UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

MIGRANT FIGURES: VISUAL EMBODIMENTS OF RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY US CENTRAL AMERICAN-LATINX CULTURE

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE
with an emphasis in LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINO STUDIES

by

Angie Caroline Bonilla

December 2022

The Dissertation of Angie Caroline Bonilla is approved:

_____
Professor Kirsten Silva-Gruesz, Chair

_____
Professor Juan Poblete

_____
Professor Ricardo L. Ortiz

_____
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies
Peter Biehl

Copyright © by

Angie Caroline Bonilla

2022

Table of Contents

List of Figures ……..…..……... iv

Abstract ……..…….……..…….…….. v

Acknowledgments …….…… vii

Introduction: The Problem of Migrancy …….……..…... 1

Chapter 1: The Black Body: Hemispheric Histories of Racial Seeing …….. 44

Chapter 2: The Tattooed Body: Inhabiting *Marero* Melancholia in Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre* (2009) ……..……... 78

Chapter 3: The Feminized Body: Voids, Virtue, and the Evanescent in Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre* (2009) and Diego Quemada-Díez's *La Jaula de Oro* (2013) …….…. 140

Chapter 4: The Data Body: Desert Necroviolence and Racializing Assemblages in Marc Silver's *Who is Dayani Crystal?* (2014) …… 193

Bibliography …….……..……..... 234

List of Figures

Figure 1. 1. Paul Ratje. *Topshot-US-Politics-Immigration-Texas.* 2021 44

Figure 1. 2. Bonobo1990. “Lil’ Mago and Willy ‘El Casper.” 2012 78

Figure 1. 3. Influence Film Club. Poster for the film *Who is Dayani Cristal?* 2014.

……...… 224

Figure 1. 4. Beatriz Cortez. “No Cages No Jaula.” 2020 231

Abstract

Migrant Figures: Visual Embodiments of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in US Central American-Latinx Culture

Angie Caroline Bonilla

Migrant Figures: Visual Embodiments of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in US Central American-Latinx Culture argues that twenty-first-century migrant figures visually embody the ideological complexities undergirding the present-day US immigration crisis. My interdisciplinary and multimedia cultural study sutures together migrant figures depicted in post-1980s literature, film, and visual art emerging across Central American, Mexican, Caribbean, and North American cultural contexts. Through readings of Carlos Guillermo Wilson's novel *Chombo* (1981), Edwidge Danticat's fictional and nonfictional writing, Cary Fukunaga's film *Sin Nombre* (2009), Diego Quemada-Díez's film *La Jaula de Oro* (2013), Marc Silver's documentary *Who is Dayani Crystal?* (2014), and Beatriz Cortez's performance piece "No Cages No Jaulas" (2020), I demonstrate how migrant figures constellate visual embodiments of meaning entwined with politicized migrant subjectivities. Drawing upon feminist and queer materialist thought, my project's visual reading practice of "embodied perception" traces a "politics of dis/embodiment" in which migrant figures visually de/materialize through co-constituted racial, gendered, and sexual processes. Grating against Western liberal renderings of a unified human migrant subjectivity, I argue for the need to ground cultural and theoretical investigations of migrant culture in frameworks that emerge from embodied forms of knowledge practices. Understood as

a relational ontology, the migrant figure houses alternative affective, material, and social affinities that expand the conceptual perimeters of race, gender, sexuality, immigration, and citizenship and the epistemic parameters of US Central American and Latinx studies. This project makes significant interventions in visual studies, intersectional thought, and cultural politics of migration.

Acknowledgments

This project could not and would not exist without the unflinching support of my family. They have helped me weather all the storms of my life through their demonstration of strength, faith, and the fundamental belief that *la unión hace la fuerza*. I want to thank my parents Daysi and Transito Bonilla, for living out this crazy and wonderful diasporic dream that is our family. My love to the Poach, Coronel, and Williams families. *Amor* to my sisters Karen and Joanna for being the most loyal siblings I could have ever asked for. My deepest gratitude to all the friendships and sisterhoods that I have made throughout my academic quest. A special thank you to my feminist *familia* from scratch, Isabel Arellano Buchanan, and Victoria Sanchez. Thank you for being the most quirky and fabulous *bruja* entities I could have ever encountered. A special shoutout to my favorite karaoke buddies, Ruby Hernandez, and Graciela Solis. No experience will ever quite live up to Friday night karaoke in Santa Cruz. It is forever, just another day without you. I want to thank Christopher Rodelo, Josh Guzman, and Mauricio Ramirez for their encouragement and model of Latinx perseverance. Shoutout to my LA Hoya family for their good wishes throughout this journey. Thanks to my fellow steppers and zhumbistas and the Coffee Bean baristas who colored my mundane writing days with their vibrancy. My BIGGEST thanks to my Hoya sister and dissertation writing partner Sonia Valencia. You are an amazing Chicanx spirit of kindness, humor, and compassion, for which I am forever grateful.

I want to express the deepest thanks to my dissertation committee chair Kirsten Silva-Gruesz for always believing in the potential of this project and for encouraging

me not to diverge from such a pertinent topic. Thank you for witnessing me and the great potential that was this inexplicable Central American (I daresay -American?!) desire. I want to thank my dissertation committee professor Juan Poblete for his critical insights into my writing and for always taking me up to the task for the execution of my ideas. I want to thank my Georgetown professor Christine So, for sharing her writing productivity tools and introducing me to Peter Boice's *Professors as Writers.* To this day, I keep your copy. I want to thank my Georgetown professor and second-wave feminist trainer Elizabeth Velez for recognizing my undergraduate writing potential. I express the warmest appreciation to my long-time Georgetown mentor Ricardo Ortiz who not only introduced me to the film *Sin Nombre* (the film that started it all!) but also kindled in me a love for diasporic reimaginings.

I dedicate this manuscript to Central American migrant children, for in the depths of their experiences are the seeds of a radical world of past, present, and future belonging.

LET'S GO BANANA SLUGS!!

Introduction: The Problem of Migrancy

> When figures are exercised, they move; and we are moved by them.
> —Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "migrancy" as "the fact, condition, or phenomenon of habitual movement from one place to another" ("Migrancy"). Yet the same US dictionary's example of the word in common usage chooses a morally freighted, negative context as in "the social and economic evils of *migrancy*." ("Migrancy") The available usage of "migrancy" as an abstracted "evil" points to the present-day characterization of migrants and migration through a meritocratic language of un-deservingness. Stereotyped characterizations of migrants as a criminal, civil, and economic threat to North American society arguably work in tandem with the depiction of migrants as "good" and "deserving" would-be-citizens to reduce the problem of immigration to a matter of moral virtuousness. Alongside changes in migratory patterns, ranging from an increase in unaccompanied adolescents to the mobilization of large migrant caravans, politicians and media outlets overwhelmingly frame the "immigration crisis" as a social and economic evil.[1] The misrepresentation of actual migrants and fictive migrants, such as in television, film, and popular culture, animates the social narrative of immigration as a problematic, chaotic, and evil phenomenon. The premise of this dissertation study is that the twenty-first-century migrant has

1. Despite the militarization of borders and expansion of immigration enforcement regimes in the last three decades, the US continues to see an increase in unauthorized immigration. The Pew Research Center reports that from 1990 to 2017, the US saw a rise from 3.5 to 10.5 million unauthorized immigrants yearly. The report shows a slight decrease in 2007 and the following years. See Passel and Cohn.

become one of this era's most prominent political and cultural figures. Within this project's scope, "migrant figures" designate the ever-evolving and convoluted ways the migrant subject-turned-figure traverses historical time and space. In addition to being an objective condition and/or phenomenon, I understand "migrancy" as the material, cultural, and ideological processes accompanying migration as a social phenomenon that becomes entwined with the migrant as a politicized subject. The questions that ground this study include: what is behind the making of migrant subjects as figures of civil and economic threat and moral perversion or, conversely, as figures of pervasive victimization and brute tragedy? How does the cultural and political making of migrant figures contribute to past and contemporary theorizations of migrancy?

My dissertation project responds to the political and cultural making of migrant figures ranging from the Reagon era to the contemporary moment. *Migrant Figures: Visual Embodiments of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary US Central American-Latinx Culture* argues that this era's migrant figures, from the lasso-whipped migrant to the tattooed gang member to the caged child, embody the material, cultural, and ideological complexities undergirding the problem of migrancy. In moving from literature to cinematic film to performative visual art emerging from post-1980s renditions of migration, this interdisciplinary and multimedia study delineates the racial, gendered, and sexualized boundaries of embodiment that relate yet differentiate contemporary migrant figures across narrative time and space. The first subsection, "Rethinking Migrant Subjectivity," begins by addressing flawed Western liberal assumptions historically undergirding migration as a social phenomenon and the

migrant subject as a social and political actor. In "Keywords and Methodology," I turn to feminist, queer, and materialist phenomenological accounts of embodiment and perception to outline my methodological approach of "embodied perception" to the cultural study of Central American migrant figures.

In "Contextualizing Contemporary Central American Migration," I elaborate on how a history of US imperial imposition in the isthmus—making it the material and symbolic "backyard" for North American political and economic maneuvering—resulted in historical and contemporary waves of forced displacement from Central America to the US. In "Material and Visual Cultures Inside and Outside of Central America," I show how anti-communism, neoliberalism, and racial capitalism drive and shape Central American migration and diasporic literature, film, and performative visual art. In "Project Interventions," I elaborate on how US Central American studies as an interdisciplinary field theorized Central American subjectivity out of the marginalized positionality of the "Central American-American" migrant subject. I depart from these past renderings of Central Americanness as always already apart, abject, and readable within an identitarian crisis of meaning to move towards an analytical model of relational differentiation that relates (yet does not conflate) Central Americanness with *Latinidades*. I argue that US Central American ways of being, forms of agency, and theorizations of embodiment remain underdeveloped within the constraints of Foucauldian-centered representational politics. I define a visual reading practice of "embodied perception" that rectifies problematic ontologies across US Central American studies and humanities-oriented migration studies by

conceptualizing the migrant figure as a visual embodiment situated in a "third space" between subject and object. The visual embodiment of migrancy is as critical to the cultural and political work of making migrant figures as it is to the epistemological project of making migrants matter.

