event.³² This should not represent a problem per se.³³ The problem is in their claim to reality, or their “realistic representations.” We should be careful not to confuse reality with representation and, more importantly, what these representations are conveying about Central Americans.

WHAT IS AT STAKE? REALITY AND REPRESENTATION

Sin nombre, *Sabina Rivas*, and *La jaula de oro* are frequently associated with reality. They are said to be accurate in their representations. That is why Edward McNulty (2016) says that, in the case of *Sin nombre*, “Mr. Fukunaga’s film can inject truth and compassion into the on-going debate” (about migration). *Sin nombre*, in fact, is the product of an intensive ethnographic research based on Cary Fukunaga’s fieldwork on gangs and Central American migrants.³⁴ Fukunaga even experienced the trip on top of La Bestia by himself, spending time with real migrants, many of whom became extras in the film.³⁵ For this reason, for Alvaro Campuzano (2009, 12), it is difficult to distinguish in *Sin nombre* the difference between documentary and fiction. This is also the case for *Sabina Rivas* and *La jaula de oro*.

Luis Mandoki, for example, points out that *Sabina Rivas* has several similarities with reality, and Greysi Mena, the film’s protagonist, mentions that she had the opportunity to interview several Honduran migrants with horrific stories (El Universal News Agency 2011).³⁶ *La jaula de oro* in its case seems to follow the social realist tradition and owes much of its style to British filmmaker Ken Loach, for whom Quemada-Díez worked as a camera assistant (Holden 2015).³⁷ Tal Rosenberg (2013), in his review of *La Jaula de oro*, points out that the director—through the film’s scarce use of dialogue and avoidance of overt editorializing and its casting selection—“creates a haunting and effective vision of illegal immigration in all its gruesomeness.” Rosenberg seems to point out a sort of reality effect in the film. In fact, Quemada-Díez spent years doing field work to complete the film.³⁸ Barahona (2018, 126) argues that the film opportunely and substantially represents the displacement of Central American minors who cross the Mexico-U.S. border, and the film lays the foundations for the representation and construction of the memory of contemporary Central American migration. In addition, Oscar Moralde (2014, 238) points out that *La jaula de oro* exemplifies contemporary “global cinema” because it is steeped in a quasi-documentary, long-take realism, and it makes a claim for the tenor of real experience with its subdued aesthetics and first-time nonprofessional actors. It seems that the aesthetics of New Latin American Film and cinema of hunger are an

influence here, through this use of documentary style and nonprofessional actors. We can certainly say then that this lends to the goal or sense of representing “reality.” Thus, it is possible to say that these films seem to rest on what Bill Nichols (2017) points out are the commonsense assumptions used to define the documentary film: documentaries are about reality, about something that actually happened. They should be about real people, or more precisely about real people who perform themselves, like the hundreds of migrants who serve as extras, especially in *Sin nombre* and *La jaula de oro*. Lastly, they tell stories. They depend on the power of storytelling. Nonetheless, even if documentaries are about real life, they are not real life. Thus, fiction films are even further from it. Nichols points out that the division of documentary from fiction, like the division of historiography from fiction, rests on the degree to which the story fundamentally corresponds to actual situations, events, and people versus the degree to which it is primarily a product of the filmmaker’s invention (2017, 264–316). Consequently, these films are offering an invented version of how they see Central American migration.

The way these films use realism is as an aesthetic style to create an illusion of reality. Shohat and Stam mention that in fiction films, reality “is not self-evidently given, and ‘truth’ is not immediately ‘seizeable’ by the camera” (2016, 842). They point out that we must be ready to distinguish realism as a goal and realism as a style (842). Realism as a goal is quite compatible with a style that is reflexive and deconstructive while at the same time underlining its own processes of construction as a filmic text (842). *Sin nombre*, *Sabina Rivas*, and *La jaula de oro* lack this self-reflexive component—their own process of construction as a filmic texts. The issue is that we find a construction of reality here that brings some meaning—Central Americans being depicted as victims and as dangerous at the same time—that we hold on to in our collective imagination.

Why is this important? The fact that films are only representations does not prevent them from having real effects in the world (Shohat and Stam 2016, 841). *Sin nombre*, *Sabina Rivas*, and *La jaula de oro*—and for that matter any other film on Central American migration—even if they are only representations, will still make factual claims for the viewer. In addition, even if we recognize that representations are inevitable and inescapable, it does not mean, as Stuart Hall has put it, that “nothing is at stake” (quoted in Shohat and Stam [2016, 841]). Following Yajaira Padilla

(2013), we could argue that the films point to the growing visibility of Central Americans in the United States. Padilla states that these kinds of cultural productions are suggestive of the ways in which migration and transnationalism have affected notions of a collective Central American identity and immigrant integration in the United States (151).³⁹ She also states that similar cultural productions signal the existence of a “Central American transnational imaginary,” one marked by memories of war, settlement in the United States, and crossings through Mexico, and in which individual and communal identities are being continuously defined and renegotiated” (151).⁴⁰ For that reason, the films could be placed within debates about Central American representation, rather than having the general “Latino label” on them, because they portray “key experiences . . . that characterize the Central American transnational imaginary” (Arias and Milian 2013, 143). However, as mentioned above, the loci of enunciation in these films, for Central Americans, comes from an outside perspective (wherever that perspective is).⁴¹

Meanings matter because, as Hall suggests, they can mobilize powerful feelings and emotions, both negative and positive. They are contradictory and ambivalent, and they sometimes call our very identities into question.⁴² Hence, the point here is that much of what the Central American migration means in visual representation (especially in fiction films) is only focusing on what appears to be the tip of the iceberg: violence, victimization, misery, etc. Padilla would say that these cultural works contribute to the formation and continuous redefinition of an emergent Central American transnational imaginary. In so doing, she says, they provide insight into the identities and multiple subject positions taking shape among Central American immigrants in the United States (2013, 150). Thus, I ask, Do these kinds of cultural productions provide insight into the identities and multiple subject positions of Central Americans in the United States? Do they, as Padilla suggests, “act as conduits of stories images and emotions that allow Central Americans in different geographic settings to conceive of themselves as part of a greater collectivity or community” (163)? In a sense, yes. Still, not all Central Americans migrate through Mexico, and not all their experiences are the same. In addition to memories of war and the crossing of the borders, what other elements could help us redefine the “Central American transnational imaginary”? What about kinship relations and religion, for

example? What about national, political, and cultural differences among Central Americans once they are in the United States? What about race and ethnicity? There is a complexity in that experience that it is difficult to grasp, but it is even more difficult when in cultural productions everything is reduced to one or two elements—violence and victimization, for example.

Representations work in complex ways, and they are connected with the way power operates in any society.⁴³ For that reason also, as Hall points out, representations are always contested, and they are always a field of struggle. There is no true final meaning of a representation, it is always a matter of interpretation between competing and contested meanings and interpretations. Hall suggests that the best way to “settle” such contested readings is to look again at the concrete example and to try to justify one’s “reading” in detail in relation to the actual practices and forms of signification used. One needs to ask what meanings they seem to be producing (1997a, xxv). Therefore, the issue with the representation of Central American migration today should be less about fidelity to a preexisting truth or reality and more about a specific orchestration of ideological discourses and communitarian perspectives.⁴⁴ Since the nineteenth century, for example, as Maritza Cárdenas demonstrates, Central America and its population have been seen as “incapable of achieving and reveling in the progress of modernity”—especially in the political rhetoric and the construction and use of the derogatory term “banana republic” in the U.S. imagination (2018, 25). Cárdenas mentions that these ideas are effects of a long-standing Western imperial gaze that “tropicalizes” a particular Latin American “space, geography, group or nation, with a set of traits, images and values” (25).⁴⁵ The notions of “victim” and “dangerous other” imposed on the signifiers of Central America follows this pattern of “tropicalization.” But this colonial discourse not only contributes to this tropicalization but also works on a deep ambivalence.

Hall provides us with a great example of such ambivalence in colonial discourse when he discusses the way racism works. He argues that racism operates by constructing impassable symbolic boundaries between racially constituted categories, and its typically binary system of representation constantly marks and attempts to fix and naturalize the difference between belongingness and otherness. Hall mentions that this comes in line with what Gayatri Spivak calls the “epistemic violence” of

the discourses of the Other. This epistemic violence is both outside and inside, and it operates, as Hall mentions, by a process of splitting both sides of the division—"in here as well as out here" (1996, 445). Hall is using Fanon's well-known argument that racism is not only a question of "black skin" but of "Black Skin, White Mask" (445). In other words, the internalization of the self as other (445). So, Hall argues, "just as masculinity always constructs femininity as double—simultaneously Madonna and Whore—so racism constructs the black subject as noble savage and violent avenger. And in the doubling, fear and desire double for one another and play across the structures of otherness, complicating its politics" (445). Thus, the doubling for Central American migrants does not come from the ambivalence between fear and desire as in racism, but by the ambivalence between guilt and fear. This colonial discourse depicts Central American migrants as victims because there is guilt for what the United States has done in the region—the multiple interventions, the political and military support of dictatorships, its economic and cultural dominance, to name but a few. On the other hand, it depicts them as dangerous others precisely because there is a fear of what Central Americans can do against the United States for the same reasons. As in racism, Central American migrants can be sensed as violent avengers.

The discourse on Central American migration, therefore, is not a form of truth in any case, but rather a "regime of truth." Michel Foucault (1977) points out that truth is not outside of power or deprived of it. Truth, he says, is produced by virtue of multiple constraints, and it induces the regular effects of power. Hence,

each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanism and instances which enable to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (13)

Thus, historically in the relation of power between the United States and Central America, the forms of domination that the United States has applied in the region have been related more to the control of the discourses about Central America than to a domination by pure force.⁴⁶

In conclusion, Central American migration is becoming a political, historical, and social discourse in which its signifiers reference not reality in itself (migration, the event) but the systems of meaning that have come to be fixed about Central American migration. Thus, I believe, there is a discursive formation that defines what is and is not appropriate in our formulations of, and in our practices regarding, Central American migration—and, in addition, what knowledge is considered “true” in these contexts, and the subjects that embody its characteristics. In this sense, Central American migrants in their journey through Mexico came to be defined as victims or as dangerous because there is a regime of truth that has established what is true about Central Americans. These visual representations seem to be in a vicious circle in which they only have value if they are associated with images of inhumanity, desperation, violence, and ultimately death. The next time we—all of those who are immersed in the study of Central America and its diaspora—see a film about Central American migration, we should look at the discourse operating in it in relation to the meanings it seems to be producing.

A story will not necessarily be better because it is made by Central Americans. It might be better if instead of telling us things we already know, it helps its recipients envision different paths to redirect the conversations about its subjects. That is to say, it needs to pay careful attention to what people really care about, and how they care for it, to tell us not only what Central Americans lose in their journey through Mexico, but also what they gain in it, and finally, to reassure us that there is hope for Central Americans.

NOTES

1. It is not my intention to negate the difficult situation of Central American migrants in their journey through Mexico. My purpose here is to question how the films understand that situation, and based on that, what they consider is important to talk about it.
2. See *Stuart Hall: Representation and the Media* edited, directed, and produced by Sut Jhally (1997). This is a talk that Hall gave at the University of Westminster in London.
3. See Jhally (1997).
4. Hall calls this the constructionist approach to representation.

5. Hall points out that what sustains this “dialogue” is the presence of shared cultural codes, which cannot guarantee that meanings will remain stable forever.
6. One of the limitations of my analysis could be the fact that these are completely different films with different approaches to Central American migration. For example, the work of Quemada-Díez seems to follow the social-realism tradition in film (see Barahona 2018), and it is incommensurable with the “(post)-Western” style of *Sin nombre* (see González [2015]) or the rawness of *Sabina Rivas*.
7. “The wretched of the earth” was originally coined by Franz Fanon (2004). The phrase depicts all those individuals who were enslaved and colonized in the Americas, Africa, and Asia by the European colonizers when colonization existed as an administrative system of domination. Fanon was politically and intellectually involved in the liberation wars against European rule in Africa—especially French rule in Algeria. Thus, the phrase was created to explain the situation of millions of people under specific contexts: European colonialism.
8. The film is an adaptation of Rafael Ramírez Heredia’s novel *La Mara* (2004).
9. Rodolfo Domínguez is of Tzotzil origin and did not know Spanish at the time of the filming. The Tzotzil are Maya people of the central Chiapas highlands in southern Mexico. See Payán and Salinas (2013).
10. Central America has been one of regions with the highest rates of murder per one hundred thousand inhabitants in the first two decades of the twenty-first century (see, for example, UNODC 2011). In addition, the region suffers from violence inflicted by the state and transnational companies and criminal organizations, drug trafficking, and gangs’ territory disputes, among so many other problems. In fact, according to a *Christian Science Monitor* article, “Central America [Might Be Considered the] ‘Deadliest’ Non-war Zone in the World” (Mulrine 2011).
11. Martínez mentions that the Guatemalan government estimates that eight out of ten female Central American migrants will face some type of sexual abuse on their journey through Mexico, but the Mexican government estimates the number to be six out of ten (2010, 80–99). Amnesty International also states that “as many as six in ten women and girl migrants experience sexual violence during the journey” (2010, 5).
12. These two phrases refer to the way rape “is a daily occurrence” and “migration is a world of everyone for themselves,” or “kill or be killed.”
13. At the time of writing this chapter (June 2021), I believe we owe this visibility even more to the media and their coverage of the migratory crises at the Mexico-U.S. border in 2014–15, with the surge in unaccompanied children during the Obama administration and the recent “caravans” that exploded in 2018. Mainstream media often puts migrants as the objects of its representation practices and never as the subjects. Migrants are seen as passive beings harmed by the actions of others or, contradictorily, as criminals who are massively invading the country. With few exceptions, this massive coverage—in the

- United States—serves mostly to criticize the U.S. administration (especially the Trump administration) rather than to understand why Central Americans leave their countries in the first place and how they strive in their new settlements. See for example, Correal (2018), Dickerson, Kanno-Youngs, and Correal (2020), La Jeunesse (2018), and Tomlinson (2018).
14. For a different perspective of this opening scene, see Byron Barahona's (2018) article. Barahona points out that this scene reveals two different aspects of the social reality in the region. First, the cause of migration is extreme poverty and lack of social programs to help the poor, and second, Central America is vulnerable and subjected to violence. In other words, violence and poverty are the cause of this forced migration (116).
 15. Larsen (1995) argues that Central America came to substitute Vietnam in the conceptual map of most North Americans, and the region in the 1980s occupied an analogous, if not homologous, place in the "political unconscious" of North American imperialism. Larsen explores the work of North American authors and directors—Roger Spottiswoode's film *Under Fire* (1983), Joan Didion's travelogue *Salvador* (1983), Oliver Stone's film *Salvador* (1986), and Denis Johnson's novel *The Stars at Noon* (1986)—that took Central America as their putative subject (40–41).
 16. A representation is also an utterance, an act of contextualized interlocation between socially situated producers and receivers (Shohat and Stam 2016, 842). I believe these depictions of Central Americans were constructed for a non-Central American audience. Based on the IMDb database of each film, they circulated mostly in universities and international film festival circuits in the Global North. *La jaula de oro* seems to be an exception. It was released in Guatemala and Costa Rica in 2014 (see Mejía [2014]; Palacios [2014]; Sánchez [2014], and "*La jaula de oro* se estrena en Guatemala; nominación nacional"). *Sin nombre* was presented in August 2009 in Panama (see IMDb, n.d., "Sin Nombre Release Info"). Apparently, *Sabina Rivas* was never released in Central America.
 17. Estrada also emphasizes the fact that *El Norte* and *La jaula de oro* maintain a mestizo (and ladino) *indigenista* lens over the Maya figures in the films. Estrada points out that ladino writers and artists—at the height of the *indigenista* tradition, between 1910 and 1930—attempted to address the "Indian problem" in their work by portraying Indigenous communities in sympathetic but often paternalistic and exotic representations (2016, 191). In other words, an internalized colonial lens operates in these films.
 18. It is out of the scope of this chapter, but it will be important to explore how Central America-made fiction films—for example, Ishtar Yasin Gutiérrez's *El camino* (2008)—treat migration.
 19. "Everything I know is that my whole life has been crap." It seems that Central Americans appear to recognize their otherness as trash or "gazing at themselves and seeing trash in it" (Arias and Milian 2013, 141).

20. In fact, Willy's nickname in *Sin nombre* makes reference to the popular animated character Casper, the friendly ghost, suggesting his phantasmagoric existence and, perhaps, the influence of U.S. pop culture in Latin America.
21. Aníbal Quijano (2007) defines the colonial matrix of power (aka coloniality) as an organizing principle involving exploitation and domination exercised in multiple dimensions of social life, from economic, sexual, or gender relations to political organizations, structures of knowledge, state institutions, and households. Taking a step further from Quijano, Ramon Grosfoguel conceptualizes the coloniality of power as "an entanglement or . . . intersectionality of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies . . . of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation where the racial/ethnic hierarchy of the European/non-European divide transversally reconfigures all of the other global power structures" (2007, 217). See also Mignolo and Tlostanova (2008).
22. Bauman (2004, 5) points out that the production of "wasted humans" is an inevitable outcome of modernization and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity. It is also an inescapable side effect of order building (each order casts some parts of the extant population as "out of place," "unfit," or "undesirable") and of economic progress (that cannot proceed without degrading and devaluing the previously effective modes of "making a living" and therefore cannot but deprive their practitioners of their livelihood).
23. I will go back to this idea in the last part of the chapter.
24. This shot is reminiscent of Gregory Navas's *El Norte* (1983), in which its main characters (who are Guatemalans fleeing the war) try to remain culturally invisible by their use of the Mexican slang *chingado* (the word derives from the verb "chingar," which is usually translated as "fuck." Therefore, *chingado* could be translated in this case as an annoying or irritating person, or a "motherfucker").
25. "This one is catracha." Catracho(a) is an adjective of place that refers to the inhabitants of Honduras.
26. Quemada-Díez spent months doing the casting of the film in Guatemala. See *Enfilme* (2014) and *Escuela Nacional de Cine* (2014).
27. There is no indication whatsoever of how our political, economic, and social systems prey on young Central Americans.
28. Estrada (2016, 185) concludes that the film implies that it is also Chauk's failure to cross westernized cultural and social borders, which impedes him from ultimately reaching the United States.
29. In fact, as Maldonado Torres points out, "invisibility and dehumanization are the primary expressions of the coloniality of being" (2007, 257).
30. In their credit scenes, the films recognize the use of real immigrants as extras.
31. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (2016) argue that casting should be seen in contingent terms, in relation to the role, to the political and aesthetic intention, and to the historical moment.

32. This is not to say that if they had casted Central Americans for most of the protagonist roles it would have been better. Nonetheless, the narrative could have been affected by the perspective of those who embody the Central American signifier. It would have been possible for a director, perhaps, to question taken-for-granted ideas about the event or about Central Americans. Although, Quemada-Díez mentions the influence that the nonprofessional actors had on the script of *La jaula de oro*. See Enfilme (2014) and Escuela Nacional de Cine (2014).
33. These independent films do not have the large budgets we see in Hollywood productions, for example. So, it is understandable to cast nonprofessional actors for financial reasons.
34. Fukunaga explains the creative process of the film in the audio commentary he gives with producer Amy Kaufman in the DVD version of the film. See also “Cary Fukunaga Talks *Sin nombre*” (On Demand Entertainment 2009) and “*Sin nombre*—Exclusive: Cary Fukunaga” (Movieweb 2010).
35. In several interviews Fukunaga has mentioned how he has been congratulated for his fair portray of gang members and migrants. See “Cary Fukunaga Talks *Sin nombre*” (On Demand Entertainment 2009).
36. See “Dan Claquetazo de *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas*” (El Universal News Agency 2011).
37. For a more in-depth analysis of the social realism tradition in the film, see Barahona (2018).
38. See FicciFestival (2014), Enfilme (2014), Escuela Nacional de Cine (2014), and Payán and Salinas (2013).
39. Padilla analyzes *Sin nombre*, Silvio Sirias’s *Bernardo and the Virgin*, and Evelyn Cortez-Davis’s *December Sky: Beyond My Undocumented Life*. The latter two are literary productions and they focus on migration experiences when the civil wars affected Central American countries, such as El Salvador and Nicaragua. In addition, as Padilla states, “In all of these texts women play a central role, these works also call attention to the gendered dimensions and implications of such processes” (2013, 150). It is also important to notice that Guatemala was also affected by a civil war, and most of the Maya population in the country suffered extreme violence and massive displacements.
40. This transnational imaginary, for Padilla, “constitutes an ‘imaginary social space consisting in transnational communities of shared fates’ in which the politics of identity and questions of subjectivity are at play in diverse ways and at various levels” (2013, 153).
41. These signals are what Arias (2007) has called “the double marginalization of Central America.” It has been marginalized historically by the metropolis (United States) and also by other subaltern metropolitan centers, like Mexico.
42. Meanings also define what is “normal,” who belongs, and, therefore, who is excluded (Hall 1997a, xxv).