I. Rethinking Migrant Subjectivity

In *The Figure of the Migrant*, philosopher Thomas Nail argues for the need to reinterpret political thought from the standpoint of the migrant figure. To understand the depth and complexity of migrants' historical role in shaping culture and society, Nail contends that we must understand the migrant as a *constitutive* and not *derivative* figure of Western politics. He argues that conceptualizing the migrant figure as a failed citizen validates only place-bound forms of political membership. When political theories interpret migrants from the standpoint of the state and a normative state of non-movement, we treat societies as "static entities of fixed members" rather than "continuous circulations of metastable social flows" (Kelley). A derivative understanding of the migrant figure as a failed citizen falsely aligns political understandings of the migrant with the stasis of state structures (such as a rigid, place-bound definition of citizenship) instead of the primacy of social motion historically animating the phenomena of migration *and* political institutions.

To rectify this misinterpretation, Nail introduces the political philosophy of "kinopolitics," which emerges out of the importance of social motion.[2] Investigating

2. As an analytical model, "kinopolitics" emphasizes the historical flows of migration, how migrants have moved and/or been incorporated as citizens, and how migrants constitute a "counter-power" to state structures.

the sociohistorical processes behind the barbarian, nomad, vagabond, and proletariat, Nail contends that (time and time again in history) a specific permutation of the migrant figure emerged as the "regime of social motion" changed within a particular society. Nail describes how the social conditions for a growing political order's territorial or judicial expansion were the expulsion and depoliticization of a segmented population. [3]The exclusionary movement of depriving some members of territorial, political, juridical, or economic status propelled the expansion of the given social and political order.[4] In short, "expulsion as expansion" constitutes the migrant figure as the motivating force of social history and political theory.

Nail's political reinterpretation holds promise on many levels. For one thing, Nail's call to shift dominant interpretations of migration from the standpoint of non-movement to movement provides a positive understanding of the migrant as a central force of history, in contrast with understanding the migrant from a place of failure or lack. This theoretical shift not only problematizes a singular definition of place-bound

3. Across these distinct historical formations, Nail identifies a similar pattern of social expansion that occurs through expulsion: "The kinetic theory of expansion by expulsion is this: all hitherto existing societies have been able to expand—territorially, politically, juridically, economically—only on the condition of some kind and degree of prior social expulsion. The migrant is the figure of this expulsion. The process of dispossessing migrants of their social status (i.e., expulsion) to develop further or advance a given form of social motion (i.e., expansion) is not unique to the capitalist regime of social motion" (Kelley).

4. Nail notes how this logic of expansion through exclusion underpins modern, Western politics where, for example, in the US, the stricter the immigration laws (in tandem with an ever-expansive definition of crime and criminality), the more migrants violate them and, hence, more crime statistics point to the need for "tough on immigration" laws because of the increase in immigration violations. Not only does the law comply with maintaining the conditions by which the criminal migrant figure is made possible, but the law also determines the criminal migrant figure as the new norm for immigrant enforcement regimes. That "[m]igrants are a constitutive part of a juridical feedback mechanism that requires for its expansion the legal expulsion of a migrant population," as Nail contends, "is part of the fundamental kinetic structure of juridical power" (Kelley). Nail also gives the example of the barbarian in the ancient world as an example of political dispossession and the nomad of Neolithic societies as an example of territorial dispossession.

political membership; it also points to the fact that the territoriality of any given political order is contingent on movement. However, as many past critics of Nail's kinopolitics (and other "nomad" or "cosmopolitan" theorizations of the migrant) have acknowledged, there are limitations to a macro-historical account of the migrant figure. Nail's theory does not naively celebrate or valorize migrancy as previous, less convincing readings have done. Works such as Gregory Feldman's *We Are All Migrants* (2015) and Iain Chamber's *Migrancy, Culture, and Identity* (1993) attempt to reclaim the agency of the migrant and give migration its "due" by valorizing the social phenomenon of migration through a universalizing imperative.[5] Critics of Nail's formulation of migrancy highlight how kinopolitics fails to account for questions of subjectivity, embodiment, and agency as they pertain to historical inequities and other motivating social factors behind migration.[6]

Building upon these critics, I point to the fact that a macro account of migration as a social phenomenon fails to account for how the problem of migration gets reduced (time and time again) to a problem of choice. Within a North American context, at the center of anti-immigration rhetoric is the claim that migrants willingly choose to put

5. For example, Gregory Feldman reinterprets the history of political power to claim that "we are all migrants" because the modern-day political citizen is increasingly restricted by environmental, economic, and political instability. Also, see Iain Chamber's *Migrancy, Culture, and Identity* (1993).

6. Adriana Nomvia, for example, highlights Nail's negligence in connecting "kinetic powers" to the racial dynamics behind migration in Latin America's historical context. When writing on migrants from Mexico, Nail oversimplifies the motivations that propel human movement, failing to account for how racial division has shaped and continues to shape human inequality and the social dynamics of movement. In a similar vein, Andrew Dilts states that while Nail offers a framework for understanding the movements of people, by not foregrounding the action, motivations, and self-understandings of those same people, his political philosophy of migrants "risks freezing them into the same stasis which the book seeks to resist" (*Westmoreland* 159).

themselves at risk.[7] This rhetoric surfaces in explicit terms when political leaders appear on media outlets to declare "do not come" to migrants.[8] When political leaders and media discourse reduce migration to a matter of choice, the migrant individual becomes the culprit of the "macro problems" of immigration, including the civil, economic, and security concerns immigration presents to host territories. While Nail's theorization of the migrant figure offers a structural understanding of which segments of the population inherit expulsion, this paradigm overlooks how the migrant figure, on the level of individuality and selfhood, gets reduced to a narrative of freedom and choice. Thus, I call for the need to reinterpret the migrant figure on both a macro-level of migration as a social phenomenon and a micro-level of subjectivity. In the following, I move towards a theorization of the migrant figure that addresses how stasis troubles the migrant figure "out there" (where a person becomes expelled and politically dispossessed) and "in here" (where an individual is judged on the level of rational thinking).

The migrant figure departs from a rigid and static conception of citizenry *and* rationality. To elucidate this point, I turn to Linda Alcoff's account of selfhood in *Visible Identities* (2006).[9] In her extensive analysis of the Western aversion to cultural

7. As the editors of *The Border and Its Body: The Embodiment of Risk Along the U.S-México Line* (2019) assert: "A common trope about undocumented migrants is that they choose to put themselves in harm's way when they cross the border without the permission of the U.S. government. Such an assertion places the responsibility for their suffering and death on themselves…this argument obscures centuries of institutionalized racism and exploitation in both the United States and the migrants' countries of origin. It also displaces responsibility for the ongoing crisis from the governments of México, Central America, and the United States onto their most vulnerable populations… Such brutal realities make a travesty of the word 'choice' itself" (9-10). The rhetoric of choice overlooks the historical inequalities and realities of risk and lived precarity.

8. See Dwyer and BBC News.

9. My entry point to Linda Alcoff's work is her engagement with the political and philosophical

identity, Alcoff argues that liberal philosophical traditions constituted selfhood through a disengaged and negating form of rationality, so that at the center of our modern understanding of the rational subject is the ethical and epistemic mastery of a detached and objectifying rational actor. Alcoff explains how the ideal of an autonomous and disengaged self, capable of objectifying emotions and the surrounding world, became a cornerstone of the modern political subject during three significant eras of Western thought.[10] The Western ideal of autonomous disengagement anchor nativist and xenophobic critiques against multicultural identity similar to anti-immigration discourse.[11] The idealization of a disengaged, rational political subject holds

formations of subjective agency and rationality as they have been historically and theoretically linked to processes of racial and gendered identity formation and the self. While I could turn to many different thinkers that engage with theories of rationality, I turn to Alcoff's account of the self because she engages with the figure of the rational subject at the center of liberal humanism. In recounting the fallacies of identity politics, Alcoff helps us rethink from which social ontology we derive our contemporary definition of migrant subjectivity.

10. Western formulations of rationality derive from an ethical, epistemic, and colonial investment in negating an externalized threat. Even though the ideal of an autonomous and disengaged self emerged out of the white male bourgeois class, the resonance of an autonomous self reaches back to the ancient world, albeit in different ways. Alcoff traces the first autonomous account of the self back to Plato and the Stoics. Like Plato's idea of truthful belief, the Stoics held "mastery of the self" as the touchstone of moral virtue and the political subject. In the ancient world, "moral virtue was defined as the mastery of the rational self over the desiring self," in the modern era, the ethical motivation for autonomy morphed into an epistemological motivation where rationality became redefined as disengagement (71). Spearheaded by Enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes, the ideal of an autonomous, disengaged, and objectifying self became a foundational aspect of the scientific worldview and the liberal political subject. In the modern colonial era, the epistemological motivation for autonomy converged with the Christian motivation for autonomy as "mastery over the Other." As Alcoff notes, although the ethical mastery of the self, epistemic mastery of the self, and colonial mastery over the Other (and the world) depart from different historical contexts, they all end in the same view, that "the idea of being constituted by others threatens such a self with dissolution" (71). Alcoff goes on to claim that the constitution of the essential self as "the capacity to resist, to transcend and to exceed all attempts at representation" is a "Western pathology written into a phenomenological ontology of being, and it has unconsciously constituted the very meaning of 'autonomy' and 'freedom' in Western political traditions (71). Liberal ontology makes negation the cornerstone of the "free" and "autonomous" political subject; the self cannot accept a positive contribution of the external (such as desire or other constraints of social life) or the Other without the dissolution of the self.

11. Alcoff underscores the many critiques launched against multiculturalism. She highlights how nativist and xenophobic arguments against immigrants hold that if cultural identity conflicts with a person's ability to reason and engage in the politics of civil society, then "their allegiance to their culture

consequences for understanding migration as a social phenomenon and how the migrant individual becomes "representative" of that movement. The trope of choice holds that if migrants cannot critically distance themselves to *choose* not to place themselves in harm's way, their insistence on migrating cannot be rational. When migration is reduced to the trope of choice, the *real* problem lies in the migrant's choice to migrate and, in essence, the failure of rational thinking.

The migrant figure as a failed rational subject reveals the messy liberal legacy of selfhood at the center of the modern political subject. Classical liberalism posits a self prior to the external constraints of social life. I suggest that this Western understanding of rationality surfaces in the political language surrounding migrant figures. Behind the discourse of choice and migrants as an external threat is a Western anxiety over the dissolution of the self. Migrant figures, as neither a strictly individualized nor collective construct, bring a static (as in disengaged) and interiorized (as in negating) account of subjectivity into crisis. In short, we can understand the migrant figure as a pertinent juncture of self-other relations in which the inherent weaknesses and biases of Western thought about self and out emerge. No matter how or how often scholars and migration advocates demonstrate how the Western social and political order historically constitutes the very conditions of migration, the overwhelming hold of a disengaged rational self will distort our understanding of the problem of migrancy. Aside from reinterpreting political histories of migration, we need to recognize the ontological interdependency between self and other and undo

cannot be rational" (53).

strict and static boundaries between interiorized and exteriorized ways of thinking. Undoing the liberal account of selfhood as a compartmentalized entity is critical to diagnosing and undoing the problem of migrancy.

My "antidote" to the dominant understanding of the problem of migrancy is to rethink the migrant subject's ontological relationship between inside-outside and self-other through a materialist understanding of the migrant figure. As an alternative to the overdetermined and static constructs of the migrant as a failed citizen and rational subject, this project moves towards understanding migrant figures as open, dynamic, and evolving entities that emerge from a material world and interdependent relationalities. Within the materialist tradition of thought, materiality refers to the animate and inanimate matter and natural and constructed matter that shapes and constricts humans' spatial, social, and bodily relations. As part of the materialist turn, phenomenological studies have been pivotal in accounting for the transformative, active, and practical aspects of "embodied subjectivities," emphasizing how matter and embodiment structure the social before and while rational actors encounter them.[12] The "materialist turn" coincides with an "ontological turn" because of the materialist argument that subjectivities are necessarily embodied, undermining the historical privileging of the mind over the body in theorizing subjectivity and lived experience. To rethink migrant subjectivity, I conceptualize migrant figures as a "third space,"

12. This assertion is not to deny the role of ideas in the formation of consciousness but to assert that consciousness and cognition come in many different forms, including the material and nonconceptual. Materiality does not overtake immaterial things, such as language, ideology, and consciousness, as if the material and immaterial were mutually exclusive. Instead, as materialists contend, the material and immaterial are deeply embedded.

somewhere between subject and object, like the way phenomenological accounts of subjectivity foreground the ontological interdependence between subject-object and self-other.

Through a materialist study of migrant figures, I offer a paradigm for cultural studies of migrancy which focalizes the embodiment of risk, choice, and agency. Like the way Alcoff argues that an interdependent model of reasoning holds consequences for all individuals of civil society, I propose an interdependent model of migrant subjectivity to approach the ethical and moral politics behind migrancy.[13] For many materialist and phenomenological thinkers, including Alcoff, "interpretive horizons" convey the messy and entwined temporality and spatiality of subject-object and self-other relations within the greater phenomenal world. Situated or "embodied" reasoning constitutes an interpretive horizon for ways of knowing, thinking, and being, including that of the body and senses. A more nuanced model of migrant subjectivity, where selfhood and migranthood are understood as interdependent, will help us account for how migrants become tethered to moral abstractions of migrancy as "evil" through their

13. Alcoff locates the "antidote" for our modern understanding of rationality and the disengaged self in the hermeneutic of "situated rationality." The misguided principle of unsituated rationality has been the base of the rational thinker as a political subject and has become the ideological cornerstone of liberal ontology. Reasoning is not an individualized or private affair but is always already mediated by the subject's cognitive and corporeal interaction with the social. Because rationality occurs within a given "field of meaning" or "horizon," situated reasoning points to the fact that the self has a fundamentally *social* rather than individual foundation. Moreover, rational deliberation does not require the individual to minimize her embeddedness within a social group. She conceptualizes situated reasoning as a hermeneutic for the self since "situated reasoning" conveys the interdependent and interrelational nature of rationality within self-other relations. Linking this hermeneutic with a phenomenological account of subjectivity, Alcoff asks what happens when embodiment structures and organizes the relational and epistemic possibilities within the self and in self-other relations. In many ways, Alcoff foreshadows the ontological intervention of the "materialist turn" in accounting for how the self develops from inter-subjectivity and inter-embodiment.

embodiment as an external and otherized threat.[14] As Maurice Merleau-Ponty states in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002): "The unity of either the subject or the object is not a real unity, but a presumptive unity on the horizon of experience. We must rediscover it, as anterior to the ideas of subject and object, the fact of my subjectivity and the nascent object, that primordial layer at which both things and ideas come into being." (255)[15] In line with this phenomenological understanding of subjectivity, I propose approaching the cultural study of migrant figures on the "primordial" level where objects and ideas come into being. Understood this way, we expand our understanding of migrant subjectivity by accounting for the dynamism of embodied consciousness and implicit forms of knowledge before and outside of rationalization.

II. Keywords and Methodology

My early research on contemporary representations of Central American migration began with an interest in transnational transit spaces of exchange and crossings in which diasporic and migrant cultures had been historically imbricated in capital and labor economies. During this early formulation of "migrant economies," I looked toward the intersectional and interdisciplinary work of feminist and queer

14. Here, I point to the significance of how abstracted representations of migrancy as "evil" and migrant figures as ethically inept, morally perverse, willfully irrational, and an otherized threat derives from all three Western iterations of a disengaged, negating self. Like how the threat of the Other became decontextualized, dehistoricized, and then universalized in Western political and philosophical thought against the backdrop of colonial expansion, in this contemporary moment, the danger of an externalized threat that parallels the ontological danger of submitting to a selfhood predicated on "being-for-others" has become universalized through the migrant figure. I understand "ethics" as a more subjective understanding of right and wrong where individuals take decisions based on individual character and "morals" as the more widely shared, collective, and societal norms about right and wrong. Migrant figures "surface" through a language of ethics and morality.

15. I cite the 2002 Routledge version. The original French manuscript *Phénomènologie de la perception* was published in 1945.

scholarship on migration to articulate my political positionality around the migrant subject. Anthologies such as *Queer Migrations* (2005) and *Queer and Trans Migration* (2020) were at the forefront of denaturalizing "immigration" terminology, expanding terms such as "migrant" and "migrancy" to register the historically "unaccommodating" relationship between state institutions and "deviant" populations. As the anthology, *Queer and Trans Migrations* posits, "legal statuses reflect not 'types' of migrants but the workings of power and knowledge that seek to differentiate among migrants; delimit rights and protections that they will be granted or denied; and shape forms of surveillance, discipline, normalization, and dispossession to which they are subjected" (8). Therefore, in this project I utilize "migrant" (as opposed to "immigrant," "refugee," or "asylum seeker") to reject the violence of top-down legal distinctions imposed on migrants. The term "migrant" emphasizes how normative and narrow definitions of the nation and citizenry are produced and contested through "technologies of exclusions," including detention centers, deportation apparatuses, and border zones. This intersectional work on migration expands the categories of "migration" alongside "queerness" to draw attention to the disciplinary processes of differentiation that play a hand in regimes of normalization. "Queering migrancy" means accounting for how social antagonisms of citizenry and nation emerged out of epistemologies and social formations based on xenophobic, colonialist, capitalist, racist, and sexist regimes that disavowed certain groups as non-rights-bearing-human.

In line with queer and feminist cultural theorists such as Jose Muñoz and Sara Ahmed, this project conceptualizes "queerness" as the desire for another way of being

in both the world and time. "Queerness" refers to the forces that move us toward other ways of being in the world, just as "queer temporalities" designate the messy and unfinished work of utopic desires. Many queer and feminist thinkers draw upon the phenomenological work of Edmund Husserl, particularly Husserl's "horizon of being," to interrogate the "time consciousness" of the past, present, and future moments. For example, in *Queer Utopias* (2009), Muñoz argues that the utopic quality of queerness can be perceived in the intimacies, gestures, and affiliations of a "doing" present that is incomplete as it continues to unfold within our horizon. For Muñoz, queerness is "a type of affective excess that presents the enabling force of a forward-dawning futurity" (23). Queer intimacies and longings offer a window to other temporalities and ways of being in the world. Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenologies* also draws upon the phenomenological work of Husserl to expand the paradigm of queerness to the forms of queer directionalities. She states: "Even when orientations seem to be about which way we are facing in the present, they also point us toward the future. The hope of changing directions is that we don't always know where some paths may take us: risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer" (Queer Phenomenology 21). In line with the more extensive queer and feminist project of "queering temporality," throughout my project, I emphasize queer-like moments that conjure an alternative past, present, and future to seek out alternative socialities of migrancy. Understood in this way, queerness is a present yet unfinished utopic project challenging social formations that are already determined.

Feminist thought has been at the forefront of expanding previous phenomenological theories of inter-embodiment to account for how bodies are lived differently. Following Merleau-Ponty's understanding that the body participates in a dialectic, as a "third term" somewhere between subject and object, inter-embodiment holds that just like sensation depends on nearness or proximity of another, embodiment depends upon relationality. Embodiment is not an individualized nor closed-off phenomenon as it is always mediated by the body's encounter with other humans and non-humans, including objects. As the anthology *Thinking Through the Skin* (2001) posits, the "relationship between bodies is characterized by a 'with' that precedes, or is the condition of possibility for, the apartness of 'my body'" (5). Upholding the relationality and sensuality of being-with-others, feminist phenomenologies extend the feminist project of taking bodies seriously as the epistemological departure and locus of investigation. The task for these thinkers has been to honor the phenomenological emphasis on lived and felt intercorporeality while criticizing the universalism of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Feminist phenomenological theories of inter-embodiment connect the inter-relationality and interdependence of embodiment to materialist conceptualizations of racial, gendered, and sexualized differentiation.[16] Feminist theories of inter-embodiment also depart from the recognition that the public sphere and philosophical discourses have historically marginalized women and

16. For example, Linda Alcoff turns to phenomenology to trouble liberal renderings of race, gender, and sexuality and dated understandings of agency and rationality as they have been historically linked to the self and racial formation. In Alcoff's phenomenological account of the self, racial and gendered differentiation emerge from an interdependent and "social" understanding of co-perception (as co-perception) and interembodiment.

femininity by associating masculinity with reason and femininity with the body.[17] The feminist antidote to this historical misinterpretation is to understand the body as both a "locus of thought" and an "object of thought" that has already been subject to interpretation. To walk this fine line, feminist materialist thinkers posit that the function of social differences establishes the boundaries that "mark out" the body as singular, legible, and coherent. Embodiment is relational and differential as intercorporeality emerges from sites of social differentiation and histories of social contact.

Materialist thought acknowledges the interdependence between humans, objects, material structures, and other (micro)organisms that populate our environment. While different interdisciplinary iterations of materialist thought focus on distinct objects and set of inquiries (across fields such as linguistics, social ecology, posthumanism, and animal studies), the primacy of matter in everyday existence unites this array of critical thought.[18] As part of the materialist turn, feminist cultural materialists have also applied phenomenological theories of inter-embodiment and co-perception to study diaspora, migrancy, and other "contact zones."[19] Understood as a

17. Feminist thinkers have also adopted phenomenology to counter the "disembodying" models of structuralism and poststructuralism that place language as the literal and metonymic center of theories of culture. See Ahmed and Stacey.