43. Hall understands that communication is always linked with power, that those groups who exercise power in a society influence what is represented through the media.
44. "Discourses are ways of referring to or practices or constructing knowledge about a particular topic or practice: a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society" (Hall 1997a, xxii).
45. Cárdenas takes this idea of "tropicalization" from Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman (1997).
46. There have been exceptions of course. The U.S. invasion of Nicaragua in the early twentieth century and the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989 are clear examples of the use of military force by the United States. Arturo Arias points out that the United States has not just dominated Central America but has "invaded [it], aiding in the slaughter of their best and brightest" (2007, xii). However, we should at least acknowledge that the slaughter of the best and brightest of Central America was done mostly by Central Americans themselves. For example, the 1932 massacre of Salvadoran peasants in the western part of the country and the genocide of the Maya population in Guatemala during its civil war.

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PART III

LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS

10

SITIOS EQUIVOCADOS

El verbo J's Queer Child

ALICIA V. NÚÑEZ

AT FIRST glance, *El verbo j* (The verb *j*) gives no indication that it will follow the turbulent yet odds-defying life of a queer Salvadoran migrant. In English, the title causes confusion and has no obvious meaning attached to it. How can the letter *j* be a verb? For Spanish speakers, the letter *j* is pronounced “ho-ta,” which phonetically sounds like the pejorative word “joto/jota,” the male and female demarcations of “faggot.” So far, this much is apparent to many Spanish speakers, especially those from Mexico and Central America. Yet, it was Claudia Hernández’s use of the word *verbo* that was striking to me because of the sensation of movement that activates the *j*. The *j* is now an action verb and not solely a noun, as would be the case with “joto/a.” Just in the title, Hernández already defies static representations of identity that would typically understand sexuality as immobile and defined.

I am not alone in paying attention to the novel’s title and use of “j(ota).” Emmanuela Jossa explains that “perhaps the title of the novel, *The Verb J*, when referring to an uncertain verb that begins with a *j*, refers precisely to this conjugation of the facts, to this weaving of Jasmine’s story through a network of voices, of verbs. The punctuated letter (the initial of the only name that appears in the text) suggests a verb that the different narrators, and then the readers, can choose according to their interpretation of the

story: to fuck, to play, to join, to pull" (2019, 874).¹ While Jossa rightly notes how the title of *El verbo j* uses "to fuck, to play, to join, to pull" ("joder, jugar, juntar, jalar" in the original citation in Spanish) to weave together the protagonist's history/herstory/hxstory, I see one distinct element missing in this intersection of migration, Central American identity, and sexuality.² At the center of *El verbo j*, I claim, is the queer child.

In this chapter, I start with Hernández's literary play with "j(ota)" to recognize that the novel portrays a fluid queer identity intensified by the child migrant's unrootedness and dis-orientation, what I call here *desubicaciones*.³ The root word of *desubicaciones*, "desubicar," is to "situar a alguien o algo fuera de lugar; perder la orientación y no saber dónde se encuentra o qué dirección tomar" (RAE, n.d., "desubicar").⁴ A *desubicado* is also said of someone who acts inappropriately, "out of line." In this chapter, I name the representation of the child's spatiotemporal and sexual ambiguities as "desubicaciones" because they disrupt and exceed how a child is expected to move in this world and how they maneuver their survival. The *desubicaciones* I bring forth emerged from what other Central Americanists have discussed about Hernández's use of nonlinear plots and hazy geo-temporal markers in her short stories.⁵ Particularly, Misha Kokotovic's apt use of the word *obliquely* in reference to Hernández's aesthetic stance that does not directly portray the war but that does touch on the effects and affects of violence motivates my use of *desubicaciones*: "Hernández's stories stand out from much postwar Central American fiction because they do not refer to the war and its consequences overtly, in more or less realist fashion, but rather allude to the conflict's enduring effects in the troubled and paradoxically violent peace of the 1990s *obliquely*, by subtly calling attention to their own silence on the subject" (2014, 54; emphasis mine). Hernández's novels differ radically from her short stories when considering the clearer geographical and historical ties to El Salvador.⁶ Nevertheless, I was prompted to imagine a more slanted geometrical image when Kokotovic used the word *oblique* to signal the evasive in Hernández's short stories.

The childhoods portrayed in *El verbo j* are oblique. Like the effects of the war on the Salvadoran consciousness, the child *desubicado* is not on a "right angle," nor parallel to a specified or implied line. The child portrayed in Hernández's novel thus has no clear line of movement within discourses of migration, gender, or sexuality. And so, my

aim in this chapter is to wander, *de forma desubicada*, with a child who is both a migrant and queer and who so aptly moves within and beyond (b)ordered conceptions of Western childhood. I use *desubicaciones* to walk us through a series of intersections that quickly unravel theoretically and that purposefully fail to encapsulate a subjectivity that defies categorization: the queer migrant child. I follow Maritza Cárdenas's (2018) destabilizing efforts of "de-recognition" in her landmark book *Constituting Central American-Americans: Transnational Identities and the Politics of Dislocation*, which "marks those moments that simultaneously participate in and are critical of the ideological matrices that normalize and proscribe subjects. As a radically unstable sign, Central American-American encourages de-recognition within the particular discourses that constitutes its own subjectivity" (13). *El verbo j* provides a rare literary depiction of a "radically unstable" subject that is rarely discussed in immigration policy and in news reporting: that of the queer migrant child and their multiple spatial, temporal, national, and sexual *desubicaciones*.

A BIRTH SCENE

Claudia Hernández's short stories, primarily from her book *Mediodía de frontera* (2002), have received considerable attention by Central Americanist scholars. Her noted use of the absurd and the surreal helps distance her work from the testimonial narratives produced during the civil war. Hernández's humorist and at times ironic tone has been justifiably read through a lens of what Beatriz Cortez (2010, 8) demarcates as *estética del cinismo* (aesthetics of cynicism), which carries a potency and aesthetic power because the artistic work is decentered from a purely political and ideological stance. In Hernández's work, violence—on the state and individual level—inescapably permeates marginalized bodies: that of the older adult, the migrant, the mother, the disabled, the nonproductive, and the child.⁷ Hernández's aesthetic sensibility observes, from a distance, what happens to those ignored in a globalized and neoliberal world.⁸

Kokotovic reads the short stories in Hernández's *Mediodía de frontera* (2002) as giving "little indication of where and when they take place. They

make no mention of El Salvador or even Central America, nor do they refer to historical events, such as the civil wars that afflicted the region in the 1970s and 1980s or the peace accords that ended them" (2014, 53). *El verbo j* is also not a novel entirely about the Salvadoran Civil War, nor one that lingers on this trauma. But *El verbo j* does provide, even if minimally, direct images of the armed struggle that serves as one of the few geo-temporal anchors of the novel. The reader is situated in the outskirts of an unknown city in El Salvador. It is presumably the late 1970s to early 1980s, and the war is gaining momentum. Chapter 1, "Yo," references well-known images of the civil war, like that of the more affluent army physically capturing young boys in public: "The soldiers had recruited me earlier that week. I was barely thirteen years old . . . they put me in a small and dirty prison where I cried and cried . . . they told me, shut up, asshole" (15). The nation is in turmoil and the region's generalized violence is felt in everyday life. Jeffrey Browitt explains that the effect the armed struggles had on Central American literature "runs parallel with the constitution of new subjectivities and new sensibilities as fiction moves from the rural to the city, from the public to the intimate, from taken-for-granted, stable selfhood to more nomadic and fluid subjectivities, from the national to the post-national, and from utopian longings to abjections" (2018, 2).

Yet, *El verbo j* does not begin in a state of abjection but instead with a birth. We are introduced to the unnamed child protagonist in the gender-neutral "I": "I am okay. I know that I will be" (7).⁹ This self-proclamation of well-being in the first two sentences of the novel converges the present and the future, a recurring temporal strategy of desubicación used by the author. This mixture of the past, present, and future makes it difficult to determine at what stage in life the child is in. Philosophical questions surrounding the figuration of the child have pushed scholars to question when childhood begins and ends.¹⁰ When is a child not a child? Childhood is a social construction affected by a complicated array of issues "shaped by both the local and the global" (Wells 2009, 14).¹¹ In her book *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009), Katherine Stockton provocatively asks cultural studies scholars to rethink how literature has portrayed children beyond just vertical notions of "growing up" that depend on exacting temporal markers of beginnings and endings.¹² Instead, Stockton contemplates how childhood

as a phenomenon can expand horizontally, growing sideways and thus affecting people well beyond the end of childhood (4). I read the pairing of “I am okay. I know that I will be” (7) followed by the protagonist’s birth scene as the first example of desubicación. These two examples push the child protagonist outside teleological development to keep the reader focused on affect and the child’s state of being. This chronological disorientation starts to untether the reader from constricting models of identity that come with notions of childhood, gender, and migration. This first temporal desubicación leads to the following question: What are the critical possibilities of untethering the queer child migrant from mere origin and destination? Consider the following passage in the first paragraph of the novel: “She still couldn’t get over the surprise of the announcement that she had given birth to a boy instead of the girl she had bet she would have when she heard her say This child is going to have to be treated differently from the rest. *Is there something wrong? They are in the wrong place*, she replied” (7; emphasis mine).¹³ In this passage, the protagonist’s mother has been informed that she, surprisingly, has given birth to a boy that “should” and was expected to be a girl. This is a second desubicación: gender.¹⁴ Let us remember that the desubicado acts inappropriately, someone who does not act according to the established norms of a situation. It is hinted that the child will be treated differently because they do not fit into the restricting gender binary that registers them as male. “They are in the wrong place” (7) opens *El verbo j* to a queer reading of a protagonist who may often feel that their “sitio,” or body, is misunderstood.¹⁵

However, I follow gender and sexuality scholars like Talia Mae Betcher, who resist the “wrong-body model” that automatically assumes the “trans problem” as one of being trapped in a wrong body and where the solution involves aligning to one of the sexes: man or woman (2014, 383). The following selections in “Yo” provide additional glimpses of this gendered desubicación, making evident that it is often outside voices, those that surround the protagonist, that mark the child’s difference and not the child themselves. In the first passage presented above, we read that the queer child’s body is supposedly corporeally “misaligned,” a gendered desubicación. We see this again when our queer narrator remarks, “My mother said that they [the sisters] had inherited my father’s body, just that him, like my brother, looked good because he was a man. I, on the

other hand, inherited her figure. It wasn't my fault either, but she still beat me for it" (25). In this passage the paradoxes of the child's misalignment are doubly emphasized by their twin sisters' undesirable masculinity. Yet the queer child's femininity, their figure inherited from the mother, is much more punishable.

The "sitios equivocados," as discussed in the birth scene, is where spatiality intersects with corporeal sites. While the name of Jasmine is the only name eventually (and only sometimes) used by our queer character, there is never a resolution to their supposed trans dilemma, never an explicit moment when our protagonist chooses a gender. Instead, the queer child understands their desubicaciones and self-incorporates a trans reading of wrongness that is not focused on their body as the center of wrongness. The spatial desubicación revealed here is that "lo malo" is the wrong site, or the "sitio equivocado" (25), the pathologizing and cultural expectations that are embedded in spaces surrounding the child and not the child's queerness itself. This passage also presents, as the *j* in the title suggests, a queer child in motion where gender and migration are inextricably tied. The queer child is imbued with an impetus for action that will cause the eventual departure of the child from their place of birth, a predestined unsituatedness. Critically, I think alongside Tania Pleitez Vela (2022, 6), who fittingly uses the term *sexilio* to forefront a similar impulse she reads in *El verbo j*, where heteronormative practices push sexually dissonant bodies into exile. By looking at this gender desubicación alongside migration, *El verbo j* confronts implicit normative assumptions that mostly portray heterosexual adult men as migrants and not elder or child migrants, let alone queer migrant children.¹⁶

LABOR, MONEY, AND DESIRE: BLURRING THE CHILD

So far, the desubicaciones in *El verbo j* raise the following questions about the "shoulds" of childhood: How should children act and what should they not experience? Conceptions of an "ideal childhood" are Western constructions aimed at providing protection for white and middle-class children in the Global North. These notions of an appropriate childhood use extremes to either imbue the child with purity and innocence or

irrational uncivility (Jenks 1996, 15).¹⁷ Both iterations of childhood try to fully separate the actions, behaviors, and desires of children and adults. There is much to be said about the paradoxical conceptualizations of children, but for the purposes of this chapter, I briefly introduce these figurations to show how the queer migrant child in *El verbo j* does not fully register as a “child,” which is augmented by their queerness and sense of desubicación. In “Boundary Crossings: Transitions from Childhood to Adulthood” (2003), Gill Valentine importantly remarks that “the boundary between childhood and adulthood is very difficult to define. Notably, it is blurred. . . . The processes through which we make the transition from being regarded as children to adults are therefore complex and fluid” (48). *El verbo j* provides numerous instances of this child-adult blurriness, what I read as childhood desubicaciones, especially when considering children that are not white and middle class. In the upcoming passages, the representations of child labor in *El verbo j* break with the normalized Western conceptions of an “ideal” childhood.

In the United States and parts of Europe, the relationship between labor and children changed after the adoption of the child labor laws of the nineteenth century. With these new policies came increased awareness about child exploitation and abuse. At the same time, family doctors and psychologists placed a stronger emphasis on early education. Money became more explicitly linked to adulthood, and so financial dependence became a childlike quality (Edmonds and Pavcnik 2005). I say all this to forefront that labor in Latin America, particularly Central America’s relationship to labor and childhood, is different. According to the *Social Panorama of Latin America 2018* report (CEPAL 2019), with over 184 million people in Latin America living in poverty, working at a young age is an everyday reality. From an outside perspective, the very real circumstances of poor Brown and Black children in Central America may seem “unchildlike” since they do not fit with more idyllic conceptualizations of Western childhood. As Karen Wells centers in her book *Childhood in a Global Perspective* (2015), the scholarly shift toward a more nuanced transnational approach to childhood underscores that certain children have *always* been expected to work and that the labor sectors children work in vary significantly by country and region (98).

El verbo j’s protagonist acknowledges this relationship to labor: “I, on the other hand, was old enough. The fact that my teeth were falling out was

a sign that I could even work at night” (10). From this brief quote we can gather that the child has hit an important stage of development at roughly the age of five or six, when children start losing their baby teeth. While in so-called developed countries physiological markers attributed to puberty signal the beginning of adulthood, in the novel, the child seems to be fast-forwarded through the “appropriate” stages of development. But to reiterate, our protagonist’s early experience with labor is not uncommon and *is* culturally and economically expected. My objective in identifying this child’s relationship to work is not to queer them further or to add moralistic judgment about labor and money.¹⁸ Instead, it is the portrayal of the child’s *extra*-ordinary, almost gifted capacity to work *beyond* their years that sets them apart from others in the novel. In the following scene, the child starts working with their twin sisters in the gunpowder business: “They said *I was better* at manufacturing than any of the adults there. The adults were offended. How could a child be better than them? I have flair, a gift for selling. . . . It seems that I did very well because . . . they gave me money for whatever *I wanted*” (11; emphasis mine). From the adult’s perspective, children are inferior and incapable of having recognizable skills at work. In this instance, the child is not seen as an equal, and so a certain amount of servility and deference toward the adult is normalized. Yet, in this instance, the use of superlative phrases like “is the best” (11) draws attention to a child that exceeds all expectations of how they should perform and aligns them more equitably to the adult. An almost magical quality is placed on the talented child that attracts people and is an often-repeated quality in the novel.¹⁹ This *don*, a gift that makes the child not quite childlike, also depicts the child’s savviness with money as an initial spark of agency that is no longer solely rooted in the family. It is the last part of the phrase, “for whatever I wanted” (11), that lingers for me. The question is no longer, What should the child do? But instead, What does the child want? *¿Qué quiere el niño?* The word “quisiera” (I wanted) marks an important segue from material desire to a more corporeal desire.

Sexual desire is often relegated as an adult experience. Under a normative gaze, appropriate childhood behavior leans toward notions that children lack sexuality (Egan and Hawkes 2008). Childhood scholars have critiqued the child’s supposed lack of sexuality as an attempt to keep the child’s heterosexuality in place. And so, this supposition has been viewed as particularly anti-LGBTQI (Fischel 2008). Children, like

adults, *do* question how their bodies react to others. In *El verbo j*, the child's conscious sexual gaze toward other children is evident through their early exploration of queer desire. I see two clear examples of this in "Yo." First, our protagonist secretly admires their friend's body: "His legs were very well shaped. I looked at them out of the corner of my eye while he showed me his books, his notebooks, his card decks. I wanted to touch them, but I never did. *I don't think his mother would have liked it*" (24; emphasis mine). I note this last phrase because it shows the introspection the child has at recognizing their attraction for this male child but also the queer child's maneuvering around the normative gaze of a society that deems them a *desubicado*.

A second moment occurs during a provocative play with their desire: "I just knew that I preferred to be with the boys than with the girls, but not to play soldiers, but because of the feeling that being close to them gave me. The touch or the simple sight of them made me feel something. . . . That is why I sought to participate in games where I could be in front of or behind one" (12). As described previously, work is thought of as an adult action, whereas play is designated as a child's activity, often in contrast to work. The passages above are wonderfully lively and sensual and show how the child expresses queer desire through play. As theories of play in child development have long proposed, play is not a menial task: "Play forms, however various, are similar in that they all facilitate self-realization—essentially, comprehending the situations in which persons find themselves, the pertinent capabilities they possess, and the action-strategies they can effectively pursue. Play is a profoundly important 'pathway of experience' that cultivates self-realization" (Henricks 2020, 120). Self-realization is not a problem for this child since their sexual aspirations are known to them through touch. Yet the child recognizes that there would be consequences, namely from the adults, if actual touch were to be involved. In other instances, play does become a means of sidestepping off the straight line, a *desubicación* from what is considered normal and appropriate gendered behavior: "I just knew that I preferred to be with the boys than with the girls, but not to play soldiers, but because of the feeling that being close to them gave me" (12). The word proximity (*proximidad*) is loaded with signification that returns us to *desubicación*: a queer child that is always close, in sight, adjacent, yet not quite here.

Throughout the novel, the child's use of proximity to listen and to look serves to secretly observe the child and adult worlds that do not seem to belong to them. A voyeuristic tendency is often associated with perversion and sex, but it is also a form of private play for children. The child's incessant bullying forces them to stay on the sidelines, from a safe distance, observing other children from the margins. The queer child watches their friend with "well-shaped legs" and avoids being seen with him in public: "I was accustomed to watching from afar, I used to climb up a tree to see him throw a ball without him being bothered [by the other boys] because of my presence" (24). The queer child does not just watch from the sidelines, they hover over the other boys—from the top of the tree—so that the queer child's presence does not cause any discomfort. The spatial significance of this hovering represents an inability for our desubicado, the queer child, to exist in the same plane as the other "innocent" children. This spectral scene gives an almost godlike and supernatural quality to the queer child that augments what I stated previously as their extraordinary skill and "gracia." The child hides in plain sight, a strategic self-detachment that serves as a queer practice of survival. Sylvia Molloy further elucidates the child's act of voyeurism: "The girl's 'I' is like a mobile camera that captures everything, always ready to spy on oddities, captivated and repelled by the bizarre" (1996, 174).²⁰ Molloy suggests that the child is constantly watching, ready to observe the strange. For our queer child, the world of the strictly childish (young heterosexual boys playing with each other) is one they cannot fully participate in.

So far, our queer child is a desubicado who weaves in and out of the strict categorizations that try to contain them by being money savvy, gifted, observant, and sexual. In the previous sections I have brought forth how gender, labor, and desire alienate the queer child from more idealized conceptions of childhood. I now focus on the queer child's migration that further displaced our protagonist from (1) childhood and (2) the social and geo-temporal terrains the queer child learned to navigate in their homeland. Migration thrusts the queer child to reconfigure their survival strategies in new and unknown lands.

THE X'S IN *EL VERBO J*

El verbo j may be overlooked as a migration novel, considering the remarkably limited space and detail dedicated to the child's crossing from

El Salvador to Mexico and later to the United States. The journey to Mexico is described in just over three pages in “Yo.” Details such as a list of what the child took in their suitcase follow the humanizing efforts frequently seen in migration stories: “two of their best pants, two shirts, two pairs of socks, two pairs of underwear, and the address where I could find my sisters. I only had a couple of small bags of chips to eat” (28). And so, the child leaves El Salvador and migrates to Mexico, with the intentions of reuniting with their twin sisters and helping the family economically. The child is still anchored by the family, a stability that at this point of the child’s journey still links them transnationally to a space considered their homeland. This tie quickly unravels since migration, as Manfred Liebel in *Decolonizing Childhoods* (2020) fittingly remarks, leads to “new forms of childhood . . . [since] these movements are associated with separations, life-threatening risks and suffering, but they also create new identities, new experiences and new knowledge” (22–23).