18. A central question underpinning the broader movement of "new materialisms" is how the body and the material world contribute to the nature of phenomenal experience. The idea that we are embodied humans living in a material world unites this diverse body of social, theoretical, and political investigations around material cultures, realities, and experiences.

19. Materialists situate perception somewhere between pure objectivity and pure subjectivity. In the case of visual perception, consciousness is material, embodied, and mostly nonconceptual in how an anticipatory structure of perception (or anticipatory expectations) constitutes what perception becomes. Part of this "anticipatory structure" includes the disciplining of the social, understood in a Foucauldian sense as a "scopic regime." Yet, a phenomenological understanding of perception emphasizes the productive value behind the anticipatory nature of perception, including the relational and tactile quality of perception. Perception is relational and intersensory in that it "could not function without a rich history of inter-involve-/ments between embodiment, movement, body, image, touch, sight, smell, language, affect, and color" (Connoly 185). Within that "half-second delay between the reception of sensory

third space or interpretive horizon, inter-embodiment holds that embodiment and perception and interdependent. That is, perception expands out to the intimacy of the self with others. Showing how these concepts have been applied to cinema studies, Laura Marks' *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2016) explores the discerning and tactile perception of a "diasporic" or "inter-cultural gaze."[20] As opposed to a dominant account of optic visuality in which a unified, central subject generates a cohesive and intentional visual, Marks underscores the "inter-involvements" between senses, affect, and memory to convey an implicit and primordial sense of belonging. Like other materialist theories of perception, Marks transforms embodiment into an enlivened site of sensory experience. Through the body's capacity to organize and stylize its "lifeworld," the diasporic gaze adopts a "worlding" quality in naming, thereby transforming the gaps and silences in the trauma of cultural difference into the discernment of texture. Beyond the lived and differential limitations of embodiment, a materialist account of the world locates the agentic capacities of the body in how our perception of the world alters both embodiment and

---

experience and the formation of an image—of language, affect, feeling, touch, and anticipation," visual perception's complex mixing dramatizes the sense of disruption and/or belonging lingering within experience" (Connoly 181). Perception animates the tacit feeling of non/belonging to the world as "visual experience is saturated with the tactile history of the experiencing agent" (Connoly 182).

20. Marks explores embodied modes of cinematic spectatorship across cultural difference and "cultural divides." For Marks, within the tradition of "intercultural cinema," the image evokes the sensual memory of lost homes, places, objects, and people so that seeing produces a different register of touch. As opposed to understanding visuality in terms of the distinction between subject and object, Marks defines perception as the "discernment of texture" to foreground the political issues of displacement in diasporic films, including the relationship between present, absent, and remembered bodies. As opposed to dominant definitions of perception, where a distant and differentiating gaze divides the viewing subject and object, Marks' idea of "haptic visuality" refers to how "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch" (2). For Marks, "the tactility of the image, the ways that spectators might touch the film with their eyes, is intimately bound up with the differential effects of diasporic culture in which the 'sometimes traumatic interrogation of personal and family memories, only . . . create[s] an empty space where no history is certain'" (Marks 2000: 5).

the world.

My project expands the feminist tradition of taking bodies and the materialist tradition of taking relationality seriously. My engagement with these keywords and their iterations of feminist and queer phenomenologies stems from my cultural engagement with the making of migrant figures across literary, cinematic, and performative modalities. No other writer has played such a pivotal role in moving my research inquiry toward the topic of migrant figures as Sara Ahmed. Throughout her writing, Ahmed engages with different social figures of unhappiness, or what she calls "unhappy organizing tropes" or "affect aliens." Figures such as the stranger, feminist killjoy, unhappy queer, and melancholic migrant populate her different theoretical engagements with queer studies, affect theory, phenomenology, and critical race studies. Where some figures adopt a more "emotive-driven" formulation as "affective containers," some figures adopt a more "object-driven" formulation, such as the melancholic migrant, and others adopt a more "idea-driven" formulation, such as the figure of the child as a willful subject. Ahmed conceptualizes figures as "affect aliens," those who do not desire the right way, and "affective containers" that bear the promise of happiness or unhappiness. Ahmed's work demonstrates how figures mobilize social history through their mobilization of social meaning. When figures are exercised, certain affectations and ideas get deposited into certain bodies or objects more than others. For Ahmed, over time, these entities inherit the capacity to cohere, organize, and shape life worlds, including that of narrative.

Ahmed's engagement with the cultural work of figuration prompted my desire

to uncover the cultural significance behind the making of Central American migrant figures. Behind my early formulated research inquiry of Central American "migrant economies" was the question of how one rendition of Central American subjectivity became representative of *all* Central American and Latinx subjectivities within media representations and political discourses on immigration. How was it that Central American migrant figures came to occupy, at least within the US, all Central American people and a reductive idea of Central America? How do these figures' "social lives" parallel, contradict, and depart from Central American migrant subjectivities? My engagement with these theoretical questions, feminist and queer phenomenologies, and the visual and literary texts that "housed" Central American migrant figures prompted my understanding of figuration as a phenomenon co-constituted by perception and embodiment. Figures come to life through the "turning" of one's gaze towards or away from particular objects and bodies so that the figure "figures" insofar as we push other objects and bodies to the edges. It was out of this visual (as in stemming from the mind's eye) and material (as in arising from material acts of relation) understanding of figuration that I arrived at the idea that figures exercise a form of embodied movement and relational politics as they traverse between subject and object and between visuality and embodiment. In my account of figuration, migrant figures shape lifeworlds through their visual embodiment as dynamic sites and sights of materiality. While acknowledging the risk of fetishizing Central American migrant figures even further, this project problematizes the coherence of migrant figures by tracing moments of continuities alongside discontinuities.

My methodology embodied perception points to a visual reading practice for aesthetic objects, including photography and film stills. Embodied perception seeks to out the dynamic and animated sense of relationality between embodied subjects and the material world. From the phenomenological understanding that every perception has a horizon belonging to its object, embodied perception holds that *sight* and *site* are relational and interdependent in that to be directed toward something means that the object does not reveal itself at once. The horizon of perception is much about the spatiality of the subject-object relation as it is about the temporality of that relation. First, as a reading practice, embodied perception seeks out *the partiality of perception* by delineating what is in front (in view) and what is behind and around the subject-object as part of the background. Second, this visual reading practice attends to the messy temporality and spatiality of sensory perception, underscoring dramatizations and disturbances in linear modes of visual narration. Embodied perception highlights the role of duration in perception, the acceleration or slowing of tempo, and "inter-involvements" between sight, hearing, smell, and touch. Third, departing from the understanding that embodiment and perception are interwoven with the affective and tactile, embodied perception foregrounds the relationality between affect, perception, and touch by understanding objects as "affective protagonists" signaling social histories of "touching objects." Altogether, this visual reading practice underscores how (1) the present already exceeds itself under the intentionality of being directed toward something that does not reveal itself at once, (2) the narrative arrival of a figure in which the figure becomes a 'what' is a form of social witnessing, and (3) spatiality

and temporality is a sedimented reality layered with affective history of memory and touch. Through this methodological understanding of figuration as a matter of embodied perception, I approach the subject of contemporary Central American migratory experiences.

III. Contextualizing Contemporary Central American Migration

For the US, Central America and its people have become the quintessential embodiment of the problem of migration. In the past two decades, US presidencies have responded to the significant increase in Central American migrants by enforcing a heavier militarization of the US-Mexico border, further systematizing the immigration enforcement regimes of deterrence, detention, and deportation, and calling upon the Mexican government to militarize and secure their borders against Central Americans.[21] Where Obama responded to surges in Central American migrants through the introduction of family-detention units, a historical increase of deportations, and the public order directed at Central Americans, "Do not send your children to the borders,"

21. Where George W. Bush in the 2000s focused on worksite enforcement, Barack Obama focused on detention and deportation, systematizing the wide-scale practice of detaining asylum seekers, including women and children. These waves of migration have shifted from a Mexican-dominant population to a Central American-dominant population, where the national pool of migrants continues to diversify as they include migrants from South America and the Spanish and French Caribbean. Obama deported more than three million undocumented immigrants. Trump introduced a deterrence- and deportation-immigration policy. Responding to different social patterns of migration, including the rise of migrant caravans in 2018, the Trump era implemented the "Remain in Mexico" program in early 2019, allowing authorities to expel asylum seekers to Mexico without the opportunity of making an asylum claim. The Trump presidency saw the systematic separation of migrant parents from their children at the border and the use of force against migrant caravans televised on cameras. The political trend of deterrence, deportation, and criminalization continues in the current Biden presidency. Where the right criticizes Biden for a "weak border," Biden's public message has been "tough on immigration"—a key moment being when Vice President Harris announces to migrants, "Do not come" during a visit to Guatemala. Like Trump, Biden has "encouraged" Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras to harden their border enforcement against northward migration by threatening to delimit trade sanctions and cut off foreign aid. See "Mexicans Decline to Less Than Half the U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Population for the First Time" and Chacon and Davis.

Trump's racist and xenophobic slurs directed sensationalized Central American people as figures of racial and criminal perversion. Famously depicting migrants as "bad hombres," gang members, and rapists and the entire region of Central America as a "shithole country," Trump's racist depictions shored up decade-old, stereotyped portrayals of Central Americans as dangerous communists within the consciousness of the American public. The sensationalized representations of Central Americans as archetypes of "illegality" stem from a history of North American amnesia.

In *Central America's Forgotten History* (2022), Latin American historian Aviva Chomsky narrates the history of Central American migration as constituted by a hemispheric politics of forgetting. Before the recent waves of migration of the last three decades, two forms of colonialism, directly and indirectly, interpellated Central America: traditional colonialism from Catholic Spain and British-originated settler colonialism from the US. During Spanish conquest and colonial rule, the region of Central America experienced the massive erasure and displacement of indigenous people, including the imposition of tribute to force indigenous people to migrate for labor. After independence from the Spanish, Central America's colonial merchant economy transformed into a neocolonial relationship of ideological and economic dependence on Europe.[22] This colonial relationship ushered in the nineteenth-century era of US and European imperial surveying and political, military, and economic imposition that transformed Central America, imaginatively and materially, into a global site for capital exchange, transportation, and transit as the elite ruling class of

22. See Chomsky pp.10-14.

the isthmus pursued the project of nation-making.[23]

Rigoberta Menchu's famous testimonial, *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1984), narrates the resistance movements of the 1970s and 1980s, sweeping across Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, were borne out of a historical memory of indigenous plight and resistance. Mass-scale government repression and revolutionary resistance enveloped Central America in the 1970s and 1980s. With the economic and strategic aid of the US, especially after the 1979 revolutionary victory in Nicaragua, militarized government forces targeted suspected activists and allies of communism, leaving the isthmus irreparably broken. The 1980s conflicts imbricated Central American countries with mass violence, gendered violence, trauma, indigenous genocide and marginalization, and the failed promise of revolution. In *Transnational Conflicts* (2003), William Robinson narrates how the social conflicts of the 1980s set the course for a transnational, neoliberal model of political economics to take hold in the isthmus. Robinson explains that the incorporation into a neoliberal market occurred through the displacement of the old oligarchy with new transnational technocrat elites. These "modernizers" expanded non-traditional export-led economies, such as maquila production, extractivism, tourism, and "new agricultural and agro-industrial products based on utilizing the region's 'comparative advantage' in cheap labor" (Robinson 159). While different dynamics and subprocesses undergird Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica's integration into an emergent global economy

23. See Ana Patricia Rodríguez's *Dividing the Isthmus* (2009) for a literary and cultural history of this era during which the project of nation-making took center stage.

and society, Robinson contends that "uniform dynamics" characterized the globalization of the isthmus. As Chomsky and Robinson explain, neoliberalism, a set of political and economic practices and social philosophy, opposed the revolutionary goals of the 1980s.[24] With the implementation of NAFTA in 1994 and CAFTA in 2004, the neoliberal political and economic system uniformly escalated social inequity, political corruption, and everyday violence.

At this moment, we continue to live out the complicated legacy of neoliberalized Central America. While the 1980s conflicts impelled millions to flee their home to find refuge across Latin America and the US, the legacy of the 1990s peace accords and neoliberal reforms continue to impact Central Americans' social livelihood and economic stability. In 1986, during the Reagan presidency, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). To this day, IRCA has a complicated and troubling legacy. While allowing three hundred thousand Central Americans to gain legal status and introducing a guest worker program, IRCA increased border enforcement and introduced employer sanctions for hiring undocumented workers.[25] As the writers of *No One is Illegal* explain, IRCA "created the model of 'comprehensive reform' that traded short-term legalization for long-term militarization of enforcement and the criminalization of today's immigrants" (Chacón and Davis xviii). The pathway for short- and long-term legalization has truncated over

24. Chomsky elaborates: "In the economic realm, neoliberalism called for privatization, deregulation, cutbacks in state spending and social services, austerity measures, and invitations to foreign capital. The state's goal was to ensure optimal conditions for investors, not to provide for social welfare or social justice. Individuals competing in the marketplace, rather than social solidarity, was held up as the basis of social organization" (190).

25. See Chomsky and Chacon and Davis.

time, while militarization of the border and criminalization of the undocumented has escalated with the implementation of the 1993 federal four-part program, Operation Gatekeeper in California, Operation Safeguard in Arizona, and Operations Hold the Line and Rio Grande in Texas. Patrisia Macías-Rojas' *From Deportation to Prison* (2016) and Tanya Golash-Boza's *Deported* (2015) understand the expansion of the Criminal Alien Program (implemented initially in the 1980s in the wake of the post-civil rights era) and the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) as crucial historical moments of that criminalized immigration and, in essence, merged the immigration and criminal justice system. The former sought to relieve prison overcrowding by deporting noncitizens to prisons, while the latter turned criminal charges into grounds for deportation. More specifically, this reform bill "expanded criminal enforcement priorities, enacted retroactive deportation for immigrants with criminal records, instituted mandatory detention, and appropriated the critical funding for information technology and detention beds necessary to make the entire program workable" (Macías-Rojas 9).

Many immigration scholars note that these reform bills emerged partly from the political thrust behind the War on Drugs and Terror. Yet, instead of making the American public "safer," these programs only escalated social upheaval through the rupture of community and kinship networks on the micro-level and the creation of a class of disposable workers and a marginalized surplus class of deportees on a macro-level.[26] An array of scholars working across citizenship, legal, mobility, and

26. As Macías-Rojas explains: "The reality…is that immigration policy enforcement targets Afro-

immigration studies have argued that deportation works to control migration and society by creating a vulnerable working class.[27] Further complicating this insight, Golash-Boza and Saskia Sassen's *Expulsions* (2014) situate the deportation regime within a neoliberal cycle of global capitalism that links mass incarceration with global economic restructuring. Ultimately, global inequality drives international migration as much as global capitalism drives mass deportation. The irony is, as Golash-Boza posits, that "[a]lthough neoliberalism at home and abroad has created powerful push and pull factors for labor migration, open borders for capital have not led to open borders for labor" (16). This current age of neoliberalism has seen the reduction of social services for the working class and disenfranchised and the escalation and multiplication of military, policing, and surveillance technologies that keep marginalized populations in line and protect corporate interests. The passage of the 2005 HH 4437 (the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act) and 2013 Senate bill S.744 (Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act) are not only examples of such neoliberal retrenchment and escalation; they point to the death of the dream that is comprehensive immigration reform.[28]

The escalated criminal racialization of Central American migrant subjects results from a narrowing definition of citizenship that, in its constriction, ever expands the category of illegality and criminality. Defining "illegality" in *Keywords for*

Caribbean small-time drug peddlers and Latino undocumented workers—not hard-core criminals or terrorists" (8).

27. See Hagen, Massey and Pren, Gottschalk.

28. See Chavez, Chacón and Golash-Boza.

Latina/o Studies (2017), Cecilia Menjívar writes: "Perhaps nowhere is the constructedness of the category of illegality more evident than in the comingling of immigrant illegality and criminality" that comes from new immigration law and enforcement practices and the creation of new categories of "illegality" such as "unlawful reentry" (94). As past critical race studies, immigration, legal, and citizenship scholars have argued, the racialized, gendered, and classed nature of the category of illegality is evident in the demographics of the deportation and immigration regime and in the way illegality evolves to encompass more populations, align certain racialized bodies with illegality, and make the value of one life contingent on the valuelessness of another.[29] Under the "citizenship" entry of *Keywords for Latina/o Studies,* Nicolas De Genova writes, "rather than the presumptive idea of inclusion and belonging, citizenship for Latinas/os has long been a technology for their racial subordination, deployed as a means for their unequal, contradictory, and differential inclusion/exclusion within the legal regime of the U.S. State" (39).

Framing the narrowing parameters of citizenship within a global perspective, the writers of *Precarity and Belonging* argue that neoliberalism constructs both citizens and noncitizens as an economic resource, stating, "in the Market Model, the migrant is not a future citizen or a subject to be assimilated, but human capital—in other words, a worker who is to add to the receiving country's economy" despite the structural exclusion of the migrant (7). As such, *precaritization,* as much as illegality, describes the contemporary Central American migrant's subjective sense of compounded

29. See Cacho, Menjívar's "The Racialization of 'Illegality,'" and Ngai.

vulnerability within this period's increasing lack of labor security and basic social needs.[30] No doubt, experiences of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse on the migrant trek and inside detention centers have left an unrepairable mark on the consciousness of Central Americans. Experiences like that of June 2022, where 51 migrants were found dead inside an abandoned trailer truck near San Antonio, Texas, are all too common. These experiences have translated into physical and social death for many Central Americans.

IV. Material and Visual Cultures Inside and Outside of Central America

Inside and outside Central America, the 1980s saw an outburst of "solidarity media" seeking to raise global public consciousness about the political state of Central America. "Solidarity" documentary films and journalism promoted human rights and social justice through a regional and transnational scope.[31] This era also saw an array of testimonial literature, including the famous testimonial *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1984).

---

30. The writers of *Precarity and Belonging* explain: "The term *precarity* emerged in the late twentieth century to describe lives and livelihoods that have become riskier and less certain and stable. Many scholars trace rising precarity to the reorganization of the economy since the 1970s. Deregulation, financialization, de-unionization, globalization, and the digital revolution have had an indelible and destabilizing impact on people's lives. Pierre Bourdieu has linked *précarité* to economic restructuring and…in particular, to a retreating welfare state, privatization, unemployment, and a general sense of insecurity and social exclusion…Indeed, insecurity may be the only thing that is well distributed in our world, as the spread of precarity is by no means limited to industrial or postindustrial countries. Taking a global view, Guy Standing argues that there has been a fundamental shift from societies structured by fixed and stable labor markets to a fully global system that not only creates but depends on a labor supply that is flexible, complaint, and continually in flux" (5).

31. Some of these documentaries include Glenn Silber and Teté Vasconcellos' *El Salvador: Another Vietnam* (1981), John Duigan's *Romero* (1982), Newton Thomas Sigel and Pamela Yates' *When the Mountains Tremble* (1983), and Monona Wali and Pamela Cohen's *Maria's Story: A Documentary Portrait of Love and Survival in El Salvador's Civil War* (1991). Some notable journalist publications include Raymond Bonner's 1985 *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador*, Walter Lafeber's *Inevitable Revolutions*, Mark Danner's *Massacre at El Mozote*, Noam Chomsky's *Turning the Tide*, and Reed Brody's *Contra Terror in Nicaragua*. Some notable photography and US-based poetry include Jean-Marie Simon's collection of photographs, *Guatemala: Eternal Spring, Eternal Tyranny,* and Caroline Forche's poetry collection, *The Country Between Us* (1981).

Gregory Nava's feature film *El Norte* (1983) reached a broad audience as the film follows the life of two indigenous Guatemalans fleeing the highlands to become undocumented immigrants in Los Angeles. As Jeffrey Browitt narrates in *Contemporary Central American Fiction* (2018), the politics of the Cold War also shaped Central American literary art throughout the 1990s. Literary writers and revolutionary poets sought to personify the social unrest of the era through psychological portrayals of ex-combatants and dictators. Contemporary Central American literary art grapples with post-war cynicism as more recent literature of the late 1990s and 2000s moves from depictions of rural public spaces to intimate urban life. This affective corpus of "regional orphanhood" showcases how violence functions affectively through the mixture of fantasy and reality (Browitt 3).[32]

In the past two decades, a collection of films, documentaries, and New Journalism style non-fiction writing has emerged out of Central America, Mexico, and the United States to capture the story of Central American migrants who travel northward on the migrant trails of Mexico. An early model of this sub-genre, Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey* (2006) recounts the journey of Enrique, a Honduran boy who travels on top of freight trains. Enrique encounters many dangers, including the threat of death, abduction, and mugging by thugs, bandits, and corrupt cops. Salvadoran journalist Oscar Martínez 's *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail* (2014) expands this writing subgenre, as Martínez demonstrates through

32. Literary writers Browitt cites include Guatemala's Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Nicaragua's Franz Galich, Belize's David Ruiz Puga, Costa Rica's Carlos Cortés, and El Salvador's Jacinta Escudos and Claudia Hernández.

sincere and sharp prose how the migrant trail is a space of death as much as a space of waiting. Salvadoran filmmaker Marcela Zamora's documentary film, *María en Tierra de Nadie* (2011), features the oral testimony of community activists, migrants, and the family members of missing migrants. Other films include Mexican filmmaker Pedro Ultreras' *La Bestia* (2010) and Mexican filmmaker Tin Dindamal's *De Nadie* (2005). In this diverse body of Central American migratory texts, the freight train *la Bestia* becomes an overwhelming life force and a type of social protagonist as the train mobilizes yet immobilizes migrants through the threat of injury, kidnapping, and death.