The child migrates alone, making it through Guatemala by “paying attention to what people talked about and asking what was necessary” (29).²¹ The child migrant uses their acute observation skills to mobilize the knowledges they already have, what in the previous section I aimed to demonstrate as practical non-Western childhood experiences. After crossing the river at the Guatemala-Mexico border and running out of food and money, the child arrives in an overwhelming and uncompassionate Mexican city: “I ended up confusing north with south and wound up lost and tired in a city that was too big and didn’t answer questions or take pity on me” (29). This confusion of north and south is probably the most literal example of spatial desubicación in *El verbo j* and which pushed me to ask, Why do I consider this novel a migrant narrative and why is the child’s border crossing so minimally portrayed? The answers to this question become more evident when considering Central America’s past through the foreign glances of travel writers in the nineteenth century that manufactured an exoticizing and global spatial imaginary of the isthmus. Travel narratives of the time, as Sophie Esch explains, overdetermined the tie between Central America’s history and its geography (2020, 8). I share Esch’s warning that this overdetermination of the region from both outsiders and Central American elites is still an ongoing issue. I see Claudia Hernández’s minimal representation of the child’s migration as an attempt to break with overly exoticizing and sensationalizing migration.²²

The absence of detail to anchor the reader highlights the geo-temporal desubicaciones Hernández uses to portray a migrant narrative that challenges notions of linearity: from point A to B, from origin to arrival, from south to north. I read this challenge to linearity throughout the following passage: “Mexico is very big. Nothing at all like that ranch where you come from. It swallows people up. Which ranch? I didn’t come from a ranch. I came from a settlement that was on the edge of the capital of another country. And do you know where you’re going? This way, I told him as I showed him the paper with the address written on it. Do you know if we’re close yet? You are still far away. But am I on the right track? At least you are on one” (29). “Mexico is very big. . . . It swallows people up” (29) is an abstraction similar to what happens with La Bestia—the cargo trains migrants use to travel from southern to northern Mexico—that mythicizes the dangers Central Americans experience on the trains as monstrous.²³

Compared with the vastness and all-consuming nature of Mexico, El Salvador is dismissed as insignificant. El Salvador as nothing, “nada,” incomparable in size and development to Mexico, reveals the ongoing and unequal power dynamics between Mexico and Central America. Here, the spatial desubicación Hernández plays with uses scale by augmenting the size of Mexico and making El Salvador a diminutive. By doing this, Hernández has readers reconsider what “North” is in the Central American context. Mexico, in this case, as is currently the situation at the northern and southern borders in Mexico, is the “North” for Central Americans.²⁴ As the passage above implies, Mexico is a dangerous and overwhelming space for our queer child, another *sitio equivocado*. The phrase *sitio equivocado* is a recurring trope of my use of desubicaciones that acknowledges that the child, as a subject in flux *and* as a Central American, is repeatedly in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Central America is a desubicación, what Claudia Milian describes as an imperceptible “disorientingness” that fails to register as either North or South America. In Milian’s article “Crisis Management and the LatinX Child” (2018), she draws together the condition of opacity surrounding the Latinx identity marker—the use of the *x* in Latinx—with Central American child migrants who are often still disregarded as unknowns (Xs). These Central American children come from countries that are registered as blanks in both U.S. Anglo, Latinx, and Latin American imaginaries. This “disorientingness” circles us back to the figure of the child in *El verbo j* who is envisioned as similarly ambiguous and in-between.

Transnational migration is not connected to childhood and is generally “an adult-centered topic . . . understood through assimilation, hyphenation, remittances, or *full subjectivities*” (Milian 2018, 10; emphasis mine). I emphasize the phrase *full subjectivities* because it shows the boundaries established around the concept of the migrant as adult and “full.” Fullness here is understood with its synonyms as whole, complete, and fully developed. These “full” definitions attributed to migration do not include the child, a subject that is “growing up” and thus not complete.

The Central American child in the shadows has their point A, their origin discombobulated. The child’s point B, their arrival, is also distorted. Where exactly should the child migrant arrive to? There *is* a destination in mind, made evident by a material object many migrants carry with them, a lone piece of paper that often contains an address, a phone number, the name of a family member or friend. More so, for the child, this piece of paper is the physical manifestation of their goal to reach an *elsewhere*. Hernández, although intentionally vague in representing the migrant’s trajectory north, poignantly uses material objects to ground the affective and sensorial aspects of migration, to the things we would most likely be able to touch and trace.

This piece of paper is tied to the hope migrants associate with “making it,” both physically arriving in the north and succeeding financially. Yet, the adult migrant in the passage alludes to a sense of hopelessness: “Do you know if we’re close yet? You are still far away. But am I on the right track? *At least you are on one*” (29; emphasis mine). This migrant understands, probably from firsthand knowledge, the geographical vastness and near impossibility of the child “making it.” His remark ominously foretells how migration is almost never a straight line: there are always multiple curves, roundabouts, and deflections that either extend the journey or stop the migrant completely. There is no *buen*, or good, route because migration is undeniably arduous. It is only out of pure desperation that people attempt crossing in the first place.

AN ENDING . . .

El verbo j is not a bildungsroman where our protagonist discovers where they belong (el “sitio correcto”) or who they were truly meant to be. Yet, there is a fairytale component: this queer child is special, they will go

through so much hardship, and they know exactly who they are. The queer child migrant does not grow “up,” they grow sideways. There is nothing linear about this child’s story, nor do we receive a happy end. While *El verbo j* is set decades before the current waves of Central American children detained along the U.S.-Mexico border, I find it difficult to keep the current sociopolitical situation at the border separate from the contents of the novel.

“Arrancados de raíz” (“Pulled Out by the Roots”) was published by the Mexican office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2014 and is worth noting here for its efforts in pairing quantitative data with migrant children’s deeply personal reflections and drawings (Camargo 2014). The very title, “Arrancados de raíz” (“Pulled Out by the Roots”), follows my attempts to think about the queer migrant children’s multiple desubicaciones, where the child’s roots—be it the family structure, homeland, or self-identity—are forcibly *arrancados*, distorted, and unrecognized institutionally.²⁵ This chapter is a very crude attempt at demonstrating the plight of LGBTQI+ refugees and the little attention they receive in migration discourses.²⁶ Similarly, “Arrancados de raíz” notes the difficulty of obtaining information of LGBTQI+ migrants: “Although an effort was made for LGBTI participation, it was not possible to include anyone with what is considered diverse sexual orientation or gender identity during the collection of information” (36).²⁷ The queer Central American migrant child is thus rendered, again, unidentifiable and untraceable.

Once in Mexico, our queer child does not find their sisters. The child migrant is taken off the streets by a stranger who promises to contact the sisters. No refuge is found. Instead, the stranger takes the child captive in a home where other young children are sexually abused. And again, our queer child is in *el sitio equivocado* somewhere in Mexico, that “swallows people up” (29). Few details are known, but years later, as a teenager, our protagonist uses their gifts of observation and *gracia* to escape and migrate to another unknown coastal city in the United States. Once in the United States, the daily abuses seem to lighten for the now-queer teenager, but unfortunately, the United States is not the haven at the end of a fairytale. In the second half of the novel, we follow the now “adult” protagonist as they are beaten and raped and become HIV positive. Through flash-forwards, flashbacks, and other geo-temporal desubicaciones, we

come to learn that our protagonist biologically fathers a daughter, “little Jasmine” (155). As the novel nears its end, our protagonist gets to reconnect via telephone with their childhood crush, the boy with the “well-shaped legs” (24). We do not know what happens to our queer child nor where exactly (in the United States, Mexico, or El Salvador) they decide to settle. This story has no ending. Most migration stories in real life do not. Yet, our queer protagonist survives and continues defying our expectations. The *j* in *El verbo j(ota)* is forever in motion and so is our queerXCentral AmericanXmigrantXchild.

NOTES

1. Throughout the chapter, I will translate all the Spanish citations to English. Jossa’s original citation in Spanish is powerful: “Quizás el título de la novela, *El verbo j*, al referirse a un verbo incierto que empieza por jota, se refiere justamente a este conjugar los hechos, a este ir tejiendo la historia de Jasmine por un entramado de voces, de verbos. La letra puntuada (inicial del único nombre que aparece en el texto) sugiere un verbo que los distintos narradores y luego los lectores pueden ir escogiendo según su interpretación de la historia: joder, jugar, juntar, jalar” (2019, 874).
2. In terms of narratology, each chapter in *El verbo j* (“Yo,” “Tú,” “Él,” “Ella,” “Eso,” “Nosotros,” “Ustedes,” “Ellos”) has a different narrator. Each of the narrators is either the protagonist, a family member, or a close friend. They all recount a different part of our protagonist’s life and focus minimally on themselves. We never know their names, just their pronouns and their relationship to the protagonist.
3. I use the Spanish iteration of “desubicar” over the English “to disorient” to put into practice the philosophical teachings of Latina queer writer Gloria Anzaldúa. Tara Lockhart (2006) comments on Anzaldúa’s purposeful use of language: “The use of Spanish not only assists the English text in making a point, but moves beyond what English is able to express to include other dimensions and meanings more ably present in Spanish.” I will also add that Anzaldúa recognized that monolingual English speakers may feel uncomfortable in the not-knowing, in reading her passages in Spanish and not being able to fully understand the full meaning of her writing. For Anzaldúa, discomfort was growth.
4. Further clarification of *desubicaciones* in English: The root word of *desubicaciones*, “to disorient,” is to “situate someone or something out of place; to lose one’s orientation and thus not know where something is or what direction to take.” This definition if taken from the Spanish dictionary, the *Real academia Española* (RAE).

5. Craft (2013), Gairaud Ruiz (2015), and Jossa (2014) discuss the use of violence, spatiotemporality, and genre in Hernández's work.
6. The centrality Hernández places on historical specificity in her novels can be read in Sebastián Reyes's (2021) article "Mujer de armas tomar: La conciencia femenina en la novela *Roza, tumba, quema* de Claudia Hernández." Here, Reyes states that *Roza, tumba, quema* "is a novel that re-writes postwar history in El Salvador" (232, my translation).
7. Both Lucía Leandro Hernández (2020) and Emmanuela Jossa center Hernández's use of the "weird" and the "monstrous" to show how relations of power are inscribed on the body. Jossa explains that "sus personajes son, ante todo, cuerpos, impregnados por relaciones de fuerza: mutilados, deformados, o bien invadidos, mortificados y anulados; a menudo, cadáveres. Son cuerpos incompletos, insuficientes, introducidos en un mecanismo incesante que los plasma y los determina. La escritora pone en escena, de forma a menudo humorística, una fisicidad marchita que choca contra la agresividad, la prepotencia y las estrategias del poder" (2014, 13). ["Her characters are, above all, bodies, impregnated by power relations: mutilated, deformed, or well dominated, mortified and annulled; often dead bodies. They are incomplete bodies, insufficient, inserted into an incessant mechanism that shapes and determines them. The writer puts on stage, in an often humorous way, a withered physicality that collides with aggressiveness, arrogance and the strategies of power."]
8. Mackenbach's (2004, 2007) articles consider the changes that occurred to postwar Salvadoran identity and literature.
9. None of the main characters in *El verbo j* are given names except for one: Jasmine. Throughout the novel only pronouns are used. Later in the novel, the reader learns that the protagonist is reflecting on the past. Yet throughout the novel, time markers to indicate the child's age are often never explicit. One marker provided is when the child is almost captured by the military at the age of thirteen. Later, there are details that indicate the passage of time, such as "something now that I am an old woman I no longer feel" (12). These insertions as the older queer child into the narrative are sporadic.
10. To read more about the discussions surrounding the beginning and end of childhood, refer to Neil Postman's book *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982) and Allison James and Alan Prout's edited collection *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociology of Childhood* (1990).
11. The concept that childhood is a social construct is a fundamental notion with a long tradition in childhood studies. Philippe Ariés's *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) is often cited as having revolutionized the study of children.
12. One exacting temporal marker being that a person is an adult at age eighteen.
13. Hernández's writing is known for extended passages that lack punctuation. In this specific example, the narrative feels both fluid and disorienting, as if in a fever dream. Additionally, in my translations throughout this chapter, I intentionally use the gender-neutral term "they." I do this to follow the gender ambi-

- guity presented in the original language of the novel in Spanish. You can see this gender ambiguity clearly in this passage: “Está en el sitio equivocado” (7).
14. I use the terms *boy* and *girl* to follow the novel’s intentional use of gendered wording. This is not to indicate that the novel pushes for the assumption that gender is binary. On the contrary, the novel’s queer child often resists this binary and imposed categorization.
 15. Another example of this “sitio equivocado” occurs in the following passage: “Mi madre le exigió mudarnos de inmediato. El lugar en el que estábamos no era bueno para mí. Ya no era solo que me marginaran de los juegos y me hicieran burla, sino que podían matarme, no los vecinos, sino la guerra que había en el país” (15). The reader can see another glimpse of the generalized effects of the war on the queer child.
 16. Eithne Luibhéid and Lionel Cantú Jr.’s edited volume *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings* (2005) is an important resource that centers queerness in border and migration scholarship.
 17. John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously purported that children’s minds are “blank slates” and are morally unburdened. In *Émile or Treatise on Education* (1979), Rousseau philosophically questions the relationship between the individual and society. *Émile* continues to have a large impact on issues in early child development and educational systems.
 18. Katherine Stockton has a great analysis of how money queers children. Stockton smartly reads that the concern parents have of their children interacting with money is a similar worry they have of sex being an adult act children shouldn’t engage with: “Sex and money also come together in a child’s negotiations with the forging, discovering, unfolding, and bearing of her persona to herself—never mind to others” (2009, 223).
 19. Another example is provided when the protagonist’s best friend later describes: “Tú, my dear, eras el más frágil. Eras también el más suave, el más dulce y el más limpio de los presentes. Tan delicado que un simple soplo te habría descompuesto en millones de vilanos que el resto habríamos visto volar por el aire y desaparecer en la inmensidad” (31).
 20. Molloy’s quote is originally in Spanish: “El yo de la niña es como una cámara móvil que lo capta todo, siempre dispuesta a espiar rarezas, subyugada y repelida por lo estrafalario” (1996, 174).
 21. I note here the repetition of listening and observing.
 22. This tendency is still present in contemporary fiction. For example, the now-notorious *American Dirt* (2020) was the subject of controversy when readers rightly pointed to the book’s use of stereotypical characters and plotlines as well as the appropriation of Mexican migrant struggles.
 23. Maritza Cárdenas reads *La Bestia* as a recurring symbol in U.S.-Central American representations where “the symbolic inclusion of The Beast reveals how the archive of Central American collective memory is expanding to include new cultural traumas surrounding the experience of migration” (2018, 143).

24. To read more about President Peña Nieto's sanctioned Programa Frontera Sur, established in 2014 under pressure from the U.S. government, see <https://www.coha.org/programa-frontera-sur-the-mexican-governments-faulty-immigration-policy/>.
25. The root word of "arrancados" is "arrancar," and the direct translation in English is "uprooted or pulled out" (RAE, n.d., "arrancar").
26. One area where LGBTQI+ visibility is more apparent is in U.S. asylum practice (Cantú, Lubhéid, and Stern 2020). Also see Brigden (2017) and consider the following: "Along the route through Mexico, 'feminine' gay men and transgendered persons are subjected to harassment, even inside the safe space of the Catholic migrant shelter" (119).
27. One crucial example of LGBTQI+ inclusion in oral histories can be read in *Solito, Solita: Crossing Borders with Youth Refugees from Central America* (Mayers and Freedman 2019), which compiles fifteen oral histories where Central American migrants detail their journeys as children. One of those stories is told by Gabriel, a young Honduran gay man who recounts how his sexuality affected his decision to migrate to the United States.

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INSTANCES OF VIOLENCE AND RESIDUAL MASCULINITIES IN CAPITALISM

The Case of *Yo tuve un sueño: El viaje de los niños
centroamericanos a Estados Unidos* (2018)
by Juan Pablo Villalobos

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IN 2018, we witnessed a phenomenon in the media that for some people was new, but it responded to a cumulative crisis, a long-term process that practically spans the entire last century. I refer to the conformation of a caravan of migrants leaving from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, on October 12, 2018. In early 2021, despite restrictions related to COVID-19, another caravan left that country and was violently stopped by the Guatemalan army. In social media and in the public arena, a migratory flow that has experienced an increase since the 1980s has gained visibility. Based on data from the Migration Policy Institute, Central American migration grew tenfold from 1980 to 2017.¹ El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras represent 86 percent of the entire Central American community in the United States, according to data from 2017 (O'Connor, Batalova, and Bolter 2019).

The caravans are the face of poverty and institutional weakness but also of unshakable resistance, community, and solidarity in hard times. They represent a new migratory strategy of mobility, which, according to Sergio Salazar Araya, “suponen estrategias de territorialización e incidencia política que contestan formas de captura estatal y violencia social, generando condiciones para la constitución subjetiva y política de

sujetos subalternos” (2019, 111).² Neither endless hours of walking across hostile terrain nor thirst nor hunger could stop them from their conviction to reach Mexico’s northern border and apply for asylum in the United States. Despite the critical humanitarian situation, for the former Trump administration, the original caravan and subsequent ones meant an “invasion” (BBC 2020). It should be kept in mind that the United States, given its geographic and market proximity, attractive labor market, previous networks, and other factors, is the main destination for Central Americans, with 80 percent of this migrant population living there (O’Connor, Batalova, and Bolter 2019).

The unaccompanied migrant children (also known as UACs), detained by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency and the U.S. Border Patrol at the border with Mexico, have been another issue in the public debate. In fiscal year 2019, a historic record of more than 76,000 minors at the border were detained in the United States (Castillo Ramírez 2019).

To have a better understanding of this phenomenon, we need to place it in the context of the global economy, how the countries of the Global North attract a labor force (especially cheap labor), and how they expel these individuals as part of a perverse logic. Since the time of colonization, a world system was established in which it became necessary to enforce the control of movement (Mbembe 2019, 10). Despite a widespread rhetoric of freedom, fraternity, and multiculturalism, which has marked modernity, in Mbembe’s words, “The brutality of borders is now a fundamental given of our time. Borders are no longer sites to be crossed but lines that separate. Within these more or less miniaturized and militarized spaces, everything is supposed to remain still. Many are those who, encountering them, now meet their ends or, when not simple victims of shipwrecks or electrocution, are deported” (3).

In the last decade, the Central American migration has been a key topic in the literature originating from different countries. For example, we can mention Valeria Luiselli’s *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (2017) and *Lost Children Archive* (2019), Antonio Ortuño’s *La fila india* (2013), Emiliano Monge’s *Las tierras arrasadas* (2015), Alejandro Hernández’s *Amarás a dios sobre todas las cosas* (2013), Sofía Nayeli Bazán’s *La Bestia* (2020), and Flaviano Bianchini’s *El camino de La Bestia: Migrantes clandestinos a la búsqueda del sueño americano*

(2016). And in terms of poetry production, we can include Balam Rodri-go's *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* (2018) and *Marabunta* (2018), Javier Zamora's *Unaccompanied* (2017), Dennis Ávila's *Ropa americana* (2017), José Serrano's *Central América* (2014), and Noé Lima's *Gula* (2020), among others. In the case of journalistic work, we can mention Óscar Martínez's *Los migrantes que no importan* (2010) and Carlos Martínez's *Juntos, todos juntos: Crónica del primer intento colectivo de saltar la frontera estadounidense* (2019). In cinema, we have seen the treatment of migration in films such as Marcela Zamora's *María en tierra de nadie* (2011) and Diego Quemada-Díez's *La jaula de oro* (2013). Additionally, *Teatro bajo mi piel* (2014) and *Puntos de fuga* (2018), published by Kalina (a press based in El Salvador), are two bilingual anthologies that show how the notions of borders are arbitrary by including contemporary Salvadoran literature produced in the diaspora. Therefore, Central American cultural production must be thought of beyond the traditional national borders. Thus, it is necessary to problematize national identities and think beyond the conventional conception of canon as it is thought, for example, only in Spanish.

In this chapter, I propose the concepts *instances of violence* (for example, the immigration detention system in the United States) and *residual masculinities* (when a male identity is made vulnerable by poverty or by the one configured in the context of street gangs) to analyze *Yo tuve un sueño: El viaje de los niños centroamericanos a Estados Unidos* by Juan Pablo Villalobos. An English version of this book, *The Other Side: Stories of Central American Teen Refugees Who Dream of Crossing the Border* (translated by Rosalind Harvey), was published in 2019.

I examine how this text can be connected with the current migratory process of Central Americans in the framework of the brutality of borderization and capitalism, which is not reduced only to the building of walls. I link the book and its context in order to expand the horizon of its understanding and to highlight its political meaning and its power to question the criminalization of migrants despite the alleged progress on human rights.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first is a brief historical overview of Central American migrations with the aim of connecting the context (current humanitarian crisis with long-term processes and the dynamics of necrocapitalism [Banerjee 2008]) of the aforementioned

book.³ The second part is about how the concepts of instances of violence and residual masculinity are represented in the model text.

PRELIMINARY CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

In Central America, geography has marked the region as a place of transit, and the region has been “an object of desire,” in Virginia Pérez-Rattón’s (2011) words. The centrality of the figure of the isthmus explains, in part, this conception (Esch 2020, 7). Consequently, Central America cannot be explained without considering the interrelation of geomorphology and the conformation of the original five independent republics (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica); Panama was a part of Colombia for four centuries, and Belize was a British enclave (Pérez Brignoli 2017, 4). Likewise, in my proposal for analysis, it is not possible to avoid the relationship between migration and capitalism (especially the demands of globalization), since “migration can be explained as the effect—or one effect—of contradictions, dislocations, and opportunities resulting from the penetration of capitalism (domestic or foreign) into nations or regions at a lower level of development” (Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991, 78).