Rebecca Schreiber's book *The Undocumented Everyday: Migrant Lives and the Politics of Visibility* foregrounds a range of art activism emerging from 2000 to 2012, including documentary films, exhibitions, video, and photography, that involve the self-representation of Mexican and Central American migrants as part of a growing "counter-representational practice." One example of Central American self-representation includes the art installation *Sanctuary City/Ciudad Santuario, 1989-2009*, exhibited in San Francisco, foregrounding migrants' oral testimonies. Regina José Galindo's array of performance and video art, including *Ablución* (2007) and *Piedra* (2013) and Beatriz Cortez's extensive body of visual installation art, represent a contemporary body of Central American art activism that critiques larger political and economic structures devastating Central American people, land, and environment. These artists utilize embodiment, mixed materials, and mixed mediums to rupture historical and social narratives. Expanding the Central American filmscape, the featured films of Guatemalan filmmaker Jayro Gustamante, including *Ixcanul* (2015),

La Llorona (2019), and *Temblores* (2019), reimagine indigenous folk legend, the supernatural world, and everyday urban and rural life in Guatemala to offer social critiques of legacies of gendered, environmental, and political violence. Whereas revolutionary desire, Cold War political ideology, and a solidarity impulse drove Central American literary and visual representations in the 1980s and 1990s, contemporary artists inside and outside of Central America continue to reshape the imaginary contours of the isthmus by antagonizing the nation, gender, and sexuality and deconstructing the family, revolutionary romanticism, hegemonic masculinity, and the relationship between humans and animals.[33]

V. Project Interventions

By reconceptualizing migrant subjectivity through figuration, this project intervenes in the ontological and epistemological parameters historically constituting the interdisciplinary field of US Central American studies. Contemporary US Central American studies emerged from an epistemological interest in the cultural, social, and political ramifications of the revolutionary conflicts of the 1980s and the ensuing migration and diasporic patterns.[34] The Central American migrant and diasporic subject

33. See Browitt.

34. In the interdisciplinary field of US Central American studies, humanities and social science discourse have primarily focused on Central America's revolutionary and post-revolutionary moments. Within these discourses, the countries that come into view most often are El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica. The periodizing markers framing these discourses include the Cold War and the implementation of globalizing, neoliberal policies, with links often made to earlier economic and political interventions in the isthmus during the colonial and imperial eras. Some significant works include John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman's *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions* (1990), Cecilia Menjívar's *Fragmented Ties* (2000), Nora Hamilton's *Seeking Community in a Global City* (2001), William Robinson's *Transnational Conflicts* (2003), Beth Baker-Cristales' *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California* (2004), Arturo Arias' *Taking Their Word* (2007), Susan Coutin's *Nations of Emigrants* (2007), Cecilia Rivas' *Salvadoran Imaginaries* (2014).

positionality are at the center of these inquiries. For example, in response to the representation of Central American migrants in Gregory Nava's *El Norte*, Arturo Arias famously theorized the ongoing symbolic erasure of Central American identities within US renditions of Latinx subjectivities through the "Central American-American" subject position.[35] Ten years after Arias's *Latino Studies* article, Claudia Milian's *Latining America* (2013) explores (and in many ways explodes) the radical performativity of this expression, positing that the redundancy of "American-American" expresses the politics of abjection, non-belonging, and the ambivalence of a Central American identity yet to be located in the Latinx and Latin American world.[36] From its theoretical conception, "Central American-Americanness" denotes the historical exclusion, disposability, and dismissibility of the Central American migrant position as the Central American subject departs from hemispheric experiences of trauma and abjection.[37] Martiza Cárdenas *Constituting Central American-Americans* (2018) builds upon these earlier formulations to frame the paradigm as a hermeneutic of de-recognition. For Cárdenas, Central American-American draws attention to the contradictory practice of participating in and being critical of recognition apparatuses,

35. Arturo Arias underscores the film's representation of two Guatemalan migrant siblings anxiously passing as Mexican and Chicano subjects to conceal their undocumented status. Overshadowed by other Latinx nationalities, the "Central American-American" is doubly marginalized by her Chicanx and Latin American counterpart within the multicultural landscape of the US. See Arias' "Central American-Americans" article for more.

36. For Milian, the redundant phrase "American-American" ironically alludes to the Central American insistence on Americanness despite the allegorization of the Central American subject as disposable and dismissable.

37. Positioning the Central American subject always in relation to trauma, Central-American Americanness allegorizes Central Americans' "double-trauma," that is, the "originary trauma" of the 1980s massacres and more contemporary sources of trauma, including the crossing of Mexico that marks the Central American migration experience as different (Arias and Milian 3).

including the ideological matrices that render subjectivity normal and naturalized.[38]

Even as "Central American-Americanness" theoretically develops as scholars tease out its performative potential, I argue that this analytic and subjective paradigm impedes the epistemological expansion of US Central American studies.[39] The formulation of the abject Central American-American points to the problematic legacy of Foucauldian thought in US Central American studies. To make this point, I draw attention to Cárdenas' formulation of Central American-Americanness as an "effect of power" via Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia." In *Constituting Central American-Americans,* Cárdenas argues that spaces of exclusion, or what she calls the "Latina/o grid of intelligibility," *discursively constitute* the abjection of the Central American-American. As "regimes of recognition," spaces of exclusion vacate migrant subjectivities by rendering Central American bodies and signifiers "intelligible."[40]

---

38. Cárdena writes, "In emphasizing the notion that repetition of a word always involves change and variation, as well as contradictory meanings, the use of Central American-American as a hermeneutic resist yielding homogenous renderings of identities" (15). As a reading practice, Central American-Americanness points to the failure and promise of identity politics to express a coherent, intelligible, stable subjectivity precisely because it seeks neither inclusion nor exclusion from Anglo-Americanness. Central American-Americanness points to the identificatory desire for political engagement and participation even as it undoes and reverses that desire.

39. Foundational tenets of US Central American studies in relation to the conceptual paradigm of "Central American-American" includes: (1) the foregrounding of a hemispheric and transnational historical framework that (opposed to understanding 1848 or 1898 in relation to Puerto Rican, Mexican and Cuban histories of Latinidad) positions the hemispheric history of US interventions in the isthmus (including US neocolonial, imperialistic and commercial projects such as the construction of nation-states, railroads, Pan-American highways, and canal zones) as the historical "origin point" for discussing a "US Latinidid;" (2) the deprivileging of national frameworks; (3) the desire to move away from stereotypes of subalternity around Central American people while analyzing experiences of violence and trauma without essentializing US Central Americans as traumatized people; (4) the importance of "shared experience" and the shared histories, cultures, and struggles that assert a regional identity (while also recognizing the diverse ethnic identities and heterogeneity of Central American diasporic communities and history); (5) the call for more intersectional and interdisciplinary modes of analysis that emphasize subjective processeses of political and cultural transformation; and (6) the recognition that "US Central Americanness" dervies from hemispheric migratory patterns. See the 2017 anthology *U.S. Central American Studies: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance.*

40. Cárdenas elaborates: "Thus despite the delimiting nature of regimes of recognition, which

Through the act of "derecognition," the destabilized Central American-American subject asserts their agency out of a "countering" or oppositional politics. Thus, in line with Foucault, Cárdenas conceptualizes migrant and diasporic cultural practices, such as the COFECA parade, as a "heterotopic" space. Emerging from the recognition of displacement, cultural "counter-sites" represent, contest, and invert hegemonic understandings of Central Americans.[41] Thus, Cárdenas reads these practices as a hermeneutic for "Central American textualities" (15). In the end, this account of cultural practices mobilizes agency along a narrow understanding of cultural practices as, above all else, a site of resistance to power. Cárdenas' desire to privilege the embodiment of Central American diasporic identities becomes undermined by the reduction of subjectivity to a Foucauldian account of agency as counter-power.

Like Cárdenas, many US Central Americanists call for the need to foreground embodied positionalities and enunciations to move away from the essentialization of Central American subjects as ontological representatives of victimhood and trauma.[42] Yet the move to center the situatedness and materiality of embodiment falls short due

circumscribe subjects into 'grids of intelligibility,' the type of political exigency that produces the concept of Central American-American provides us not only a destabilized subject but also an approach for reading Central American textualities and identity—a 'derecognizing' one that understands that it cannot get out of a form of identity determinism and therefore calls attention to this condition via its (re)iteration" (15).

41. Cárdenas writes: "According to Foucault, heterotopias achieve this because they expose those spaces that produce their conditions of possibility and act as mirrors where 'I see myself where I am not…a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent.' Such other spaces, then, emerge from an act of recognizing one's displacement. Thus we may need to think about the production of the COFECA parade and of a diasporic Central American identity itself as heterotopic texts—as remnants discarded during the constructions of other identities, like 'American' or 'Latina/o,' which seldom link those categories with the experiences of Central Americans" (109). For more on Cárdenas' usage of Foucault's "heterotopia" also see pp. 83.

42. See Alvarado.

to a dependence on a discursive understanding of embodiment as continually operating within parameters of power. As one of the most influential writers of postmodernism, Foucault's account of power/knowledge relations drives many minoritarian interpretations of subjectivity as resistance. Targeting the normalization and naturalization of sexual identity, for Foucault, the grounds for self-transformation (and the central element of political struggles) is resistance.[43] While Foucault asserts a more "active" account of subjugation than other postmodernists, wherein becoming subjected to power impels the subject towards a self-reflective agency of demanding one's interests, there is, no doubt, a deep pessimism and political ambivalence in Foucault's account of subjectivity.[44] The moment an individual obtains the status of subject coincides with the moment of the individual's subjection. The misnaming or "disrecognition" inscribes that subject into power. The Central American-American subject continues to live inside this moment of subjectivization as subjugation. US Central American accounts of subjectivity, agency, and embodiment are underdeveloped because of an overreliance on Foucauldian metaphysics that renders all accounts of agency to discourse.[45]

---

43. See *The History of Sexuality* (1978).

44. Foucault understands identities as discursively constituted. In *The History of Sexuality*, for example, Foucault prioritizes "resistance" in his call to resist sexual identities through pleasure and the body. The subjectivization of an imposed sexual identity constitutes the subject's power to resist. Affirming this point, Alcoff writes: "Subjectivation produces a subject who then can act, for example, in making demands in his own name, but at the same time it misnames that subject and inscribes it into power" (70).

45. As writers such as Judith Butler and Linda Alcoff have argued, Foucault's account of agency is largely underdeveloped. For example, Alcoff explains in her overview of "genealogies of identity" that Foucault "figures the process of subjectivization—of becoming a subject—as having an irremediably ambivalent political valence: it makes possible agency and resistance to power as surely as it enfolds the individual into power's embrace" (72).

Within US Central American studies, we see the shadow of a Foucauldian metaphysics play out on three principal fronts. First, we see this legacy in the articulation of "Central American-Americanness" as always already abject, ambivalent, and incommensurate with other Latinx ontologies. The crisis of meaning and threat of extinction through exclusion or misrecognition never seems to leave the Central American migrant/diasporic subject as it never seems to escape US Central American studies. Second, we see this legacy in how the framing of cultural practices as "counter-sites" or "counter-narratives" locates the political value of cultural practices primarily in their visibility, presence, and documentation.[46] Third, we see this legacy in how the field continues to reformulate its parameters around the need for self-representation even as US Central American studies become an established critical body of social and cultural analysis. The field's conception of self-representation (where Central American subjects "speak back" to those discursive regimes that have "spoken for them") as the only *valid* and "true" form of Central American cultural analysis exhibits Foucauldian anxieties of representational politics. While not discrediting the importance of US Central American self-representation and how, for example, the anthology *U.S. Central Americans* (2017) spearheaded the articulation of a second-generation Central American positionality and the social and political nuances that come along with it, an overemphasis on the agentic power of self-representation risks fetishizing "real" and "authentic" US Central American objects of knowledge. The representational triad "by, for, about" borrowed from Chicanx studies and the

46. See Alvarado, Cornejo, Schreiber.

exceptionality of the "Central American-American subject" has led to the evasion of relational modes of analysis across US Central American and US Latinx studies.[47] Moreover, the reliance on a Foucauldian investment in individual integrity and/as agency undermines the greater disciplinary desire to reveal collective and embodied dimensions of Central American social, material, and political life.[48]

My idea of agency and grounds for "isthmian unity" derive from somewhere different. My entry point into this debate is to reframe US Central American reading practices by foregrounding the body as a visceral protagonist. This project moves away from a Foucauldian totalizing panoptic gaze and a liberal objectifying gaze (both of which are iterations of a "top-down" gaze) to foreground a "bottom-up" gaze deriving from an embodied and intentional subject.[49] As discussed in "Keywords and Methodology," embodied perception, understood as a visual reading practice, underscores the field of intentionality between subject and object so that the subject does not become "vacated" by the other at the moment of encounter. Embodied perception reframes the power relation around visibility politics by conceiving perception as the "co-perception" of an intersubjective relation. In the "third space" between subjective and objective experience, embodied perception is the *directedness*

47. For an elaboration of this analytical trinity that guided early Chicanx film criticism, see Rosalinda Fregoso's *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (1993).

48. If identity is "an effect of power," then how can US Central American studies create a paradigm of identification and identity practices not overdetermined by macro-forces, where bodies are not "docile bodies" and "totally imprinted by history" (Foucault 83)? How could a Foucauldian account of "subjugated subjectivity" as identity allow the field to reimagine an ethical relation with a collectivity of others so that the collective category does not reproduce a similar set of disciplinary mechanisms?

49. See Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995) for more on the "Panopticon." Originally published in 1975.

of consciousness as opposed to the *whatness* of the subject or object caught up in oppositional politics. By transforming our understanding of perceptual practices, we change our understanding of how subjects and objects engage with knowledge production. While power may constitute and be reproduced by bodies, embodied perception underscores the agentic capacities of the body in discovering and structuring its perceptual environment. As a "knowing practice" that emerges from an intentional subject's orientation, affectation, and sensing perception, embodied perception offers a fuller account of how, when, and where agency is possible.

My project also applies this visual reading practice to Central American migrant "directionalities" to reestablish the ontological and epistemological parameters of US Central American studies in relation to *Latinidad.* This methodology reframes the story of the Central American migrant body's arrival into *Latinidad* and/or Americanness so that the question is no longer *where* the object traveled so that it became vacated; the question becomes *how* we arrived at this point where it is possible to witness the arrival (or non-arrival) of the Central American migrant social body into *Latinidad*. Here, I move towards understanding Central Americanness as a directionality, an unfolding, open-ended, and fluid "horizon of experience" that could not be made consistent with only one Central American way of being. As such, my project investigates "migrant directionalities" that exceed a US Central American "by, for, about" representational triad. By formulating Central American migrant figures as an inter-subjective, interdependent, and phenomenal "third space, "this project moves towards a relational understanding of Central Americanness, *Latinidad*, and Americanness.

Emerging across US, Caribbean, Mexican, and Central American material realities, the body of cultural texts this project foregrounds unite in their visual embodiments of contemporary migrant figures. By emphasizing the intentionality behind this diverse set of migrant visual embodiments, this project maps sights/sites of affective potentiality and social forms of collective witnessing that exceed the totalizing "presentness" of an already subjugated representational politics. While forces of power may drive the making of these figures, power is not this project's protagonist. Instead, this project locates the politicization of migrant ontologies, as opposed to the foregrounding of mind-oriented or power-oriented subjectivities, in the animation and visuality of material phenomena. Materiality refers to our everyday encounters with animals, other human beings, physical objects, the natural environment (including land, mountains, and bodies of water), and manufactured environments of the industrial and postindustrial age (including buildings, technologies of transit, housing developments, etc.). On a micro level, materiality can refer to the micro-organisms that populate our environment and the micro-processes that shape corporeality, including sensing and affective relations. On a macro level, materiality can refer to the socioeconomic structures, such as neoliberalism and industrial capitalism, that shape our everyday lives. "Visual materiality" refers to the matter and textures that reproduce the seeing and embodied conditions for everyday existence. The visual materiality of Central American migrants is saturated with animate qualities of creative and contingent meaning. Understood as a visual embodiment, US Central Americanness animates a fluid and multi-directional paradigm for relating the phenomena of migrancy.

While the retheorization of Central American migrant ontologies within US Central American studies is this project's primary intervention, this dissertation project's politicization of embodiment via Central American migrant figures offers new critical avenues for theorizing embodiment and intersectionality across feminist, queer, and critical race studies. Behind the visual embodiments of the figure of the black migrant, tattooed *marero*, feminized migrant, and post-data body, a "politics of dis/embodiments" animates yet disfigures these figurations of migrancy. A "politics of embodiment" refers to how these migrant figures organize through matter, affectation, queer orientations, and the aestheticizing of the background. A "politics of disembodiment" refers to how migrant bodies immaterialize or become disfigured through modalities of excess, modes of abstraction, and the aestheticization of impermanent matter. This project politicizes the moments in which migrant figures traverse between material and immaterial realms and past, present, and future tenses, to foreground the sensations, spatialities, temporalities, and materialities in which migrants matter and unmatter inside and outside the world of narrative. By teasing out the micro spaces of intimacy, encounter, and estrangement that make up these migrants' life worlds, not only do we witness the social imprints of racial capitalism, but more importantly, we witness renewed attachments to the world and new ways of envisioning social relationality, however momentary, messy, and incomplete they may be. Visual dis/embodiments of migrancy sharpen, dramatize, and protagonize the senses, sensations, modes, and modalities of belonging and not belonging to this world.

Moreover, we can locate a host of social critiques within the politics of

dis/embodiment undergirding these migrant figures, including critiques against the privileging of Western liberal ontologies. Within humanitarian-driven studies on migration, the impulse to humanize migrant subjects through the emotive and subjective dimension of migration often results in a superficial rendering of migrant subjectivities and the "heroic" migration story. To delineate this epistemic phenomenon, I foreground the concept of "migrant affects." "Migrant affects" refers to narrative and figurative deployments of affect in migration stories, including the animation of migrant friendships along the migrant trail. This project's body of texts deploys "migrant affects" as a humanizing tool, ranging from a more superficial treatment of affect, where migrants become aestheticized as tragic heroes, to a more in-depth treatment of affect, such as in the film *Sin Nombre,* where feelings of desire and melancholia point to submerged social histories of repressed consciousness and the utopic potentiality of alternate relationalities and modes of being in the world. Whereas the film *Who is Dayani Crystal?* humanizes migrants through a language of sentimentalism, *Sin Nombre* and *La Jaula de Oro* utilize romance and friendship narrative arcs to foreground the intimate vulnerability of the migrant experience. These affects are "migrant" in how they name the messiness of the politics of emotion within the film genre of contemporary migrant narratives. In response to this phenomenon, I argue for the need to ground cultural and theoretical investigations of migration cultural texts in frameworks based on material and embodied understandings of migrancy. Otherwise, questions around race, gender, and sexuality become relegated in favor of presenting a cohesive and unified migrant subjectivity. I argue that migrant figures

visually materialize along co-constituted and relational lines of racial, gendered, and sexualized meaning.

VI. Chapter Outline

In the first chapter, "The Black Body: Towards a Hemispheric Phenomenology of Racialization," I complicate April Shemak's figure of the refugee "liminal citizen" to foreground the historical category of black migrations and the subjective category of black migrancy. This chapter places in dialogue Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat's fictional and fictional writing with Afro-Panamanian writer Carlos Guillermo Wilson's novel *Chombo* (1981). This chapter relates distinct literary and hemispheric histories of "black bodies in motion" to argue that figurations of blackness animate a relational methodology of "under-seeing." This visual reading practice exceeds identitarian-based categorizations through the rearrangement of racializing meaning on the level of embodiment's perception and visuality. In the second chapter, "The Tattooed Body: Inhabiting *Marero* Melancholia in Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre,*" I deploy Sara Ahmed's concept of "orientation devices" to argue that *marero* tattoos guide the "*marero*-to-be" along the affective, collective, and "devil" directionalities of *la mara*. Through a tattooed visual and affective economy, *Sin Nombre* (2009) orients the tattooed figure at the very intersection of freedom and force. I argue that *marero* melancholia understood as an inheritance of racialized wretchedness, reveals a repressed diasporic consciousness. *Marero* melancholia brings the *marero* subject to account for a hemispheric history of violence as it names the paradoxical positionality of the *marero* as a willing yet unwilling subject.