In the case of Central America, the development of capitalism has been asymmetric, and its changing dynamic has affected the region in two senses: (1) the effects of foreign capital on the region and (2) the consequences of economic cycles, booms, and depressions on economies tied into the global market. Capitalism has been subject to the introduction of export products. For example, in the nineteenth century, coffee production was introduced and expanded after the displacement of indigo, and in the early twentieth century, the U.S. banana enclaves were established in Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, and, later, Nicaragua. Meanwhile, in the 1940s, new export crops (cotton and sugar) were introduced in the region. It is necessary to add one element at this stage: the construction of the Panama Canal, which helped to reinforce the previous patterns of international migration (Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991). The mobility of the population in Central America has been driven by the need for a workforce. In the long term, labor migration has been a dominant tendency, according to Carolyn Hall and Héctor Pérez Brignoli (2003).

Ronny Viales Hurtado and David Díaz Arias (2014) propose five historical trends to understand Central America and its socioeconomic and sociopolitical features in connection with globalization. The first is Central America's transition to agrarian capitalism following independence from Spain (1821/50–1900). Agrarian colonization was encouraged. Coffee growing led to internal and intraregional population movement, the construction of railroads drew workers from Europe, and banana production stimulated the flow of intraregional migration with a circum-Caribbean market. Workers joined different areas of the labor market during that period. Throughout the second period (1900–1950), agrarian capitalism was consolidated. Population policies were not modified, including domestic migration (nevertheless, this migration and agricultural settlements received incentives). The third period (1950–75) is located in the context of developmentalism with an agricultural bias and regional economic integration. Its main feature is the promotion of the proletarianization of the low-wage endogenous workforce and the migration from the countryside to the cities. In some countries, the middle class was configured, which became a social and consumer key for the economy. This emigration was regional and interregional. Castillo (1999) notes that at the end of this period the migrations tended to consist of two main movements: on the one hand, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, Hondurans, and Belizeans to the north (Mexico, the United States, and Canada); on the other hand, Nicaraguans to the south (Costa Rica).⁴ The fourth period (1975–85) is defined by several wars in the region. It was also impacted by the world economic crisis and developmentalism and, at the internal level, by integration efforts. Finally, the fifth period, from 1985 to the present, is characterized by the implementation of neoliberalism and the postindustrial economy, which led to specialization in the service sector and the reformulation of the state. In this period, the topic of remittances is relevant to the state budget. The United States is the main host country for Central American migrants, while Costa Rica and Belize are the main host countries within the region.

Currently, the forced displacement has resulted mainly from the imposition of neoliberalism and is also connected with the displacement that occurred during the war years. Contemporary migration, Sandoval (2015) argues, is a crucial dimension in the societies of the region. In the

framework of globalization, there were circuits, flows, and trends that produced a connection between Central America and the Caribbean and also with the United States, which has continued to be the main destination for migrants from the region; likewise, there were internal and interregional migrations (Hall and Pérez Brignoli 2003; Sandoval 2015).

In the cultural field, Alexandra Ortiz Wallner's (2012) work is important to mention. Central American literature, she claims—since the beginnings of Modernismo, especially with the figure of Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío—can be called “a literature without a permanent residence” (27), taking into account its patterns of constant movement, interchanges, and interactions. In this vein, the notion of national literature must be problematized in order to contribute to critical studies according to a comparative, transnational, transregional, and trans-areal perspective: “Las lógicas y construcciones definidas exclusivamente desde los parámetros de lo nacional se ven desbordados ante una producción literaria que obliga a pensar en modos, articulaciones y filiaciones que surgen de la movilidad, el dinamismo y la complejidad de las configuraciones espacio-temporales y de la procesualidad propia de la literatura” (172).⁵ Moreover, Ortiz Wallner draws attention to the fact that many Central American authors are characterized by their nomadic status, such as Rodrigo Rey Rosa and Horacio Castellanos Moya.

YO TUVE UN SUEÑO: EL VIAJE DE LOS NIÑOS CENTROAMERICANOS A ESTADOS UNIDOS

INSTANCES OF VIOLENCE

My analysis of Villalobos's *Yo tuve un sueño: El viaje de los niños centroamericanos a Estados Unidos* starts with the premise that migration experiences are not the same for everyone, as they are affected by age, gender, social class, ethnicity, language, migratory status, and other forms of intersecting oppressions. In this chapter, I define *instances of violence* as the spaces designed to violate, abuse, or torture in different dimensions (emotional and sexual, for example), and they are expressed in different levels with the aim of showing the power of the system and of imposing an “order” that benefits the configuration of capitalism.

This requires punishing or harming physically and mentally those who are considered “disposable” or “trash.” I can mention, for example, the U.S. detention system, which has created deplorable conditions for the migrants in so-called *hieleras* (cells at a freezer-low temperature in a detention center on the border), which are portrayed in the description of Villalobos’s book.

Villalobos is a Mexican writer, who was born in Guadalajara in 1973. He was raised in Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco, Mexico, and his current residence is Barcelona. He completed a bachelor’s in Hispanic language and literature at the Universidad Veracruzana and earned a diploma in literary theory and comparative literature at Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (Casa Lamm, n.d.). All his books have been published by Anagrama and have been translated into different languages.⁶ In 2016, he won the prestigious Herralde Prize for the novel *No voy a pedirle a nadie que me crea*. Nevertheless, *Fiesta en la madriguera* (2010), written when he was thirty-three years old and published when he was thirty-seven (Barragán and Sevilla 2020; Rodríguez 2019), is the work that has had the greatest resonance in the media and in the academic world. All this has allowed him to get into the *start system* of Latin American literature. In *Fiesta en la madriguera*, we find an autodiegetic narrator as the main character, Tochtli, whose meaning is close to the Nahuatl “rabbit,” according to Siméon in *Diccionario de la lengua nahuatl o mexicana* (1977). Tochtli is a little boy caught in the drug trade, who lives in isolation with his father, Yolcaut, and whose main whim is to get a Liberian pygmy hippopotamus. Therefore, the novel represents a very subjective and apologetic viewpoint of the criminal world, marked by extreme violence, ostentation (money, jewelry, treasures, weapons), power, lack of empathy, cruelty, and corruption—following the most widespread image of drug trafficking.

Yo tuve un sueño is labeled as a nonfiction work, according to its “Advertencia” section, but it is closer to fiction in some stories, as Villalobos recognizes in an interview in 2020 (Lemos 2020). Thus, I classify it as a book of short stories. The use of the first-person narrator problematizes the blurred border between factual and fictional narrative. *Yo tuve un sueño* is composed of eleven short stories and an epilogue, as well as notes by journalist Alberto Arce. “My work as a fiction writer would be to find the perfect form for each story. What is fiction in the book is the

form,” the author declared in an interview (Lemos 2020). Although his objective as a writer was to not follow the conventional rules of a book of chronicles, his role as an “editor” is not devoid of political and ethical implications—as the stories told in the book are based on interviews with actual Central American refugees. The “translation” of these individuals’ voices is not direct or an emptying onto the page without filters, as it involves decisions, selections, and structuring. Some elements are placed front and center, while others disappear: “Sí, mi idea era borrarle del libro. No tengo voz en el libro. No me interesaba que aparecieran mis opiniones. Un libro de crónica convencional habría sido el contar mis encuentros con estos niños, el contar cómo los veo, describirlos, analizar su discurso, etcétera. Decidí que eso no me interesaba y que lo que realmente importaba era que prevalecieran sus voces, que mi trabajo era un trabajo de selección y de montaje” (Gaar 2020).⁷

Yo tuve un sueño is inspired by the testimonies of ten teenage refugees collected in personal interviews conducted in 2016 in New York and Los Angeles, as is made clear at the beginning of the text. Villalobos’s interest in the migration debate started in 2014, thanks to Michael Benoist’s invitation to write about the reality of the border for *Medium*. Villalobos went to Los Angeles for the purpose of interviewing a sixteen-year-old girl who had made the journey from Central America to the United States with her best friend, who lost her life in Mexico (Lemos 2020). However, when Villalobos arrived in Los Angeles from Brazil, he found an email from the NGO that was helping him with his research reporting that the family had changed their decision, so the girl wouldn’t talk. After *Medium* published his piece on social media, Grace Kendall, a senior editor for young readers at Farrar, Straus and Giroux, contacted him and proposed the idea of writing a book about the same topic. In 2016, Villalobos started the project by contacting NGOs, lawyers, and writers, like Valeria Luiselli (Lemos 2020).

Yo tuve un sueño is marked by an autodiegetic narrator, which allows the author to “re-create” the young people’s own vision of their cruel journey from Central America to the United States—showing the fear, desolation, and hostilities that the interviewees faced. From the title, a link is established with the spirit of Martin Luther King’s famous speech “I Have a Dream,” given in 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. The text seeks to generate empathy in international readers

unfamiliar with Central America's reality and to contribute to the understanding of the tragedy that thousands of migrants (including pregnant women and babies) experience in their journey across Mexico to reach the United States. The structure of the stories is the same: a detonating situation that reflects the multiple causes of migration, the crossing and its risks, the arrest at the border, and an ending. The ellipses in the stories help to focus the viewpoint on the most significant moments of the journey that is being described. Thus, the author can create a summary of the migratory experiences of the main characters rather like a *mise-en-scène*. For example, in the first story, titled "¿Dónde están tus hijos?" (Where are your children?), the composition is like a dramatic capsule. We only have two voices: that of the immigration agent and that of Kevin and Nicole's father. The focus of the narrative is on the agent's call to the father to warn him that his kids have been arrested at the San Ysidro border point of entry, between Tijuana, Mexico, and San Diego, California. We barely know why the children were living with their aunt: the street gang had killed their grandmother because she refused to continue paying "the tax" (*la renta*), so she paid with her life. This case is very representative of what happens in the extraliterary contexts of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras: many families are forced to leave their homes, their countries, because of the increase in social violence after the civil wars—especially because of the street gang issues.

Based on the book, it is clear that the institutions are no guarantee of protection—they are instances of violence from which the characters wish to escape at all costs. For example, in the second story of the book, "Voy a dormir un ratito yo" (Now I'm going to sleep for a bit), Kimberly's description of the conditions in the hielera expresses the corporeal suffering of migrants caused by the migration authorities. Kimberly is a fourteen-year-old teenager from Ahuachapán, El Salvador. She was living there with her maternal grandparents, her older sister, and her younger brother. She set out on the traumatic and dangerous journey to reunite with her mother, who is in New York. At an early age, her father had abandoned her, which partly demonstrates the fragility of social institutions like the family.

In the stories contained in the book, the modern Western notions of childhood and family are called into question given that what is represented does not correspond with the ideals of middle-class families.⁸

Instead, in the book, the value of extended family is remarkable, especially the figure of the woman: grandmothers, sisters, aunts, a lineage that is a refuge beyond the borders and that is in charge of the ethics of care. Despite everything, they support life.

In la hielera, it is evident that the treatment given to migrants follows the paradigm of social exploitation in which life is not central, but rather it is damaged in different ways. As Segato (2018) explains, “El paradigma de explotación actual supone una variedad enorme de formas de desprotección y precariedad de la vida, y esta modalidad de explotación depende de un principio de crueldad consistente en la disminución de la empatía de los sujetos” (12).⁹ Therefore, la hielera is a place where the most basic rights of detainees are infringed; they are treated like criminals, when in fact the real criminal is the state. For example, according to the book, the conditions of the cells are extremely cold, overcrowded, filthy, and dimly lit, and there is a shortage of food. Falling asleep is difficult. The migrants are not allowed to take a shower (“porque aquí no nos podemos bañar ni tan siquiera asear” [Villalobos 2018, 16]) or know the time (“aquí no hay manera de saber el tiempo” [18]).¹⁰ Still, there are spontaneous signs of solidarity and affection among the migrants and a notion of community, ephemeral bonds that display the nuances of the journey, carried out under the most extreme conditions. The end of “Voy a dormir un ratito yo” is significant: despite having known each other for a short time, they could engender affection. Kimberly is embraced by her interlocutor as a sign of gratitude and perhaps to wish her a better path.

Based on Kimberly’s descriptions, it is understood that the dignity of migrants is denied in multiple forms and scales. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the following quotation about how one of the main motivations of the migrants is the search for dignity, a dignity they are denied in their home countries. Despite the fact that Felipe Oliver Fuentes Krafczyk (2018) acknowledges the agency of migrants and the arbitrariness of the borders, I do not agree that there is such a thing as a *migrant’s essence*, given that there are a variety of motivations for starting the journey: “La esencia misma del migrante consiste en la búsqueda de una dignidad que jamás tuvo o que le ha sido arrebatada por la sociedad en la que vive. El desplazamiento del migrante brota de su inherente renuncia a permanecer pasivo ante las condiciones sociales y económicas que atentan en contra de su dignidad. El migrante no persigue utopías,

no es un iluso que espera obtener riquezas y lujos sólo por cruzar una línea que arbitrariamente divide al mundo próspero del mundo subdesarrollado” (Fuentes Krafczyk 2018, 47).¹¹ For safety reasons, Villalobos decided to use pseudonyms. Thus, we can only approach fragments of the lives of Nicole, Kimberly, Santiago, Daniel, Dylan, Alejandro, Miguel Ángel, Kayla, Mariana, and Abril—the young people he interviewed for the book. This only offers a part of the characters’ trajectories and, therefore, we cannot delve into their lives.

RESIDUAL MASCULINITY

In residual masculinity, the generation of terror is a central part of its configuration, because it is the only way to achieve a space in society—a society that has denied its citizens any possibility of self-esteem, wellness, or basic rights. In this type of masculinity, there is no room for building emotional linkages or empathy for the suffering of others, as it would show them to be vulnerable and frail. Someone who is residual cannot expect to reach the top of the social pyramid. I cited Segato’s words as she incorporates one key element in the configuration of residual masculinity. I refer to the cruelty and its link with the depredation projects driven by capitalism: “La repetición de la violencia produce un efecto de normalización de un paisaje de crueldad y, con esto, promueve en la gente los bajos umbrales de empatía indispensables para la empresa predadora” (2018, 11).¹² In some territories, the law of the barrio is enforced by street gangs: “ver, oír y callar” (see, hear, and keep silent). Thus, it is possible to gain access to certain material (money, houses, and guns) and symbolic (respect, authority, and power) goods—a bare minimum, but, after all, privileges in this precarious context caused by neoliberal politics have intensified in Central America since the 1990s. For them, the only way to get access to these goods, denied by the social and economic system, is through violence in its crudest forms. That is why I can state that residual masculinity is not gratuitous—it is the result of structural violence in societies marked by authoritarian culture, deep gender inequalities, racism, and a colonial mindset. This forces us to analyze the representations of this type of masculinity from an intersectional dimension.

In Central American literature, the voice of street gang members has rarely had a place of representation, perhaps because it is still a painful

reality for many people from different social strata (and even for the street gang members themselves), who are victims of their violent actions.¹³ Or perhaps because it is an open wound, a phenomenon that is consummately stigmatized by the majority, it hinders an objective analysis. The rhetoric promulgated by most social media outlets identifies street gang members exclusively as victimizers or as monstrous (Zúñiga 2007–2008), or perhaps because to consider street gang members as a literary subject would be to move them up the social scale. When the trauma is so vivid, it is difficult to approach it from literature, at least not with the necessary distance it demands. To date, the greatest interest in the world of *maras* (Central American gangs) has come from journalism, sociology, anthropology, and, still timidly, cinema and poetry. There is only one novel that portrays this particular world: *La Mara* (2004) by Rafael Ramírez Heredia (Mexico, 1942–2006).

To understand the complexity of the configuration of these criminal organizations, we need to review their origins, the global and local dynamics from which they emerge, and their tight connection with the long history of structural inequalities and the imposition of necropolitics (employing Mbembe's concept) in the region. Wolf argues that "violent crime has emerged as one of the key problems in postwar El Salvador" (2017, 2). Precisely, one element that contributes to public insecurity in the country is street gangs. Their origins can be found in the early postwar period, when thousands of Salvadoran-born youth were deported from the United States, bringing gang culture with them to the isthmus (Wolf 2017).

To better explain the role street gangs play in forced migration, I will focus on *Yo tuve un sueño's* story titled "El otro lado es el otro lado" (The other side means the other side). Here, the voice describing the facts is that of Mecha, a member of Mara 18, the street gang that is in charge of criminal operations and movements in the territory under their control. The change of narrator is also problematic for the "facts." Villalobos recognizes why he decided to select the view of the perpetrator instead of the one who gave him the testimony: "Why the change? Because I thought that it would be interesting to tell the story from a different point of view, not just the point of view of the victim, but the point of view of the perpetrator" (Lemos 2020). This selection tenses the nexus between reality and fiction.

In the book, el Mecha and Yoni represent what Segato has called “pedagogía de la crueldad” (pedagogy of cruelty), which can be defined as “todos los actos y prácticas que enseñan, habitúan y programan a transmutar lo vivo y su vitalidad en cosas” (2018, 11).¹⁴ The repetition and intensification of violence creates a landscape of cruelty, which leads to low thresholds of empathy in the population exposed to this repetition. Segato states that capitalism in its apocalyptic phase depends on this pedagogy. In the book, the characters have to learn to suffer pain at an early age, as it is shown in the story “Era como algodón, pero cuando lo toqué era puro hielo” (It was like cotton, but when I touched it, it was just ice). Socialization in the spaces of marginality is marked by extreme violence in order to impose hierarchy; this is a key element in the configuration of what I called residual masculinity, which is a particular type of masculinity resulting from a long history of extreme violence, racism, precariousness, looting, and deep inequalities.

This pedagogy teaches people to eliminate life and any possibility of mourning. In other words, “La pedagogía de la crueldad es, entonces, la que nos habitúa a esa disecación de lo vivo y lo vital, y parece ser el camino inescapable de la modernidad, su último destino” (Segato 2018, 12). In addition, following Sayak Valencia (2010), it can be said that not only can capitalism be considered a system of production but it also can be considered a cultural and social construction. The practice of gore, Valencia notes, is a systematic and repeated practice of the most explicit violence to produce capital. I am interested in this explicit violence, considering that it has been normalized and can be clearly identified in the book studied here, not only in the country of departure but also on the never-ending migratory journey, as well as in the host country. The characters of *Yo tuve un sueño* are expelled from the social system; they can no longer live in their countries, nor are they welcome in the country of their arrival.

Villalobos’s book explores the subjectivity dimension of the characters who have to face daily poverty and violence, thus highlighting one of the causes of forced migration, as *Atlas of Migration in Northern Central America* has pointed out (ECLAC 2018). In other words, the extreme violence produced by street gangs is also a strong reason to leave the country.

In “El otro lado es el otro lado,” el Mecha describes the meeting with “Santiago,” whom he nicknames “Fat Boy,” when he crossed the insurmountable border. In the extraliterary context, in El Salvador, crossing the line (the border between two rival gangs) can result in death. Juan José Martínez D’aubuisson (2015) indicates in his book *Ver, oír y callar: Un año con la Mara Salvatrucha 13* that the country has more lines of division than appear on the official map. In Wolf’s (2017) words, the residents of those territories have to obey the code of silence. This explains Santiago’s nervousness, since he is a fifteen-year-old teenager. His body responds to the imminent danger: he snorts, sweats, and wants to cry. When el Mecha faces him on the street and his greetings were not paid attention to, the street gang member wants to show him his weapon, a precious property in this type of male configuration, supported by extreme violence in order to generate fear and thus gain respect and authority—which leads us to think about the relationship between violence, masculinity, and guns. Esch notes that “in societies shaped by war a weapon is never just a tool to kill. A weapon, and the firearm in particular, wields enormous symbolic power” (2018, 5).

Núñez-González and Núñez Noriega (2019) consider that, for example, in a *campo buchón*—an area where symbols and meanings related to drug trade predominate—the “war capital” is one of the cornerstones of hypermasculinity that is configured there. El Mecha is aware that he is part of a hierarchy. As a result, he must follow the rules of the game in his destructive community. He is one of the lower ranks on the social scale, so he cannot have access to the profits of the power machine that the gang has become. In one segment of the story, he admits, “Andaba muerto de hambre porque me había tocado postear desde temprano, llevaba desde las doce y ya eran casi las cinco” (34).¹⁵ He, being a small part of a larger machine, must obey the orders of the gang not to attack with weapons without knowing who the person is. In the first moment of their meeting, according to the book, Santiago keeps silent: “No dijo nada, nomás seguía resoplando como un caballo” (30),¹⁶ as stated by the gang member. And Santiago also avoids responding violently when he is attacked, as he is made vulnerable. He is in a position of complete subordination. In that sense, masculinity cannot be studied as a homogeneous and ahistorical category, like a seamless block of marble. Indeed, gender relations compel us to historicize them to achieve a full understanding.

No one could save Santiago: “Lo empujé del hombre y se fue contra la pared, sin resistirse. De la frente le escurría el sudor como si fuera una fuente” (30).¹⁷

However, Santiago, when confronted by the gang member, says that he knows Yoni, another gang member. This strategy would perhaps save his life. Nonetheless, el Mecha points to him as a possible “poste de los Mierdas” (33), meaning a lookout for the rival gang, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), and hence an enemy. Santiago, in his despair, says that his only objective for going to the “other side” was because of a school project, and to make sure, he shows him his backpack. The contents: notebooks, books, other items for study, plus a bag of chips.

And then, after his pleas, Santiago is taken to Yoni’s house. Once there, they talk about the family. Yoni asks him if his mother is still living in the United States. He threatens, “A tu abuela todo el mundo la quiere aquí en el barrio—le dijo—, a tu abuela se le respeta, pero no deberías usar eso si no querés que la gente piense que sos maricón” (35).¹⁸ This underlines the issue of shaping masculinity: it is understood that he needs to protect himself without turning to a female or maternal figure, in this case his grandmother, who appears in the text as a subject endowed with an aura of authority. For example, the word *maricón* (faggot) in the text places the bearer in a female (subordinate) position. Unfortunately, we don’t get to listen to the voice of Yoni’s girlfriend, who is just called the generic name “jaina” (the girlfriend/property of a street gang member). Santiago mentions his heart disease to strengthen his survival strategy and thus introduces himself as a weak or harmless character to the criminal group that controls the territory. He doesn’t follow the *mandato de masculinidad*, or masculinity mandate, which, according to Segato (2018), can be defined as a constant demand for proving to be a man. There is a moment when Santiago almost ends up crying, an action that in the configuration of this kind of masculinity is a sign of weakness. El Mecha demonstrates all the time that he has control of the situation and of himself. This can be explained by the fact that “the imposition of rank on some men sometimes meant the feminization of others” (Lipsett-Rivera 2019, 10).

As his last demand, Yoni gives a packet to Santiago. Because of the context of the story, it is tacitly understood that it is something illegal. After that, there is an ellipsis to show us the scene from when el Mecha introduces himself to Santiago’s grandmother as he goes to their house to

pick up the packet. Santiago's grandmother throws it away with a defiant attitude. Finally, Santiago is forced to leave the country with his brother, Daniel. With this background, we can connect with the other part of the story, entitled "Cómo nos íbamos a ir" (How we were going to get there), which tells their difficult journey to the United States. In this story, the brothers are made vulnerable by different agents and also by the power of nature, which is another "wall" to cross. The first obstacle is a river. At the beginning of the long journey, the narrator states his anguish and feeling of solitude, as no institution is there to protect them and ensure their most basic rights are met: "Estábamos solos, solos, solos, en esa parte del río. Solo íbamos nosotros y el que nos acompañaba. Había unos señores que estaban sacando arena del río, pero no nos dijeron nada" (83).¹⁹ After crossing the river, they find a man from Guatemala with a balaclava, who asks them for all their money. Farther on, they need to cross another river, this one with crocodiles. They are frightened; it is the first time they will be on a boat.

CLOSING REMARKS

Yo tuve un sueño continuously shows the tension that exists on the border between fiction and reality. It is a book of short stories that makes a claim to truth; even though the author states that his role was only as an editor or a mediator between informants and the writing project, the book is closer to fiction. The writer's self is not erased, which contradicts what he declared in a 2020 interview: selection implies writing, editorial, and ethical decisions and a vision of the world, a position toward the social reality portrayed. However, it is necessary to highlight the empathy of Villalobos's treatment: the characters are shaped, in most cases, as courageous and endowed with a great capacity for resistance and bravery and as capable of building networks of solidarity in a context of extreme violence—despite their young age. This portrait does not forget the other side: their fears and uncertainties and also their contexts. The *mise-en-scène* of the text is condensed like a capsule (in some cases) or like a short story, which underlines the literary sense.

In this chapter, I proposed two concepts to analyze *Yo tuve un sueño*: instances of violence and residual masculinity. These concepts can help

us to problematize the representations of migrants in an unequal system and the literary configuration of masculinities, especially in street gangs. The migratory journey is represented as full of dangers, as it has been widely denounced by NGOs and activists. Despite the fact that the state and its institutions must provide protection to migrants and enforce their rights, they become another instance of violence (the immigration detention system is a clear example of this in the text). That is why the book's characters cannot escape from violence, and most of them are not able to find relief in their lives.

NOTES

1. In 1980, the migrant population was 354,000. By contrast, in 2017, it was 3,527,000 (O'Connor, Batalova, and Bolter 2019).
2. "involve strategies of territorialization and political impact that respond to forms of state cooption and social violence, generating conditions for the subjective and political constitution of subaltern subjects."
3. Based on the works of Agamben and Mbembe, Banerjee proposes the concept of "necrocapitalism," which is defined as "contemporary forms of organizational accumulation that involve dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death" (2008, 1541) in contexts framed by imperialism and colonialism "that seem to be immune from legal, juridical, and political intervention, resulting in a suspension of sovereignty" (1544).
4. A cultural production that portrays the migration from Nicaragua to Costa Rica is the film *El camino* (2008), by Isthar Yasin Gutiérrez.
5. "The logics and constructions defined exclusively from the parameters of nationality are overwhelmed by a literary production that forces us to think in terms of modes, linkages and affiliations arising from mobility, dynamism and the complexity of spatio-temporal configurations and the process-driven nature of literature itself"
6. Other works include *Fiesta en la madriguera* (2010), *Si viviéramos en un lugar normal* (2012), *No estilo de Jalisco* (2014), *Te vendo un perro* (2015), *No voy a pedirle a nadie que me crea* (2016), and *La invasión del pueblo del espíritu* (2020).
7. "Yes, my idea was to erase me from the book. I do not have voice in the book. I was not interested in my opinions showing up. A book of conventional chronicle would have been to tell the interviews with these children, to tell how I see them, describe them, analyze their discourse, etc. I decided I was not interested in that and that what really mattered was that their voices prevailed, that my work was a work of selection and assembly."

8. In this case, I am referring to the dominant notions of childhood (for example, dependence, innocence, relating to the private world and play) disseminated in Europe and the United States, especially since the beginning of the modernity project. See Ariès's (1962) *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* and Liebel's (2020) *Decolonizing Childhoods: From Exclusion to Dignity*. In addition, the modern concept of family was understood as the institution with moral and spiritual functions that were focused on the child. This ideal was cohesive for feelings, habits, and ways of life. It was assumed that it shapes bodies and souls in the private life; therefore, it was built as a wall between the family and the society (Ariès 1962, 412–13).
9. "The paradigm of current exploitation assumes a huge variety of forms of unprotection, and this modality of exploitation depends on a principle of cruelty consisting of the reduction of empathy toward the subjects."
10. "We can't have showers here, or even a wash." "It's impossible to tell the time in here."
11. "The essence of a migrant is about the search for dignity that he/she never had or has been taken away from him/her by the society in which he/she lives. The migrant's displacement springs from his/her inherent refusal to remain passive toward social and economic conditions that threaten his/her dignity. The migrant does not pursue utopias, he/she is not a naïve individual who hopes to get wealth and luxury only for crossing a line that arbitrarily divides the prosperous world from the underdeveloped one."
12. "The repetition of violence produces an effect of normalization of a landscape of cruelty, and, by doing so, promotes in people low empathy thresholds, which is indispensable for the predatory enterprise."
13. In contrast, journalism and anthropology have given street gangs a privileged space. We can mention Óscar Martínez and Juan José Martínez's book *El niño de Hollywood: Una historia personal de la Mara Salvatrucha* (2019); Roberto Valencia's *Carta desde Zacatraz* (2018); Juan José Martínez D'aubuisson's *Ver, oír y callar: Un año con la Mara Salvatrucha 13* (2015); and Sala Negra de El Faro's *Crónicas negras desde una región que no cuenta* (2013). In theater, there is the work of Teatro del Azoro with *El fenómeno* (the phenomenon), presented in 2018. In poetry, *Siete voces para retratar el rostro detrás del silencio: Muestra de poesía salvadoreña que aborda el tema de pandillas*, compiled by Jorge López, Francisco Ascencio, and Brenda García (2020). And in cinema, *La vida loca* (2008) by Christian Poveda and *Imperdonable* (2020), directed by Marlén Viñayo.
14. "the acts and practices that teach, habituate, and program subjects to transmute life and its vitality into objects."
15. "I was starving because I'd been on lookout duty since early—since twelve o'clock—and it was nearly five now."
16. "He said nothing, just carried on huffing and puffing like a horse."
17. "I shoved his shoulder and he fell against the wall, without putting up a fight. Sweat poured off his forehead like a fountain."

18. "Everyone here in the neighborhood loves your grandmother," he said. "We respect her, but you shouldn't take advantage of that if you don't want everyone to think you're a wimp."
19. "We were alone, alone, all alone, at that part of the river. It was just us and the guy who was with us. There were some men taking sand out of the river, but they didn't say anything to us."

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12

WOMEN POET VOICES OF THE CENTRAL AMERICAN DIASPORA

An Intersectional, Transnational Reading

MAURICIO ESPINOZA AND TIFFANIE CLARK

IF THE casual reader wants to learn about Central American migration and its diasporas through literature authors from this region, what they are most likely to find is fiction or nonfiction—and most of it written by men. Since the 1970s, when armed conflicts and foreign military invasions impacted the isthmus and generated an unprecedented exodus that continues unabated through today, a majority of the attention from publishers and literary scholars has been given to male prose writers who have themselves or through their families experienced displacement—authors such as Héctor Tobar, Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Horacio Castellanos Moya, Óscar Martínez, and Eduardo Halfon. This of course does not mean that female Central American writers have not made important contributions to this migration narrative corpus. The work of Salvadoran fiction author Claudia Hernández, just to cite one notable example, has garnered international recognition in recent years. The same is true with film production in the isthmus, where directors such as Costa Rican Ishtar Yasin and Salvadoran Marcela Zamora have placed women at the center of their migration stories. This chapter addresses poetry about migration, exile, and diaspora by women authors—a literary corpus that has been doubly neglected by critics and scholars alike and whose complexity and diversity are fundamental for understanding

Central American cultural production in a time of profound demographic and cultural shifts.

Here, we explore how female poetic voices approach migration and diaspora through their unique perspectives shaped not only by gender specificities—but (more importantly) by the intersections of gender with class, place of residence, ethnicity and race, indigeneity, migratory and legal status, language(s), and other markers of identity. Additionally, we analyze how the lives of these authors (as well as the diversity of voices, characters, and stories that make up their deeply personal and socio-political poetry) exemplify a type of literature that is transnational in its production, circulation, and reception. In this regard, we claim that contemporary Central American literature—which the work of women poets studied here perfectly illustrates—needs to be studied from the perspective of transnationalism and the global flow of people and cultural goods to be fully understood as the literature of a region in constant movement, dialogue, and redefinition. Finally, we explore how the poetics of these authors actively place women at the center of enunciation and creative activism—putting forth a feminist agenda that is tightly interwoven with broader concerns about the rights of racial/ethnic minorities, undocumented migrants, the socioeconomically precarious, and others living on the *borderlands* of discrimination and invisibility.

Our analysis concentrates on four poets whose lives (as migrants or exiles living within Central America, the United States, and Europe) as well as whose work reflect the issues presented above. They are Tania Pleitez Vela (who was born in El Salvador in 1969 and currently lives in Italy), Alexandra Lytton Regalado (who was born in El Salvador in 1972, grew up in the United States, and returned to El Salvador as an adult), Ilka Oliva Corado (who was born in Guatemala in 1979 and migrated to the United States as an adult), and Alejandra Solórzano (who was born in Costa Rica to Guatemalan parents in 1980 and now resides again in her country of birth). In their heterogenous and growing body of work, these poets deal with the complexities of coming of age during a time of armed conflict; being forced into migration or exile; living in diasporic communities; and constructing lives characterized by displacement, hybrid cultural realities, bilingualism, and a constant interrogation of social and political issues in both their homelands and in their new countries of residence.

AN INTERSECTIONAL, TRANSNATIONAL READING OF MIGRATORY POETICS

Because the literary production of the four poets featured here is heavily informed by the confluence of gender with various social identities and political issues, it is helpful to approach it from an intersectional perspective. The core ideas of intersectionality were elaborated in the 1960s and 1970s by diverse groups of women of color fighting for civil rights and advancing their particular feminist agendas (Hill Collins and Bilge 2000). However, the term was first coined by African American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 in her article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” and it was later developed by various intellectuals and activists of color, most notably Patricia Hill Collins. Intersectionality “views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age—among others—as interrelated and mutually shaping one another” (Hill Collins and Bilge 2000). Intersectionality’s core principle is that “in a given society at a given time, power relations of race, class, and gender, for example, are not discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but rather build on each other and work together; and that, while often invisible, these intersecting power relations affect all aspects of the social world” (chapter 1). The concept of oppression is crucial for understanding how intersectionality impacts individual lives and societies, as different forms of oppression (for instance, against young, poor, undocumented, Indigenous migrant women) amplify each other and affect those individuals in more severe ways than they might affect, say, a college-educated white male migrant from a middle-class background. Thus, all categories that conform the lives of migrant writers studied in this chapter, their poetic voices, and the individuals whose stories appear in their poems must be carefully considered—as it is in the intersecting points of these categories where the lyrical and political might of this poetry is often found.

While intersectionality is a powerful tool to identify various forms of oppression in a variety of contexts, it can also serve the crucial task of challenging those oppressive forces by harnessing solidarity, resilience, and creativity among women, people of color, migrants, and

other groups living in precarious conditions. Before Crenshaw, Gloria Anzaldúa had already developed a complex theory of intersecting identities in her groundbreaking book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, first published in 1987. Anzaldúa explores the harsh realities and creative possibilities of convergence through the concepts of *borderlands* and the *new mestiza* in the context of Mexican and Chicana history and culture. While the border is a rigid entity, for Anzaldúa the borderlands are a fluid and ambiguous space of exchange, where diverse cultures, ethnicities, languages, traditions, myths, genders, sexual identities, spiritual practices, etc. commingle “in a constant state of transition” (1999, 25). By learning to tolerate and embrace the contradictions and ambiguities of this liminal space, a woman of color who doesn’t conform with cultural, societal, or gender binaries “learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (101). This “something else” is the *new mestiza consciousness*, which is both a “source of intense pain” and of “continued creative motion” that thrives on the breaking down of dualistic thinking and “of the straddling of two or more cultures” (102). This consciousness does not function by simply bonding the severed pieces of each culture together. Rather, it is a catalyst for the creation of a *greater language* via translation of one culture through the eyes of another, emphasizing or deciding between their strengths and weaknesses. This is the type of language and attitude we often find in the poets studied here.

The corpus of this chapter also needs to be analyzed within the context of violence, inequality, and displacement that has characterized Central American history in the past few decades. According to a 2018 report by the Inter-American Dialogue based on data from the United Nations’ Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the number of Central American migrants grew from 2.6 million in 2000 to 4.2 million in 2015. Of this number, 3.3 million have migrated to the United States, 576,000 to other isthmus nations (mostly to Costa Rica), and the rest to other countries around the world (Orozco 2018, 2). By 2015, 12 percent of Central Americans lived outside their countries of birth, which is four times the global migration rate (Sandoval García 2015,

xvi). This immigration phenomenon has resulted in the consolidation of a substantial Central American diaspora around the world—especially in the United States, where today there are 7 million individuals of Central American descent. Salvadorans (who boast a diasporic community 2.8 million strong) are now the third-largest Latino group by origin in the United States, after Mexicans and Puerto Ricans (Babich and Batalova 2021; Pew Research Center 2019). While the armed conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s were an important factor behind this exodus, the region's expulsion of its population has drastically increased in the postwar years because of new forms of violence (gang-, drug-, environmental-, gender-, or state-related) and the failure of poverty-intensifying neoliberal economic policies. Prominent among these new migration waves are children (the number of “unaccompanied minors” trekking north to the United States saw a sharp increase in the 2010s) and women, who in 2017 represented 25 percent of migrants apprehended by Mexican authorities (up from 13 percent in 2012) and 27 percent of migrants stopped by the U.S. Border Patrol (up from 14 percent in 2012) (Hallock, Ruiz Soto, and Fix 2018).¹

Conceiving contemporary Central American literature as *trans-Central American* acknowledges this reconfiguration of the region, its communities inside and outside the isthmus, and the writers who have been marked (directly or indirectly) by migration and displacement. Central America has long been considered (geologically, geographically, and culturally) a “bridge” between North and South America, as well as a critical passageway for a diverse flow of material and symbolic goods between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea—and hence the Atlantic world. However, it was not until recently that the region's cultural production has been approached in a transnational fashion. In her seminal 2009 book *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures*, Ana Patricia Rodríguez proposes moving away from an understanding of the region as an “in-between” space and working toward articulations of “across” and “beyond” national and regional borders. Using the term *transisthmus*, Rodríguez analyzes Central American literatures “not as discrete national units” but rather as texts that can be read “across national divides, drawing connections between them while producing

other transisthmian and transnational cultural and literary spaces" (2). Trans-Central American literature, then, would encompass texts that dialogue intra-regionally (the *testimonios* of the 1980s and 1990s or war narratives that involve several countries and characters of various nationalities, for instance) as well as literature produced by the Central American diaspora beyond the geophysical isthmus, since, as Rodríguez notes, diasporic subjects are producing "transisthmian narratives" from a variety of translocal sites (17).²

In this new transnational reality, people and their cultural practices have become deterritorialized—constantly crossing (voluntarily or involuntarily) and troubling the traditional borders of the nation-state or regional constructs (of which Central America is a perfect example). In the postcolonial and media-saturated environment of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, phenomena such as globalization, massive global migration, increased trade, and new information technologies have helped to create what Arjun Appadurai calls a "new global cultural economy"—characterized by the disjointed and unstable worldwide circulation of people, media, technology, finances, and ideas (2006, 588–89). This, of course, has important implications for identity formation and contestation, especially as social categories increasingly intersect in transnational diasporic conditions: "The central paradox of ethnic politics in today's world is that primordia (whether of language or skin color or neighborhood or kinship) have become globalized. That is, sentiments, whose greatest force is in their ability to ignite intimacy into a political state and turn locality into a staging ground for identity, have become spread over vast and irregular spaces as groups move yet stay linked to one another through sophisticated media capabilities" (595). The poets and poetry analyzed here have inserted themselves into this global cultural flow, decentering and debordering national and regional notions of Central American-ness. At the same time, their artistic visions are imagining and validating new forms of being Central American and enunciating the isthmus across a world in constant flux—while the political discourses tightly interwoven in their texts also denounce the conditions that have forced so many people (the poets included) to live and often struggle outside their home countries to begin with.

PREWAR, WAR, AND WHAT COMES AFTER: NEGOTIATING BELONGING IN THE POETRY OF TANIA PLEITEZ AND ALEJANDRA SOLÓRZANO

Even as this chapter and this entire volume explore representations of migration from a regional (Central America) and, more so, transregional (the isthmus and its diasporas) perspective, it's not easy resisting the urge to group the poets studied here according to national origin and to place them in their respective national literatures. Such is the power of separatist and reductionist cultural politics that have persisted in the region ever since the Federal Republic of Central America dissolved in 1841 and its territories forged their own paths as independent republics. However, if we apply the roots/routes formula from diaspora studies, we would quickly see that an emphasis on roots (the static attachment to a common homeland) would limit a transnational comparative study of these poets, while routes (the dynamic passages through which connections with external host-lands are made) would enhance it.³ This is not to say that roots are not important, as James Clifford reminds that the existence of a diaspora depends on a collective of individuals who "feel (maintain, revive, or invent) a connection with a prior home [that] must be strong enough to resist erasure through the normalizing process of forgetting, assimilating, and distancing" (1997, 255). Moreover, the interplay between roots and routes is crucial for understanding these authors' poetry and discourses of identity.

In this regard, while Tania Pleitez and Alexandra Lytton Regalado (El Salvador) and Ilka Oliva Corado and Alejandra Solórzano (Guatemala) share similar national roots, their routes (along with their intersecting identities) vary significantly. For that reason, we have decided to group these writers according to the main routes their migratory and diasporic experiences have taken—Pleitez and Solórzano have Costa Rica as a common route and have resided mainly in Spanish-speaking countries; Lytton Regalado and Oliva Corado both migrated to the United States, whose dominant language and laws play significant roles in their creative work and/or daily existence.

As Clifford reminds us, violence (whether political or economic) is often behind the processes that generate migration and diaspora cultures (1997, 265). In the case of Pleitez and Solórzano, the civil wars that

devastated El Salvador (1980–92) and Guatemala (1960–96) played a significant role in their leaving or being born outside the homeland and thus figure prominently in their poetry. (Lytton Regalado also left with her family because of the armed conflict, but her writing is more concerned with the current violence in El Salvador, although specters of the war sometimes appear in a few of her poems; Oliva Corado also grew up during the civil war years and experienced socioeconomic violence as she lived in poverty.) Migration has been a common experience in Pleitez's life, as her maternal grandparents had moved to the United States in the mid-twentieth century and her mother grew up there. Between 1980 and 1981, when Pleitez was eleven and violence had intensified in her homeland, her pregnant mother left for California with her and her siblings. Pleitez began attending the Central American University (UCA) in 1989—the same year six Jesuit priests were killed by the army at the university. Fearing for her safety, Pleitez and her parents decided she should continue her studies in Costa Rica, where her brother was already studying medicine. Pleitez remained in Costa Rica until 1998, when she moved to Spain—the country where she resided until 2021, when she took residence in Italy (Pleitez 2020). Meanwhile, Solórzano was born into a family of revolutionaries who left Guatemala in 1974 and were in Costa Rica at the time of her birth in 1980. Solórzano did not “return” to the homeland she had never set foot on until 1994, also living in Nicaragua and Mexico during that period as her family joined various militant groups in the region. Finally, in 2007, she moved back to Costa Rica to attend university and has lived there since (Guzmán Sierra 2019, 101–12).

In her 2017 book *Preguerra/Prewar* (translated into English by Lytton Regalado, with whom Pleitez has collaborated on several editorial projects), the Salvadoran poet takes her readers to the years before the war is officially declared but when violence is already present—as we see in “Compañero de escuela, 1977” (“Classmate, 1977”), where the adults “Comentan el último secuestro” (2017, 16). This time of prewar is also the time of premigration, but the inevitability of displacement can be sensed in many of the poems. For instance, Pleitez uses childhood as a site of contention and slow separation, as innocence begins to give way to the horrors of violence and eventual departure from everything that's familiar in the homeland. In “Golpe de silencio” (“Silent Coup”), we find the girl whose childhood is interrupted and ruined by the war

that's slowly brewing: "Pequeña, ya no quieres subir al árbol ni jugar. / Ojos desdoblados y múltiples despedazan tu infancia. / Desparramados, oníricos, buñelianos" (12). In this poem we also see the use of "five o'clock" (the time of the curfew), a common time utilized throughout the book that becomes a metaphor for fear but also a moment of scission between safety and despair, a sort of border where the carefree nature of childhood ends and a forced, hyperaware consciousness steeped in worry and dread begins: "Son las cinco de la tarde y ojos mecidos en el péndulo del caos / ya no miran el mar" (12).

This sense of split existence is further explored in "El miedo y lo minúsculo" ("Fear and All that Is Minuscule") (20), where the little girl senses how "se acerca la guerra hirviente y viscosa." Hence, she is caught between feeling that she is entitled to enjoying the innocence and enthusiasm of childhood (represented by palm trees and the flavors of tropical fruits such as avocados and nísperos) while facing the inevitable changes looming with the afternoon curfew (something that the child is unable to name other than by calling it "el escupitajo del crepúsculo"). The result is "un entusiasmo apurado," a childhood interrupted, rushed and patched up. In addition to the curfew, Pleitez employs the metaphor of an egg in this poem: the child is inside, protected but fragile at once. The shell is also a border dividing the attenuated domestic bliss from the outside world of explosions and conspiracies.

This schism frames most of the poetry book. On the one hand, we see how the adult poetic voice often talks with the little girl, complicit in the daring and healing act of remembering and naming that moment of fracture many years ago from a present time and place of diasporic consciousness. As we see in "El miedo y lo minúsculo" (20), memory and speech go hand in hand. In speaking across the time and space divide, the split lyric subject breaks a silence that has seemingly been haunting both the girl and the woman since the prewar years: "Pequeña, ¿temes romper los huesos del silencio?" The answer is yes, the "little one" is afraid to say something: "Pero no dices nada. Maldita estás, pequeña," the adult poetic voice painfully rebukes. Breaking the silence in this poem equates breaking the eggshell inside, which the traumatized little girl has been hiding, unable to morph into a new life form that might offer wings and freedom: "El silencio se convierte en tu agrio y rancio cascarón." As the adult lyric subject indicates, in order to break this egg-silence, the girl would need

a blade (words), something that the poet only manages to find later in life, as she reaches out into the past to talk to herself from a diasporic and more conscious site of enunciation, having flown out of the sieged homeland and having lived her entire adult life in various countries. The way in which the two poetic voices interact in this exercise of speaking out and bearing witness to past trauma is particularly evident in the short poem “Tu casa es mi casa” (“Your House Is My House”) (14), where the anguished adult lyric subject again delves into the past to realize she is not alone because “Estás tú, / pequeña en el umbral, / en el escándalo de mi sangre.” It is here where the split, the brokenness that traverses the entire poetry collection, arrives at a rare moment of communion, as the two poetic voices meet and find solace in “Nuestra casa,” even if this shared house is still “la esfera abatida de la preguerra.”

While most of the poems in *Preguerra/Prewar* focus on childhood memories and their relationship with the adult poetic voice speaking from the present, “Exilio” (“Exile”) is the one that more explicitly explores the experience of migration and displacement—moving through various temporal, geographic, and identitarian realities. The poem embodies the unrootedness that comes with expatriation, utilizing words that describe the territory of exile as a place that exists on the *other* side and that belongs to *others*, not to the lyric subject: “En el otro lado aprendí a planear en el azul metálico de lo ajeno” (10). Additionally, the migratory experience—an endless journey that in the first verse is already referred to as “este viaje sin retorno”—is presented as something painful, even as the adult poetic voice has tried to grow roots outside her homeland: “Plantada estoy aquí, / pero un cuervo picotea mi mirada, desangra medusas / de rencorosas aguas” (10). The poem also attempts to express the difficulty of reconciling the two halves of a migrant identity in constant reconfiguration, which fail to fuse because of fundamental differences: the child is a fish who lives in water, the adult is a bird with wings that have taken her away. For this reason, the former cannot breathe in the realm of exile, while the latter cannot adjust back to the habitat-homeland that was once hers: “Allá, en aquel mar, tampoco encajan las alas que fabriqué. / Pez-pájaro. Ni una cosa ni la otra. Péndulo caótico. / Hablo en el lenguaje del aire. / Sueño en el lenguaje del agua” (10).

These verses are crucial for understanding Pleitez’s poetic project in *Preguerra/Prewar*, as writing and language (the language of air) allow the

adult poetic voice to try to make sense of her past experiences, but such endeavor could not be possible without the raw material of her childhood (the language of water). As it often happens in the writing of former migrant children and youth, childhood for Pleitez becomes associated with the lost homeland. Meanwhile, exile represents the loss of innocence that resulted from the armed conflict and the expulsion from this space and age of belonging. In this regard, Pleitez's first migration to the United States coincides with the end of childhood during the prewar period, while the move to Costa Rica would represent the ushering into adulthood and permanent separation from the remnants of home. Thus, this book is an effort to reconcile such traumatic separation—that is, the two sides of the split poetic voice's identity and sense of belonging. It is also about healing, which requires breaking past silences and opening the half-closed wound once again in an attempt to begin actual restoration. And this healing can only be done through words, through the power of poetry. In "El abrazo de Gaia" ("Gaia's Embrace"), the book's final poem, Pleitez summarizes this process: "En la sombra olfateo / los despojos de mi país, los pedazos de mi infancia. / Suelto mis termitas, carcomen esa casa de mandamientos / y comienza mi viaje en el limo" (28). Words (in this case "termites") gnaw at what remains of her house, her country, her childhood. It's a painful, even destructive, process. But very much necessary.

Alejandra Solórzano's personal story and poetry are also deeply marked by armed conflict, in this case the long Guatemalan civil war. Unlike Pleitez, Solórzano was born in exile, so her early relationship with her homeland is one of absence. This absence is often represented by images of silence and emptiness, both of which denote something that is missing or lacking from the poet's childhood and adolescence. In "El silencio" (from her book *Todo esto sucederá siempre*, 2017), the poetic voice travels with her "timidez de infancia" aboard a lonely train "sin pasajeros ni estaciones" (67). We can see how migrating generates a sense of incompleteness that manifests itself in dreamlike poems such as this one. Moreover, the instability that comes from having to be on the run and constantly moving from country to country also marks Solórzano's childhood and the way it is written about in her poetry. In this regard, Solórzano's work is an itinerant and border-crossing experience that seldom stops—always traversing geographies, histories, cultural legacies, and the open wounds of the civil war.

For example, in “La vigilante” (also from *Todo esto sucederá siempre*), the poetic voice expresses how a twelve-year-old migrant is forced to rewrite her history (and with it her sense of identity) every time she must move to another country with her family: “Debajo del silencio / la ecuación de la historia que debe / inventarse en cada viaje. / Un país a cada tanto. El alma sobre el / cuaderno / Puta guerra” (42). Here, we see some points of connection between Pleitez and Solórzano. First, the experience and agency of the young girl occupy a central space in the poem, as the act of remembering and making sense of the past (which also involves pointing fingers at the war as the triggering event) takes place from her perspective and lived experience. Second, “silence” serves as the metaphor of something that hides, that refuses acknowledgement, that obfuscates any attempt at making sense of what’s happening. The only way to break through this silence is to invent stories, to pour one’s soul into the notebook the lyric subject carries with her wherever she goes. In this and similar poems, words function as a survival mechanism for Solórzano; in other poems, as we will see, words go above and beyond to construct a sense of identity rooted in Guatemalan/Indigenous cultural legacy and female solidarity.

Solórzano first traveled to Guatemala in 1994, when she was fourteen years old. Even though she had never lived in her homeland, she sees this voyage (one of many in her young life) differently: “Para mí esto significa en realidad un regreso porque todo este camino, esta itinerancia, estaba relacionada con la historia de Guatemala” (qtd. in Guzmán Sierra 2019, 111). This “return” is not necessarily to the homeland as a geographical territory but rather to a history and culture intimately tied to the poet’s identity as a Guatemalan woman displaced by violence. Reconnecting with Guatemala’s strong Indigenous legacy, the poetic voice of the returnee engages in a healing ritual that is at once a reclaiming of this legacy: “Sanar este mal hermoso, / AMARILLO / del maíz de mi carne, / de mi tristeza / de mi memoria” (*Todo esto sucederá siempre*, 70).⁴ Meanwhile, in her first book, *Detener la historia* (2015), Solórzano finds in the story of Malitzín, or La Malinche—the enslaved, migrant Maya woman who served as interpreter to Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and also bore him a child, presumably the first Mexican mestizo—a strong identification with her own story.

In “Malitzín Tenépatl,” the poetic voice speaks with the woman infamously regarded as a traitor in Mexican history in search of a common Mesoamerican root, attempting to rescue and establish a sorority of

women forced into exile by warring factions in patriarchal societies—and forced, also, to forget “their own names.” As Silvia Elena Guzmán Sierra indicates in an article about migration in Solórzano’s poetry, “Malitzín es la mujer centroamericana, es la mujer migrante reducida al olvido” (2019, 117).⁵ Even though the Indigenous people of Mesoamerica continue to suffer from the legacy of violence wrought by conquest and the colonial period, Solórzano highlights the strength and survival spirit of their culture, the claims they stake every day on their land despite continued attempts to erase them from it: “Somos dueños aún de esta tierra, / aves del insomnio / y el pasado nos dice /que no hemos terminado de volver” (2015, 51). In returning to her ancestral homeland, Solórzano welcomes back Malitzín along with her, acknowledging—however—that their return remains inconclusive, that their histories of migration will continue to be a part of what constitutes them as individuals. Finally, another point of connection between the two women is the power of language—Solórzano as the poet and Malintzin as the learned, influential, polyglot interpreter. In “Palmearán la espalda de Rivera,” the lyric subject asks Malitzín about the ancient word that links them culturally but also as women with agency and a voice of their own: “¿Dónde dejaste la última palabra de este siglo / que fue mi insignia? / ¿Dónde deberé buscarla, eco del cabello de / mis abuelas?” (2015, 62). In establishing this vital connection, Solórzano engages with Anzaldúa’s *new mestiza consciousness* through the power of creative language and the straddling of traditions represented in Guatemala’s rich cultural tapestry. She also exposes the powerful intersections between gender and indigeneity that are woven into Guatemalan history and society, where Indigenous women have been a constant target of violence (but also a source of resistance)—as exemplified in the story of activist and Nobel Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú Tum.

WHICH WAY NORTH, WHICH WAY HOME? LANGUAGE, TRANSLATION, AND INTERSECTING OPPRESSIONS IN ALEXANDRA LYTTON REGALADO AND ILKA OLIVA CORADO

While the diasporic poetry of Pleitez and Solórzano analyzed here is very much concerned with the impact of war and displacement on childhood

and the adult poetic voices' efforts to make sense of their itinerant and split identities, in the works of Alexandra Lytton Regalado and Ilka Oliva Corado we find the challenges of living between two very different countries, cultures, and languages—while exploring the intersecting forms of oppression they encounter in their own personal experiences and in the people around them. Born in El Salvador to a Salvadoran mother and a father from the United States, Lytton Regalado's origins bespeak hybridity. This mixed identity is intensified very early in life, at four years old, when her family moves to Miami to evade the dangers of civil war in her home country. After having grown up in the United States, Lytton Regalado returns to El Salvador in her late twenties to start a family.⁶ Meanwhile, Oliva Corado grew up in a working-class family in an impoverished community of southeastern Guatemala. At the age of twenty-six, she made the treacherous journey north to cross into the United States without papers, settling in Chicago—a place she calls her “rented city,” in reference to her status as an undocumented immigrant.⁷ Despite their different backgrounds, poetic styles, and current life circumstances, both authors explore and interrogate the in-between spaces (linguistic, physical, emotional, historical) resulting from their unique diasporic experiences. Their poetry is an act of translation, expounding on those interstices so that we can read them through their particular filters and lenses—which are inevitably gendered and also crossed by issues of class, ethnicity, and legal status.

Despite being the only one of the four poets studied here who currently lives in her country of origin, Lytton Regalado is the only one who writes her poetry predominantly in her diasporic language. Her debut poetry collection, *Matria* (2017), is written in English mixed with Spanish, following in the tradition of Chicanx and other Latinx poets (Anzaldúa included) who have employed linguistic mixing and code-switching as a form of cultural resistance in the face of assimilation.⁸ While Spanish and English are both part of her upbringing, just as El Salvador and the United States are both part of her biography and her DNA, Lytton Regalado chooses English in part because this book is an attempt to translate her hybrid, in-between identity and experiences for bilingual readers (particularly other Salvadoran Americans and migrants), who are better equipped to decode her translation. A good example of this exercise is “Land O,” in which a little Central American immigrant girl recalls being ostracized by classmates at school for her Indigenous features and dark

skin: "When I moved to los Estados I became Vee-O-letta. A thick heavy name that tumbles clumsily from the gringos' mouths. The idea of those tiny purple flowers, quiet and elegant in the shade, didn't translate. To them my dark skin meant Pocahontas, Tiger Lily from Peter Pan, the little Indian girl on the Land O'Lakes butter package. I couldn't explain that in my country, the Indians built pyramids, not tipis" (34). "Land O" underscores the ways in which untranslatability marks many of the author's bicultural experiences. In other poems, the notion of the untranslatable parallels with a desire to translate. For instance, "Salvadoran Road Bingo" (4–6) explains and satirizes identity and cultural norms in Lytton Regalado's country of origin. This push and pull between translating her identity divided between two societies and recognizing the failure to do so echoes the overall mood of *Matria*.

As the title indicates, *Matria* is mainly about the poet's motherland and about the women who live there and are oftentimes forced to leave. In this regard, the book recounts the ways in which Lytton Regalado looks to the strength and struggles of Salvadoran women from all social strata in a poignant exploration of their testimonies and daily livelihoods while revealing her challenge to reassimilate to this aspect of her identity after growing up abroad and belonging to an upper-middle-class family in a country where most of her compatriots live in poverty. *Matria* reveals the poet's resistance to turning a blind eye to the precarious and dangerous reality of contemporary life in El Salvador. The contrast between the poet's (and her lyric voice's) privileged position and the struggles faced by everyday Salvadorans becomes evident in the poem "La mesa": "We've left behind the sandbagged street corners and now it's only the bodyguards driving us around in bulletproof SUVs that keep us from the gun-toting assailant at the stoplight. The thick glass that separates us from the children begging at their mother's side—and my own children asking, *What does she want mom? Where is her car? Where is her house?* And the driver staring ahead at the road through the tinted glass, his ears listening and listening for my reply. What to answer; this is something for my poetry, no?" (19). For Lytton Regalado, the answer to this question is yes: poetry is the place where she can raise her voice about what she sees behind the window of her bulletproof car, thus refusing to become one of the "women I once despised," those who ride "side saddle on shoulders / of bare-breasted beasties [who] pretend, with our laced booties and fine

ankles, to sidestep / the eggshell topics on the table, brilliant as it is with our polished words" ("La Doña," 50). These "topics on the table" include those that commonly affect women in El Salvador, such as domestic abuse, femicide, machismo, gang violence, and the lack of female-led political representation. For example, in "La Quinceañera," the fifteen-year-old girlfriend of an MS-13 *marero* is killed by female gang members because she "*don't want to be his girl anymore*" (15). The tragic story highlights not only the violence inflicted on the girl for refusing to comply with a violent gang member's desires but also the ways in which *maras* (a transnational gang phenomenon) force both young men and young women to join them and do their dirty work for fear of reprisal. In this sense, *Matria* epitomizes the poet's decision to confront the "eggshells" on El Salvador's table, bearing witness to the violence and inequities of her homeland in a style that often resembles the aesthetics of Central American *testimonio*.⁹ Nevertheless, as a woman who can afford protection and comfort (and whose identity, language, and vision have been shaped by two very different societies), Lytton Regalado's poetic rendition of Salvadoran life exudes an act of constant translation. As the author has indicated, even after two decades of being back home, she is straddling the two worlds of her existence: "The question is—how to be both? Displaced twice, I'm not just the 'other,' I'm now the 'other-other'" (2018).

Because of that double displacement that has marked Lytton Regalado's life, her poetry is a reencounter with origins left behind. It is an expansion of identity and of social awareness. It is a breaking down of borders between cultural and linguistic differences. A key element, then, to how she describes the *matria*, the home of her mother, is an acceptance that she is at once a Salvadoran citizen, a U.S. citizen, a migrant, and a mother, an identity that renders her, in the words of Homi Bhabha, "like but not quite" (1994, 86) others born and bred in the two countries where she has lived. This realization results in both a critique of Salvadoran culture and a passion for it. In her struggles for becoming anew without leaving her North American influence behind in El Salvador, she writes simultaneously with a longing and an acceptance of her difference: "O Salvadoran woman, who is me / and yet not me, / we travel / beneath a mantel of white" ("Ode to La Matria," 86). One might look at *Matria*, then, as an extended metaphor for looking at, understanding, and empathizing with the female other(s) present in the poet's daily life—at home

and beyond the bulletproof glass. Even more, it is the very realization that the *other* is another dimension of the self. And if the other is really, in some aspect, the self, then, as Anzaldúa would put it, an enactment of the new mestiza consciousness begins its important work of “healing the splits that divide mankind” (102).

In the work of Lytton Regalado, this healing occurs between Salvadoran women, mothers, and girls from all social strata who must travel under the mantle of a new day to change their conditions despite their differences. This concept reverberates in poems such as “La Cachiporrista,” where the lines between Lytton Regalado’s poetic speaker (protected but also trapped in her bulletproof SUV) and the poem’s major-ette protagonist (living in a marginal neighborhood and being looked at lustfully by a man) are “blurred in such a way that the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ become products of each other’s experiences and memories of historical trauma, of enacted space, and of sociopolitical crisis” (Taylor 2003, 191). Of course, the intersecting oppressions are very different for these two individuals because of socioeconomic class and other factors, but what brings them together is their condition as exposed women in a country with high rates of gender-related violence.¹⁰

Migratory circumstances and intersecting oppressions also differ significantly in Ilka Oliva Corado’s life story and literary oeuvre. Unlike the other three poets, Oliva Corado is the only one whose first displacement took place as an adult, the only one who migrated by land undocumented and remains an “illegal alien” in her host country, and the only one who is not involved in academia or cultural production as a full-time occupation. The self-published author of sixteen prose and poetry books, Oliva Corado was born in rural Comapa, in the southeastern Guatemalan department of Jutiapa, to a stay-at-home mother and a truck-driving father. At age seven, she began selling ice cream in the bustling, violent, poverty-stricken slum of Peronia, just outside Guatemala City, to help make ends meet at home and to pay for her education. Her collection *Nostalgia* (2016) can be characterized as a poetic testimonial of the ways in which her early sociopolitical consciousness developed during her formative years in the countryside and in the city. In these poems, Oliva Corado denounces the social invisibility and exclusion of the poor in both settings but also reveals a strong sense of identity rooted in campesino life, indigeneity, and the telluric.

This criticism of social injustices in Guatemala seamlessly segues into the themes of migration and diaspora so vital to Oliva Corado's overall poetic vision. In her book *Destierro* (2016), the author tackles migration as a global, rather than as particularly Central American, dilemma. Giving testimony of her perilous journey from Guatemala through Mexico and into the Arizona desert, this collection declares solidarity with all migrants worldwide, including Central American children who risk their lives and face countless acts of violence as they ride atop La Bestia cargo train through Mexico and Latinx migrants whose labor in the United States is essential for the economy but whose human rights are often denied. In this manner, *Destierro* moves between first and third person, jumping from Oliva Corado's personal testimonial voice to the imagined perspectives of other women, children, and male migrants. Unable to travel back home physically because of her immigration status, some of the poems in this book also demonstrate the author's nostalgic return to her home in Comapa and Peronia, coexisting with a sociopolitical denunciation of how she and others in similar predicaments have ended up in this untranslatable and often precarious space of diaspora—unappreciated workers in a land they will most likely never be able call their own. In "Amanece el desarraigo," the poet calls these individuals "esclavos de la diáspora," demythifying any celebratory discourses associated with migration, particularly in the U.S. context: "Las redadas son precisas / La angustia indiferente / Es gente decente / Que no tiene libertad" (37). In this regard, Oliva Corado draws connections between the circumstances that make marginalized rural and urban people migrate and remain marginalized in their host nations, noting how their lives and experiences have political stakes in more than one place at once.

As a woman who has lived nearly two decades in the United States without legal documentation and works as a nanny, Oliva Corado's poetic vision tears down simplistic thinking around diaspora. For instance, in her testimonial poems that present voices of migrants from Central America, she reveals that one issue that continues to augment migration from the isthmus is that the migrants often suffer so much psychological trauma when they cross the border that they tend to remain silent about what really happened—instead making up triumphant stories about their experiences in the host country. As a result, their family and friends may be encouraged to cross too, repeating and exacerbating the cycle of

trauma. In the long poem “Los que han cruzado fronteras,” Oliva Corado pushes back against these migration myths, describing how the actions and attitudes of undocumented migrants all over the globe simultaneously demonstrate their vital impact on two societies at once, how they are undervalued in their host countries and how they often undervalue themselves. The poem uses repetition and alliteration to reinforce that diasporic peoples are an essential component of contemporary society, the global economy, and the rapidly shifting global culture. However, until they realize their essential nature as well as their social and political worth at home and abroad, they will never gain justice. Oliva Corado argues that migrants must begin to denounce Border Patrol violence, the rape of females during the journey, and the pressure they feel to provide for their loved ones back home in order for the economic, physical, and psychological violence against them to cease. They must tell and know the truth about themselves to break down the old dualistic thinking that migration and diaspora are one-way phenomena. Rather, for the author, the gray, ambiguous, and contradictory aspects of diaspora are the ones that must be tended for healing to begin (Anzaldúa 1999, 92).

While Oliva Corado’s literary work embraces migrants from all genders and background, a significant portion of her production focuses on the specific experiences and plights of women—whether back in the rural areas and the shanties of her home country or in the diaspora, as exemplified in *Nostalgia* (2016b) and *Destierro* (2016a). In this manner, Oliva Corado channels the creative and unifying power of the new *mestiza* consciousness for lifting up the voices of oppressed women and breaking down the walls that contribute to their invisibilization. She achieves this by highlighting the increasing number of women migrants in the twenty-first century who—despite their different circumstances, identities, and intersecting oppressions—come together to embody a type of universal diasporic woman whom she names “Clandestina,” in the poem of the same title from *Destierro*. This marginalized, clandestine woman is all races, all languages, all creeds at once, is one who will continue to cross borders if that means a better future for her and her loved ones, and is one who will speak the truth because she knows that she is essential to her homeland and to her host country, even as she braves the untranslatability of the in-between spaces. She is the sister of all other migrants and would-be migrants as well—that is, she is just as clandestine as the

ones who continue to struggle back home for freedom from patriarchy and poverty. Most importantly, she is her own voice that testifies of her life to those who have either stayed or migrated. Together, perhaps, they could catalyze social change, once they recognize they are on a similar journey: “Yo soy mi letra, yo soy mi canto / soy clandestina, así como vos / que al otro lado de la frontera / escuchás el eco de mi canción” (“Clandestina,” 19–20).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although under-studied thus far, the work of women poets is fundamental for understanding how Central American migration and the region’s growing diasporic communities are conceptualized in recent literature. The four poets studied in this chapter are representative of the diverse canon of contemporary Central American authors whose lives and literary production are marked by displacement and errancy, stemming from war and economic violence. Whether they have migrated intra-regionally, to Europe, or to the United States (which holds the world’s largest Central American diaspora) or have returned to their homelands after growing up abroad, these poets embody the increasingly significant transnational nature of the region’s literature in the twenty-first century. At the same time, their work challenges the traditional labels of “national” literature in the isthmus, as it is produced for and circulated among transnational or diasporic audiences within and outside Central America—often blurring linguistic boundaries by appearing in bilingual editions or even being written mainly in English or Spanglish for U.S. audiences.

Additionally, these poets explore key issues of gender that are often excluded or glossed over in mainstream literature. As the analysis in this chapter demonstrates, the treatment of gender and feminist tropes by these authors often intersects with other aspects of identity or systems of oppression that are painfully present among marginalized communities in Central America and in the nations that receive its migrant populations. In this regard, gender issues are made more complex by their interactions with childhood, indigeneity, legal status, differences in socioeconomic class, and access to academic and cultural institutions—differences that

are strikingly obvious when we compare the biographies and the work of Alexandra Lytton Regalado and Ilka Oliva Corado, for instance. Despite these intersectional differences, all four poets analyzed here share the common vision of (a) using language to break the traumatic silence caused by violence and displacement and (b) denouncing injustice by reclaiming a sense of identity that is unique to their transnational and multicultural experiences. After all, as Clifford explains, the violence at the heart of diasporic people's displacement does not "strip them of their ability to sustain distinctive political communities and cultures of resistance" (1997, 265). Likewise, as Appadurai states when referring to migrants, refugees, and those living in diasporic communities, "these moving groups can never afford to let their imaginations rest too long, even if they wish to" (2006, 589).

NOTES

1. According to the Migration Policy Institute, based on data from the U.S. government's Office of Refugee Resettlement, the number of unaccompanied minors stopped by the Border Patrol jumped from 24,668 in 2013 to 57,496 the following year. After decreasing slightly between 2017 and 2018, the numbers climbed again between June 2018 and June 2019, when more than 56,000 minors were detained at the border (Chishti, Pierce, and Telus 2019). Meanwhile, young women under age eighteen from the Northern Triangle (an even more vulnerable migrant group) constituted 32 percent of all child apprehensions in the United States in 2017 (Hallock, Ruiz Soto, and Fix 2018).
2. We prefer the term "trans-Central American" over "transisthmian," as it avoids confusion with a narrower use of "isthmian" to refer to "Panamanian." Originating from references to the Isthmus of Panama, this usage is common in scholarship about Central America; see, for example, Michael Donoghue's (2015) "Roberto Durán, Omar Torrijos, and the Rise of Isthmian Machismo."
3. See Gilroy (1993) and Clifford (1997).
4. As told in the *Popol Vuh*, the Mayas believe humans were made from corn, or maize.
5. Regarding the connection between Indigenous women during the time of conquest and Central American women during the civil war years, Guzmán Sierra states: "Son inagotables las violencias sufridas por las personas migrantes, fueron incontables las violaciones y agresiones sufridas por los pueblos centroamericanos durante las guerras de los años setenta y ochenta, más de todas

- estas violencias fueron las mujeres los principales objetos. La figura mítica de Malitzín, surge como consuelo y heroína, como refugio ancestralmente femenino” (2019, 117).
6. Lytton Regalado (2018) speaks about her life and poetry in this essay: “I See Myself in Her: Three Women Poets Through the Lenses of Time, Sexuality, and Nationhood.”
 7. Oliva Corado writes about her migration journey in her self-published memoir and first book, *Historia de una indocumentada travesía en el desierto de Sonora-Arizona* (2014).
 8. Lytton Regalado’s second poetry collection, *Relinquenda* (Beacon Press), was published in 2022, after this chapter was completed. It also explores women’s roles in family dynamics, immigration, and the Salvadoran Civil War.
 9. *Testimonio* is a type of literature produced since the 1980s, whose emphasis is to denounce and bear witness to the atrocities committed during decades of civil war and revolution in Central America; see Beverley (2004).
 10. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2018), El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (in that order) have the highest femicide rates in Latin America and the Caribbean and comprise 87 percent of all femicides in the isthmus.

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13

THE WORK OF MOURNING IN THE CENTRAL AMERICAN DIASPORA

IGNACIO SARMIENTO

*No debiera arrancarse a la gente de su tierra o país, no a la fuerza.
La gente queda dolorida, la tierra queda dolorida*

—JUAN GELMAN, NO DEBIERA . . .

*Quise ser cantante de corridos,
pero ya no canto, migro sin descanso*

—BALAM RODRIGO, “18° 07' 34.1" N 94° 29' 01.4"W
—(COATZACOALCOS, VERACRUZ)”

THE JOURNEY undertaken by thousands of Central Americans migrants to the United States is filled with danger. Kidnapping, rape, extortion, robbery, disappearance, and slaughtering are some of the threats that await the scores of people who try their luck in search of a new life every year.¹ According to the Missing Migrants Project (n.d.), nearly two thousand migrants of Central American origin died or disappeared between 2014 and 2022, most of them, presumably, on Mexican soil while traveling toward the United States. Experts agree on the difficulties of establishing an exact number. However, it is undeniable that a significant number of people from Central American countries have lost their lives on their journey to the United States. A brutal example is the infamous massacre of Tamaulipas, in 2010, when seventy-two people, most of them from Central American countries, were slaughtered only a few hundred kilometers away from the U.S. border. More

recently, on January 23, 2021, nineteen burnt bodies were also found in Tamaulipas. Regardless of the identification difficulties in a case like this, the police established that more than half of them were Guatemalans.

For years, relatives of disappeared and dead migrants have demanded information from Mexican and Central American authorities about their loved ones' fates. Still, most of these claims have been systematically ignored. The lack of interest from Mexican and Central American authorities has resulted in the emergence of a number of civil society organizations, primarily in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, that collectively fight to learn the truth about what happened to their relatives. Examples of these organizations are the Comité de Familiares de Migrantes Desaparecidos de El Progreso, Honduras (COMAFIPRO), Comité de Familiares de Migrantes Desaparecidos del Centro de Honduras (COFAMICENH), Comité de Familiares de Migrantes Fallecidos y Desaparecidos de El Salvador (COFAMIDE), and Asociación de Familiares de Migrantes Desaparecidos de Guatemala (AFAMIDEG), among others. Many of these groups have an active presence on social media. For example, Facebook is used habitually by these organizations to disseminate pictures and information about missing migrants. The vanishing of thousands of people is doubtless a profound loss for their relatives and loved ones who cannot conduct a proper work of mourning because of the uncertainty of their disappearance.

With the above information in mind, this chapter aims to explore how issues of mourning have been addressed in cultural productions that deal with the twenty-first-century Central American diaspora. In what follows, I will first discuss some theoretical foundations about the relationship between mourning and migration. Then, I will briefly discuss how recent cultural productions have tackled the problem of mourning in the context of Central American migration. Finally, I will analyze Balam Rodrigo's poetry collection *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* (2018), one of the most compelling works regarding the complexities of mourning and migration in the Central American diaspora.

MOURNING AND MIGRATION

Mourning and migration relate in different and complex forms. Mourning, writes Sigmund Freud in his classic "Mourning and Melancholia"

([1917] 1957), is the reaction to some kind of loss. The lost object, however, is not limited to a person. It can also be “some abstraction . . . , such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (243). Following this thread, we can establish that migration, especially forced migration, is in itself a loss for those who decide to leave behind their families and places of origin. According to Joanne Stubley (2009), however, the migrants’ experience of loss is not limited to abandoning their places of origin and families, it also involves other traumatic events. In her words, “The impact of immigration on an individual will always involve the experience of loss. The loss of home, country, national identity, way of life, plans for the future and so on. Traumatic events that precipitate flight will compound the sense of loss. Arriving in the new host country may confront one with further traumatic experiences” (115). In the case of Central American immigrants, the latter translates into poverty, little or no access to basic needs, and violence and discrimination in their hosting communities in the United States.

From a different perspective, migrants’ friends and relatives who stay in the so-called sending countries also experience loss, since thousands of them will never see their loved ones again, even if they reach their destination, because of the sanctions imposed on undocumented immigrants that prevent them from returning to their home countries. Too often, sadly, the fate of fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and neighbors will remain unknown. In this context, grieving the disappeared migrant becomes an intricate and often endless task with which friends and families struggle, bouncing between the hope of hearing from them and the silence that anticipates their demise. The assassination and disappearance of thousands of Central American migrants on their journey through Mexico is the reaffirmation of the worthlessness of their lives in the neoliberal world, and therefore, as Judith Butler suggests, “they cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never ‘were’” (2004, 33). The migrants’ lives were not grievable lives for the Mexican and the Central American states in the first place. Therefore, their death and disappearance are irrelevant to local authorities and supranational markets, who maintain “business as usual” in one of Latin America’s most dangerous regions.

Despite the apparent disinterest of Mexican and Central American authorities, families of missing migrants fight to learn about their friends’

and relatives' fates. They are moved by a compulsion to mourn, a will to know about the destiny of their loved ones. Mourning, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, "consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present" (2006, 9). In this regard, as Derrida continues, "nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning that confusion or doubt: one *has to know* who is buried where" (9; italics in the original). Unfortunately, the possibility of knowledge is denied to many relatives of missing migrants. Consequently, their mourning often extends for long periods, and in many cases families fail to find consolation because of the utter absence of any physical evidence of their relatives. Therefore, while migration, especially forced migration, is always an experience of loss, the case of Central American migrants has other complexities. Here, we face an intricate, traumatic situation in which losses pile up on top of each other. In addition to the experience of losing one's homeland and leaving behind friends and relatives, the mourners often also become the mourned when they die or disappear without leaving a trace during their journey.

A noteworthy feature of these mourning works is that they do not necessarily occur within a limited community (local or national). Instead, especially in the context of Latinx migration to the United States, too often we observe how the mourning process is undertaken by a broad, transnational community of mourners.² Mourning might take place in the missing ones' and dead ones' home countries, in foster communities along the way (such as the several "Casas del migrante" throughout Mexico), and among friends and relatives who wait for them at their destination.

In the epilogue of *Constituting Central American-Americans*, Maritza Cárdenas (2018) provides an insightful perspective about the work of mourning in Central American communities in Los Angeles through the analysis of the 2014 Confederación Centroamericana (COFECA) parade. For these people, who succeeded in reaching their destination, their journey's trauma is still present. The trauma is apparent in the inclusion of a float representing La Bestia, the lethal cargo train that transports thousands of undocumented Central American migrants throughout Mexico. This inclusion, indicates Cárdenas, is a perfect example of how the archive of Central American collective memory incorporates new "cultural traumas surrounding the experience of migration" (143). La Bestia's

float, continues Cárdenas, is a moving memorial that works as “collective mourning for migrants” (143), thus allowing “the grievability of the migrant body” (144) that has been systematically denied for decades. Cárdenas also notices that unlike the real train that traverses Mexico, The Beast float does not include any migrants on top of it. This absence, suggests Cárdenas, generates a form of “hypervisibility” (147), in which the audience cannot help to notice the invisible bodies. The Beast float, concludes the author, ultimately claims that, regardless of the identity of the bodies missing on the migrant trail, they all “are equally significant and worthy of being remembered” (147). The ideas embodied by the La Bestia float expose a common thread within the mourning experience of thousands of immigrants and their communities—a shared experience of loss that seems to never end. However, this open, ongoing work of mourning does not impose a pathologic melancholy à la Freud. Instead, as the float and some of the works discussed here suggest, communities often engage in an active process in which the will to mourn becomes an ethical command. These mourners, driven by a powerful internal force, demand to know the truth about their relatives’ and friends’ fates. Regardless of their country of origin, social condition, or luck, they work hard to give their loved ones a proper burial.

THE OVERPRODUCTION OF DEATH, THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF MOURNING

The hazards of migrating from Central America to the United States have been portrayed in numerous films, journalistic works, novels, poems, and other cultural productions. Movies like Cary Joji Fukunaga’s *Sin nombre* (2009), Diego Quemada-Díez’s *La jaula de oro* (2013), and Jonás Cuarón’s *Desierto* (2015), along with novels like Rafael Ramírez Heredia’s *La Mara* (2009) and Emiliano Monge’s *Las tierras arrasadas* (2015), to name a few, portray the migrants’ journey as a violent and perilous situation in which death always breathes down the back of the characters’ necks. Nevertheless, despite the overproduction of death exhibited in these works (and others), only a fraction of them offer an in-depth look into the work of mourning. A careful analysis of these works rapidly reveals that many of them chose to tell the story of contemporary

migration as an action/road story, frequently privileging the point of view of those who reach their destination, disregarding those who die and disappear along the way.

A perfect example of the above is *Desierto* (2015), directed by Jonás Cuarón. Starring Gael García Bernal, this film follows a group of undocumented immigrants who aim to cross the Arizona desert. For their misfortune, the truck that transports them breaks down in the first few minutes of the film, forcing them to continue their journey on foot. A few kilometers into the desert, however, a new threat awaits: a U.S. American white man called Sam, who resembles a Minuteman Project vigilante, is determined to kill them all for the sole reason of entering the country illegally. At the beginning of the movie, we see a group of approximately fifteen people walking into the desert. Eventually, the vigilante begins to kill them one by one. Every time a person dies, they are left behind, and the camera stays with the remaining characters. Ultimately, almost everyone has been slaughtered except for Simón, García Bernal's character, and Adela, played by Alondra Hidalgo. By the end of the film, Simón has managed to hurt Sam badly, leaving him agonizing and begging for help in the middle of the desert. In the last minutes of the film, we follow Simón traversing the inhospitable Arizona desert, carrying Adela on his back. Finally, in the long shot that closes the film, the spectator sees the survivors approaching a city, and then the camera turns to the right to provide a panoramic view of the desert. Then, the title of the film, *Desierto*, appears above the horizon line. The film does a great job portraying a dramatic and, sadly, real situation suffered by thousands of people who enter the United States through the Arizona desert. However, by the end of the narrative, the movie transmits an apparent calm. The protagonists have survived, the antagonist will presumably die soon, and the main characters are finally reaching their destination. However, what is utterly ignored by the film is the fate of the migrants' bodies. Across the film, there is no room for grieving or remembering. Spectators observe a spate of killings for over one hour, but very little sorrow.

While the perspective we observe in *Desierto* is widely extended to other works, including highly complex films like Quemada-Díez's *La jaula de Oro* (2013), it is also possible to find a small number of works that have privileged exploring the work of mourning.³ I would like to briefly highlight

two documentaries that illustrate the latter: Marcela Zamora's *María en tierra de nadie* (2010) and Marc Silver's *Who Is Dayani Cristal?* (2013).

Zamora's *María en tierra de nadie* is an emotional documentary that explores Central American migration from different points of view: the migrants, the families left behind, and migration as a social, economic, and political problem. The documentary's mainline is the story of María Inés Méndez, an elderly woman from El Salvador. In the first few minutes, spectators see Doña María in her hometown, Sensuntepeque, selling candies. Her goal is to save enough money to continue looking for her missing daughter, Sandra, who disappeared while traveling to the United States. We learn that, as part of her search process, in 2009, Doña María and a group of parents of missing migrants gathered in COFAMIDE and began a pilgrimage from El Salvador to Oaxaca, México, demanding to know the fate of their missing relatives. The documentary does an excellent and powerful job portraying the grief of those who lost friends and families and their struggle to learn the truth about them before the indifference of Mexican and Central American authorities. Also, we learn about the dozens of anonymous mass graves in Mexico that house the remains of numerous unidentified bodies, presumably of Central American immigrants. In the last scene, we see Doña María and one of her granddaughters, Sandra's daughter, holding Sandra's picture in between them. Then, the documentary informs us that Doña María has continued searching for any information about her daughter. Her mourning, as the film makes apparent, continues.

The starting point of Silver's *Who Is Dayani Cristal?* is the finding of a dead male body in the Arizona desert. The man is presumably an undocumented immigrant, and the documentary retraces his steps to find his true identity. This film does an interesting exercise. On the one hand, we see the interviews and steps taken to identify the dead man, and eventually his family, which ultimately lead the spectator to the man's family in Honduras, where we meet his daughter, Dayani Cristal. In parallel, the documentary takes an empathic approach when Gael García Bernal impersonates Dilcy Yohan, the name of the dead person found at the beginning of the film, and undertakes parts of his journey some days, weeks, and months before dying. Through this double perspective, we see the work of U.S., Mexican, and Central American authorities that finally allow the reuniting of the cadaver with his family. This effort enables his

family to learn about his fate and to conduct a proper burial, facilitating their work of mourning. Simultaneously, the documentary offers us an inside look into migration from the dead's point of view, as García Bernal attempts to retrace the deceased's steps, while reflecting on the difficulties and threats of the journey.

These three films embody some of the choices creators face when deciding to address the delicate and complex topic of Central American migration and diaspora. Undoubtedly, death is an invisible character present in most of these productions. However, producers, directors, writers, and artists are the ones who decide what to do regarding the pain inflicted by the death that haunts their work. As stated above, a panoramic view suggests that these productions often overflow their work with death but are reluctant to explore the mourning that said death produces. In this context, documentaries like *María en tierra de nadie* and *Who is Dayani Cristal?* are exceptions that must be highlighted. In what follows, I will offer an analysis of one of the few works of literature that have explored in-depth the work of mourning in contemporary Central American migration, Balam Rodrigo's *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* (2018).

THE VOICES OF THE DEAD: BALAM RODRIGO'S *LIBRO CENTROAMERICANO DE LOS MUERTOS*

Balam Rodrigo is a Mexican poet with an atypical career. He completed two degrees in biology, played fútbol, and studied theology. At age thirty-one, he started writing poetry, and he has done it with great success since then. To date, he has published over fifteen poetry books. In 2018, he won both the Premio Nacional de Poesía Tijuana for his collection *Ceibario* and the Premio de Bellas Artes de Poesía Aguascalientes for *Libro centroamericano de los muertos*.⁴

Libro centroamericano de los muertos is a powerful collection built on several layers. The book is organized by sections, each dedicated to a different country in the following order: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and, finally, Mexico. The chapters are intercalated with a section called "Álbum familiar centroamericano," divided into five parts. As Fernando Salazar (2018) states, *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* is a

polyphonic text. In each poem, we identify a different poetic voice, which coexists in the same world with the poet's lyrical voice that emerges in some stanzas of the "Álbum familiar" sections, which we can identify as Balam Rodrigo himself.

The book offers an intricate literary creation with several facets to be studied. Here, I will explore two aspects of this book that relate to the work of mourning. First, I will discuss the use of the palimpsest, which establishes a clear connection between this book and Bartolomé de Las Casas's *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*. Second, I will analyze a selection of representative poems that give voice (even if a literary one) to Central American migrants who lost their lives while crossing Mexico.

Although not inscribed on the front cover, the full title of Rodrigo's book is *Libro centroamericano de los Muertos: Brevísima relación de la destrucción de los migrantes de Centroamérica, colegida por el autor, de la orden de los escritores de poesía, año de MMXIV*. The latter confronts the reader immediately with the ghostly presence of a preexisting book, Spanish colonial friar and chronicler Bartolomé de Las Casas's *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las indias: Colegida por el obispo don fray Bartolomé de las Casas o Casaus, de la orden de Santo Domingo, año 1552*. The presence of *La brevísima relación* is far from being hidden in Rodrigo's text. In "Nota del autor," the poet explains how he has used de Las Casas's famous text: "Tanto el subtítulo y el epígrafe inicial, como los subtítulos y los epígrafes de todas las secciones corresponden a fragmentos de la obra *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*. . . Sin embargo, realicé intervenciones, actualizaciones, incorporaciones y reappropriaciones en dichos epígrafes a manera de palimpsestos, las cuales se encuentran en cursivas" (13). First introduced by Gérard Genette's *Palimpsests* ([1982] 1989), where he analyzes several forms of intertextuality, the notion of palimpsest can be understood, in Sarah Dillon's words, as "an involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other" (2007, 4). In this particular case, the palimpsest interweaves two texts written with almost five hundred years between them and that, apparently, address completely different topics: the brutality of the first decades of the Spanish Conquest, on the one hand, and the Central American migration in the first decades of the twenty-first century, on the other.

Balam Rodrigo's first intervention of de Las Casas's text appears in the "Argumento del presente poemario y palimpsesto fiel." This fragment not only introduces the reader to the main ideas of the book but also embodies some of the essential features of Rodrigo's palimpsest:

Todas las cosas que han acaecido en México, *contra los migrantes centroamericanos en tránsito hacia los Estados Unidos* [...] entre estas son las matanzas y estragos de gentes inocentes [...] que en *este país* se han perpetrado, y que todas las otras no de menor espanto . . . Así, *muy a pesar mío, y con toda la indignación y la rabia míos, testifico que* [...] muchos insensibles hombres que la cobdicia y ambición ha hecho degenerar del ser hombres, y sus facinorosas obras traído en reprobado sentido, que no contentos con las traiciones y maldades que han cometido, despoblando con exquisitas especies de crueldad *a aquellas gentes, los centroamericanos de Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua y aun de otros muchos países más.* (17)

The Mexican poet maintains de Las Casas's grammar and style to remain as faithful as possible to the original. His interventions, sometimes just by changing a few words, update and invigorate de Las Casas's famous book, making it a powerful testimony of brutality and cruelty, valid for both the early sixteenth and the early twenty-first centuries.

Libro centroamericano de los muertos's structure is also taken from de Las Casas's text, organized by country/region. In the introduction to the Honduras section, for example, Balam Rodrigo performs the following changes to *La brevísima relación*: "Desde a pocos días mataron a *muchísimos migrantes* . . . y después sucedieron otros muchos tiranos crudelísimos *de distintos carteles* que con matanzas e crueldades espantosas y con hacer esclavos e venderlos a los *tratantes de seres humanos, a los pederastas, a los varones de la droga* . . . e con la tiránica servidumbre ordinaria, desde el año de *mil y novecientos* . . . ? Y hasta el día de hoy *año de dos mil e catorce* . . . asolaron a *aquellas gentes migrantes* de la provincia e reino de Honduras" (71). In *Libro centroamericano de los muertos*, the palimpsest goes beyond its stylistic use. Balam Rodrigo's interventions to de Las Casas's book not only establish a bridge between both texts but also interweave two manifestations of violence that, despite a gap of five centuries, have a lot in common. Through this intervention, the Spanish Conquest's brutality is updated and equated to the brutality exercised

by narcos, *maras*, and the Mexican state toward the Central American population. The above strengthen Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott's words, which claim that "la condición brutal de la llamada acumulación primitiva no está en un pasado remoto y ya superado, un tiempo abstracto y especulativo, sino plenamente vigente en nuestra actualidad" (2016, 202). Thus, by connecting *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* to *La brevísima relación*, Balam Rodrigo borrows the denunciative style of de Las Casas to reinscribe it in a contemporary literary work. As a result, we find in the poet's book not only a powerful, emotional literary work but also a political, ethical statement that grieves the thousands of lives lost on Mexican soil over the last few decades.

Second, I would like to explore the representation of the dead migrant's voice in Balam Rodrigo's book. Many of the poems included in *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* are written from the migrant's perspective. While the voices of the poems are often anonymous, the section in which they are included informs the reader of their country of origin. Another relevant feature of this book is that all poems are geographically fixed by coordinates, which serve as the poems' titles.

The poem that opens the section dedicated to "De la provincial e reino de Guatemala" is called "14°40' 35.5" N 92°08' 50.4" W—(Suchiate, Chiapas)." The coordinates correspond to the degree zero of the Central American diaspora, the Suchiate River, which divides Mexico and Guatemala. This location is crucial in the study of Central American migration and diaspora because it is precisely there where thousands of people from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (or any other national origin) lose their national identities to become "Central American immigrants" in Mexico and beyond. The poem, narrated by a male voice, starts like this: "Este es el origen de la reciente historia de un lugar llamado México / Aquí migraremos, estableceremos la muerte antigua / y la muerte nueva, el origen del horror, el origen del holocausto, / el origen de todo lo acontecido en los pueblos de Centroamérica / naciones de la gente que migra" (28). This stanza reinforces the connection between the distant past and the present we have already discussed in light of the use of the palimpsest in this book. With this poem, Balam Rodrigo links the "muerte antigua," which we can associate with the brutality of the Spanish Conquest and, more recently, with the violence of the Central American revolutions and civil wars, to the "muerte nueva" carried out by gangs and narco violence

that jeopardizes the lives of thousands of Central American immigrants who dare to cross Mexico in search of a better, or at least safer, life.

After marking the Mexico-Guatemala border's relevance, the poetic voice tells his story, which is shaped by loss. He says he has arrived at the border because "me dijeron que acá murió mi padre" (28). However, the decision of leaving his hometown was also triggered by the horrors of the Guatemalan internal conflict: "Abandoné el olor a cuerpos quemados de mi aldea, / la peste militar con sus ladridos de 'tierra arrasada'" (28). These verses establish the role of loss as a major cause for migrating, a cause that is often overlooked. Thus, when the accumulations of losses finally expels the subject from his community, he decides to follow in his father's footsteps. Unfortunately for the speaker, he will face the same fate. We learn about this through his own words when he says, "Huí del penetrante olor a odio y podredumbre; / caminé descalzo hasta el otro lado del inframundo / para curarme los huesos y el hambre. / *Nunca llegué*" (28; emphasis mine). At this point, readers understand they have been hearing the voice of a dead man—something that will become a constant throughout the rest of the book. The above introduces one of Balam Rodrigo's poetry's main novelties in the Central American diasporic literature, the voice of the dead. As I have discussed in the first part of this article, death is often depicted and approached from the living's point of view. In *Libro centroamericano de los muertos*, however, the poet relinquishes that voice to the dead migrants. This, of course, occurs in a literary sense. It is a conscious decision to explore the work of mourning in the Central American diaspora from the departed's point of view.

In the second part of the poem, the voice tells the story of his death. Simultaneously, he reveals his identity and his connection with the recent history of Guatemala: "Dos machetazos me dieron en el cuerpo / para quitarme la plata y las mazorcas del morral: / el primero derramó mis últimas palabras en quiché; / el segundo me dejó completamente seco, / porque a mi corazón lo habían quemado los kaibiles / junto a los cuerpos de mi familia" (29). This stanza reveals several layers of complexities in the contemporary Central American diaspora. First, it connects the atrocities committed against the Indigenous Maya K'iche' population during the Guatemalan internal conflict, what we might call, following the voice's words, "la muerte antigua," with the twenty-first-century displacement that opens "la muerte nueva." Here, loss becomes an inherent

condition of the migrant subject. First he lost his family in the 1980s during the war, then his father at the border, and finally his own life when he attempted to escape his reality. Another relevant feature here is the multicultural dimension of the diaspora. While often condensed in singular and homogenous categories, like "Central Americans," Balam Rodrigo's poem aims to shed light on the region's multiculturalism. Thus, the voice is not only a "Guatemalan" or "Central American" immigrant but also a Maya K'iche' immigrant, a population often overlooked in the portrayal of this phenomenon.⁵

After his death, the voice does not go anywhere. Quite the contrary, he remains as a ghost in the Suchiate River, observing the fatal fate of the hundreds of migrants who every day cross the border: "Todos los días veo pasar a las hileras de muertos, / a los que migran sin llegar a Estados Unidos" (29). However, his spectral presence is not invisible to the living, who often claim to see his ghost: "Dicen polleros y coyotes que ven mi fantasma en la ribera, / por eso se santiguan y rezan al cruzar las aguas rotas" (29). The voice, nevertheless, sees himself as much more than a mere "ghost": "Dicen algunos que en la ribera de este río / se aparece un fantasma, pero yo sé que soy, / que he sido y seré, el unigénito de los muertos, / guardián de mi propia sombra, negro relámpago de mi pueblo, / bulto ahogado en esta poza en donde inicia Xibalbá" (29). With the voice's death, the multilayered connections the poem establishes in the first part are taken even further. The speaker now takes the reader to Xibalbá, the underworld of the Maya K'iche', and from his double dimension as dead but also as a specter who continually returns to the world of the living, he claims his place as the representative of a people who have suffered the uttermost violence since the arrival of the Europeans in the early 1500s. From this transcendental position, the speaker witnesses the soon-to-be-dead migrants moving toward their fatal destiny.

In just a few stanzas, this poem brings together an in-depth meditation over loss and mourning in the Central American diaspora. In the first place, the poem presents loss as the cause of displacement. The voice is drowned in the Suchiate River as part of the work of mourning for his dead father. Unfortunately, in the middle of his mourning-migration process, he becomes the lost object. His death, however, does not take the focalization away from him. Once the voice has narrated his assassination, his words acquire a new force since we are now utterly aware

of hearing a voice from beyond. Toward the end of the poem, the voice, now embodying a dead person, a mourner, and a specter, claims his transcendental position as the witness of those who will follow in his deadly footsteps.

The second poem I would like to analyze here is "19° 35' 29.9" N 99° 09' 03.3" W—(Tultitlán, Estado de México)," included in the section "Del reino e provincias de Nicaragua." This poem is told by a man called Walter, who left his home and family in Managua, Nicaragua, to migrate to the United States, aiming to "comprar con dólares algunos trastos y una estufa para mi madre" (100). The poem reveals in the first verses that Walter is already dead: "En vida me llamé Walter. Y heme aquí, con mis huesos blanqueando / el basurero municipal de Tultitlán, Estado de México" (100). Unlike the previous poem, where the voice's situation is concealed during the first half of the poem, here the voice immediately discloses his condition as departed.

Whereas in the previous poem, the dead voice assumes a certain position of power among the deceased, Walter is presented here as helpless, deprived of any possibility of action. From the public landfill where he lies, he cries, "Ahora no tengo descanso / ni sepulcro" (100). Walter's voice is a constant lament. He suffers because of his fate but also because of the people who mourn him. Speaking about his mother, he says, "Sería feliz si mi madre hiciera nacatamales y nezquizara / el maíz en su fogón. *Pero sé que no llora por el humo*" (100; emphasis mine). Walter embodies the double figure of the mourner-mourned, something we can only approach through literary (or artistic) imagination, which seems to be one of the primary goals of the book. Through this perspective, the poem sheds light on the perpetual suffering of those whose lives were violently taken in their ordeal through Mexico. In Walter's case, he was killed and robbed by the Mexican police. From the stillness of his bones chewed by dogs, he remembers the words he wrote in a migrant shelter, the last proof of his existence: "Aquí estuvo Walter, originario de Managua, Nicaragua, C.A." (100). From the public landfill, he reassures in the last verse of the poem, "Y aquí sigo" (100), that one day someone will find his remains and put an end to the perpetual mourning his family and himself are condemned to suffer.

The poem "16° 07' 12.1" N 93° 48' 11.7" W—(Tonalá, Chiapas)" is told by an eleven-year-old boy, who was born in Soyapango, El Salvador. As

in the previous poem, the first verse informs the reader that we are hearing, once again, the voice of a dead person: “Tengo 11 años, ahora y para siempre” (51). Similarly to the first poem analyzed here, one of the reasons the boy decided to leave his hometown is the death of his father, who was killed by the Mara Salvatrucha gang to rob him of “una soda y una *cora*” (51). The anonymous boy dreams of becoming a professional fútbol player, and with that in mind, he and his friend Pablo decide to migrate to the United States, dreaming of playing in the Major League Soccer. While eating in Coatepeque, Guatemala, the kids watch on TV a documentary about Jorge “El Mágico” González, the greatest Salvadoran fútbol player of all time, which creates an emotional connection between the young migrants and the legendary player. Eventually, the two young men hop on La Bestia, and tragedy occurs: “Antes de Arriaga me quedé dormido / y todavía sigo cayendo” (52). From this point on, the poetic voice will reflect on the past and events to come, establishing a relationship between his death and his home country, El Salvador.

One of the most powerful stanzas of this poem is the one that follows the falling of the boy off the train. Thus he speaks: “Llevaré para siempre, como el Mágico, / un 11 tatuado en la espalda; / quizá por el número de bolsas en que guardaron, / todo partido, mi cuerpo; / tal vez porque traía puesta la camiseta de la Selecta, / con la misma cifra o porque la muerte lleva / el 11 infinito de las vías del tren grabado en el vientre” (52). In these verses, the voice connects through the number 11 several aspects of his fatal fate. First, El Mágico’s jersey number was 11, and the boy is wearing a replica of his jersey when he falls off the train. The number on his back is now replicated by the 11 inscribed in his body by the parallel rails on which La Bestia runs, carrying the dreams (and deaths) of thousands of immigrants every day. The 11 multiplies itself when we learn that they put his destroyed body in that number of bags. Thus, the voice’s age, his admiration for one of El Salvador’s greatest icons, and the death faced by this young man are connected by the experience of migration. As the last verse of the stanza indicates, 11 is an infinite number that, as this poem’s voice, will perpetually remain in its place for the time to come.

Unlike in the previous poem, the migrant does not express rage or grief after his death. Instead, from his point of view as an eleven-year-old boy, he thinks of the bright possibilities that death offers him: “Sé que Dios juega fútbol allá en el cielo. / Pero aún no quiero estar en su equipo.

/ Me quedaré esperando en la banca / hasta que me llamen, sonriendo,
 / mi amigo Pablo y el Mágico González / para jugar con ellos” (52). This is one of the few poems in the book where death does not bring grief, stillness, or rage to the deceased, most likely because we are hearing the voice of a boy who did not die from the direct action of any external agent (although we cannot forget that he was forced to abandon his home because of his father’s assassination). Still, the verses reveal he is not ready to go yet, and he prefers to await his friend Pablo, who was traveling with him and who is also at risk of dying, to play fútbol together with their idol in this life. Thus, even after dying, the voice hopes for the future, partially resisting his fatal fate.

UNCONCEALING THE WORK OF MOURNING

Migrating is—willingly or not, consciously or not—connected to the experience of loss. This is valid for “privileged” migrants and, especially, for victims of forced displacement. In her 2006 article “Migrant Melancholia,” Alicia Schmidt Camacho explores how the impossibility for undocumented Mexican immigrants of returning home emphasized their loss, threatening “the integrity of the border crosser’s personhood” (2016, 838). In the early 2020s, in light of the recent Central American migration waves, the loss goes way beyond the traumatic experience of leaving behind relatives and friends. Today, migrants also face constant threats while traversing Mexico and crossing the U.S. border, which often leads them, sadly, to death. Despite the overproduction of death carried out by the mass displacement of people of Central American origin, scholarly and artistic work regarding mourning in the Central American diaspora is still scarce. That does not mean, under any circumstance, that grief is not a pivotal feeling among migrants’ communities and families, as the existence of several “comités de desaparecidos” in different countries and regions demonstrate.

In this context, Balam Rodrigo’s *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* is one of the few literary works that address Central American migrants’ experience from the perspective of mourning. Here, we observe how mourning and migration multiply their connections by focusing not only on the living’s realm but also on the afterlife. The latter is only possible,

needless to say, because of the literary condition of the text. In the poet's decision to provide a literary voice to the dead migrants, there is not only a poetic but also a political, ethical decision that is revealed throughout the entire book. This responsibility toward the migrants and the dead, the book suggests, was inherited by Balam Rodrigo from his father, dead when the poems were written, who "desde muy joven fue amigo / de varios centroamericanos, a quienes trató y ayudó / con la fuerza de un hermano mayor" (130). According to passages in "Álbum familiar," the poet grew up surrounded by dozens of Central Americans who stayed at the family house in the Mexican state of Chiapas (which borders Guatemala) for several days, weeks, and even months. Thus, for the poetic voice we identify with Balam Rodrigo in several passages of the book, the migrants are not conceived as aliens to his community and life but rather as integral members of it. In this sense, following Butler, we can read the grief portrayed in *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* as a manifestation of a political community that reveals mutual acknowledgment (2004, 22–23), one that resists the official compulsion of making the immigrant an "Other" who does not deserve to be grieved.

Because of the polyphonic character of this book, it is difficult to establish well-defined lines that summarize the points of view of the dead in the poems. Yet what we do observe in many of them is a claim for recognition and justice. The latter is clearly present in two of the poems analyzed here. In "14°40' 35.5" N 92°08' 50.4" W—(Suchiate, Chiapas)," for example, the departed claims his role as the first cadaver of the Central American diaspora and declares himself as the witness of the dead-to-come. In "19° 35' 29.9" N 99°09' 03.3" W—(Tuxtla, Estado de México)," the poetic voice laments his destiny and begs that someone finds him and informs his family about his fate to stop the pain. In "16° 07' 12.1" N 93°48' 11.7" W—(Tonalá, Chiapas)," the dead kid does not express grief, but he still manifests his emotions, especially his dreams of one day playing fútbol with El Mágico. *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* provides agency to the deceased migrants, presenting them as subjects who, even after death, can express their hopes, fears, and grief. By doing this, the book aims to establish a connection between the readers and the literary dead immigrants. As Juan Pablo Ruiz (2018) claims, the main invitation of the book is for us, the readers, to stop being "meros testigos, dejar de ser cómplices de la iniquidad" (159). Thus, the departed become

specters who, following Derrida (2006), are the “frequency of certain visibility. But the visibility of the invisible” (125). The specters’ main goal in this book is to not be seen by others within the literary realm. On the contrary, we, the readers, are the ones who should pay attention to their constant (re)apparitions and acknowledge their existence.

Through his poetic work, Balam Rodrigo seeks to unconceal the work of mourning that compounds every aspect of the Central American diaspora. He does not present here the success stories often portrayed in Central American media, nor the criminalization or law-breaker representation made by far-right media in the United States. Instead, the book aims to explore the human dimension, the pain that subsumes the diaspora, one that is often overlooked even in well-intended works. In this sense, Balam Rodrigo’s book joins a small number of cultural works that have decided to explore the diaspora’s intimate feelings and emotions over the prominent interpretations related to violence and social and economic inequalities. By doing this, as Nanci Buiza concludes in her analysis of the films *Which Way Home* and *Who Is Dayani Crystal?*, these works “have the capacity to recover or animate potential sensibilities and attitudes that have been suppressed by the cacophony of our data- and information-driven culture” (2018, 427). In Balam Rodrigo’s poems, as we have observed, death is not the end. It is a transition where individuals continue their grief under new forms and where new mourning relationships emerge. A grief that, far from being passive, awaits for its revenge, as the voice in the closing poems claims, “Y en un abrir y cerrar de ojos / la resurrección de los desaparecidos, / se eruirá sobre la furia y la venganza / la legión de los migrantes” (124).

NOTES

1. See Izcara Palacios (2015), Willers (2016), Castillo Ramírez (2020), Porraz Gómez (2020), and Martínez (2010).
2. For more about transnational death and transnational mourning, see Saramo (2019).
3. A critical reflection on *La jaula de oro* can be found in Estrada (2016) and in Sánchez’s chapter included in this volume.
4. See *Enciclopedia de la literatura en México* (2010), Velázquez (2018), and Ayala (n.d.).

5. While Indigenous migration is often overlooked by mass media and cultural products, it has been thoroughly studied by numerous scholars. Examples of this are Speed's *Incarcerated Stories* (2020), Sittig and González's *The Mayans Among Us* (2016), Loucky and Moors's *The Maya Diaspora* (2000), and Burns's *Maya in Exile* (1993).

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