In the third chapter, "The Feminized Body: Voids, Virtue, and the Evanescent in Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre* and Diego Quemada-Díez's *La Jaula de Oro*," I build upon Sara Ahmed's idea of "sticky objects" to argue that notions of virtuousness animate visual embodiments of feminized migrants in film *Sin Nombre* and *La Jaula de Oro* (2013). Whereas in *Sin Nombre,* the sticky nostalgia around the memory of Martha amounts to a virginized depiction of the character Sayra, in *La Jaula,* the stickiness around breasts amounts to Sara's oversexualization and eventual vanishment. These sticky "herstories" mobilize a meritocratic, moralizing, and differentiating affective economy around the figure of the failed migrant hero and heroine. The fourth chapter, "The Data Body: Desert Necroviolence and Racializing Assemblages in Marc Silver's *Who is Dayani Crystal?* (2014)," builds upon the previous chapter's reading of "migrant virtuousness" to argue that the documentary *Who is Dayani Crystal?* and secondary discourse around the migration film genre universalize the migrant subject through a language of pathos as virtue. Building upon Jasbir Puar's conceptualization of the "data body" as a racializing assemblage, I argue that a visual language of excess, scale, and "castagorization" effaces the flesh to render the postmortem migrant as a "whitened" visual embodiment. The postmortem migrant as a data body reveals the remnants of a Western liberal ontology in the modern understanding of humanness.

Chapter 1: The Black Body: Hemispheric Histories of Racial Seeing

Then words, no one's fiefdom, meet up with the materiality of the world. Relation is spoken.

—Édouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*



Fig. 1.1. *Topshot-US-Politics-Immigration-Texas* (Ratje 2012)

During the fall of 2021, an estimated thirty thousand Haitian migrants arrived at the US-Mexico border. Many had traveled from Brazil and Chile through Central America and Mexico to seek TPS protection, job security, and possible legal status. The Panamanian government reported thousands more waiting to cross the border between Colombia and Panama. Traveling by bus, train, and traversing the treacherous jungle of Darien Gap, the Haitian migrants that succeeded in making the journey to the US found themselves under assault by the US Border Patrol. Images of horse-mounted,

uniformed officers corralling Haitian migrants, including this photograph taken by Paul Ratje, circulated news outlets in the US and worldwide. This heavily circulated photograph exposed a more profound history of racial capitalism and racialized violence by evoking grim comparisons to the treatment of enslaved people during enslavement and the Jim Crow era (see fig. 1.1).[50] Like the way that armed bands and militias, from the "paddy rollers" who tracked runaways from plantation slavery to the Texas Rangers and vigilantes who maintained a reign of terror over indigenous and Mexican people in the pre-Civil War and Jim Crow eras, these horse-mounted Border Patrol agents, equipped with whips, corralled black migrants back to their place. This long history of law enforcement and state-sanctioned racial violence on the US-Mexico border bore down on Haitian migrants along the banks of the Texan Rio Grande River. As thousands made camps along the Mexican border, thousands of others were deported to the collapsed state of Haiti or sent to detention centers. This contemporary encounter at the US-Mexico border links modern migrancy with neo-colonial histories of racial violence to speak to a more extensive hemispheric history of slavery's afterlife in the wake of its abolishment.

This chapter aims to place hemispheric histories of antiblackness in the foreground of Latinx migrancy today. With noted exceptions, the disciplinary formations of US Central American and Latinx studies have marginalized black populations and ontologies within the more extensive epistemic project of *Latinidad*.[51]

50. "Racial capitalism" refers to the historical process that subordinates non-white populations. For different animations of this concept, see Brady, Wynter and Gómez-Barris.

51. One notable exception includes Milian's *Latining America.*

Within discussions of US Central American migration, the marginalization of black populations is partly due to more extensive histories of antiblackness that have been central to the national constructions of *Latinidades* across the isthmus and Latin America.[52] Because of the historical negligence and epistemological disavowal of black populations, histories, and ontologies within this hemisphere's formation of Americanness, Central Americanness, and *Latinidad*, for the most part, there remains a very limited definition of race and theoretical understandings of racialization.[53] For the most part, US Central and Latinx cultural studies on race, racialization, and migration continue to be historically and theoretically linked to brown and mestizo bodies and subjectivities. This chapter addresses this epistemic and theoretical gap by placing the black migrant figure at the center of US Central American and Latinx inquiry. I center the black migrant by looking toward cultural texts conventionally categorized outside the boundaries of US Central American and Latinx literary traditions. To underscore the contribution of black ontologies and visual histories of blackness to the epistemic and theoretical project of Central Americanness and *Latinidad*, I go beyond a Hispanophone-centered understanding of US Central American and Latinx studies, historically divided by language, region, and nation.[54]

This chapter entitled "The Black Body: Hemispheric Histories of Racial

52. For example, see Alvarado.

53. See Yúdice for an extensive explanation of why the afro-Caribbean was left out of Central American literary and cultural studies.

54. While past literary criticism on Danticat and Wilson's writing favors a historical and nationalized treatment of literature, where each author responds to or emerges out of a specific and differentiated geo-political understanding of a Haitian or Afro-Panamanian national, imperial, or state project, this chapter moves away from a strict nation-based reading that exceeds boundaries naturalized around the nation-state, national language, and static formulations of historicized time and space.

Seeing" places into dialogue the fictional and non-fictional writing of Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat with the fictional novel *Chombo* (1981) by Afro-Panamanian writer Carlos Guillermo Wilson. The first section, "Post-Slavery Itinerancies of the Isthmus," argues that *Chombo*'s "post-slavery itinerancies" co-constitute categories of blackness, Central Americanness and *Latinidad*. Wilson rearranges the isthmian racial landscape by bringing the disavowal of blackness within the purview of hemispheric histories of migrancy. Through an objective and subjective reconfiguration of racial knowing, the novel cuts across and inverts systems of racial classification to mobilize a hemispheric "black itinerancy" that links isthmian racial history to the colonial context of the transatlantic slave trade. The second section, "Revisiting Migratory Histories of the Sea," revisits the metaphorical histories of "migrations of the sea" from the viewpoint of Edwidge Danticat's fictional and nonfictional writing, including her short story "Children of the Sea" (1996) and essay "Black Bodies in Motion and in Pain" (2015). In this section, I complicate April Shemak's figure of the "limbo citizen" by responding to Danticat's invitation to place oceanic migrations of black bodies in conversation with "terra-migrations" across Latin America and inside the parameters of the US. Just as the "high seas" have been a central migratory passage for generations of Haitian migrants and transatlantic histories of black enslaved subjects of the Middle Passage, this chapter points to the significance of how this metaphoric and visual history continues to evolve from imagery of boat people to the imagery of Haitian border crossers. This section emphasizes and expands the visual dimension of migratory narratives across a transatlantic, Caribbean, and isthmian context to foreground a

relational, hemispheric, and global understanding of cultural reimaginings of migration.

The third section, "Visual Praxes of 'Underseeing,'" builds upon the previous readings of Wilson and Danticat's migratory reimagination to argue that these two authors animate a visual reading practice of "underseeing." Like Sharpe's figure of "the underwriter," I argue that these two authors construct a literary praxis of "racial underseeing" within and across racialized legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Through Wilson's figure of El Chombo and Danticat's rendering of a phenomenological encounter in *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007), I argue that these authors reconfigure the embodiment of blackness by inverting expectations around racialized perception. This section moves from Sharpe's figure of "the underwriter" to my figure of "the underseer" (as an alternative to the top-down gaze of "the overseer") to underscore the creative and agentic capacities of re-envisioning black embodiment via a phenomenological understanding of co-perception.[55] These two authors reconfigure the visual embodiment of blackness to undo the hegemonic power of "identitarian" categories of thought to foreground the processes by which racialized meaning around blackness and whiteness travel, rearrange, and transform. Ultimately, this chapter argues for the necessity of a methodology of "racialized seeing" that is not only attuned to the historical and continual disavowal of blackness but necessarily goes beyond this

55. Recalling the history of shipping insurers who underwrote slave traders' financial losses, Sharpe rhetorically formulates "wake work" as an "underwriting." Through wordplay and logic of free association, Sharpe performatively "underwrites" black loss, including the impossibility of fully conceiving that loss, to imagine new ways of living in the wake of slavery. *In the Wake* understands mourning as a living practice and living practices as embedded in mourning. Sharpe's figure of the "underwriter" enacts this dialectic through language's reinvention. Sharpe enacts alternative forms of black resistance through the refashioning of language and the performative reenacting of post-slavery hauntings through metonymic language, akin to speaking in tongues.

disavowal to apprehend blackness and black studies as both a central *and* relational object of knowledge within Latinx and Central American cultural studies on migration. Within US Central American and Latinx contexts of migrancy, I propose focalizing hemispheric histories of "racial seeing" as they are connected to visual embodiments of blackness across literature and visual culture.

I. Post-Slavery Itinerancies of the Isthmus

In Mobility and Modernity (2017), Robert Aguirre elaborates on how the nineteenth-century construction of the Panama Canal gave form to a particular set of global relations and interoceanic migrant movements and diasporas. The Panama Canal fundamentally reordered the material and social reality of the isthmus. For Aguirre, power was not only exercised by US military might and railroad-employed vigilantes. In nineteenth-century Panama, power was wielded through the "representational machines" of canals, railways, highway systems, steamers, telegraph stations, and bridges, communicating modernity's "mastery of technology" (5). Not only did the aesthetics of "mobility and modernity" reshape the hemisphere as a global transit site, "[t]he discursive construction of Panama as an in-between zone, the geographical servant of other masters, was constitutive of a bold new order in which the capital needs and settlement patterns of distant imperial powers could redefine, almost overnight, a sovereign territory as a link of empire" (Aguirre 5). The Canal's construction did more than establish a transit infrastructure; its construction placed the isthmus firmly in a global and military economy, which deterritorialized and transformed laboring

communities inside, outside, and across the isthmus.[56]

Panama and "the idea of Panama" reordered capital, bodies, labor, racial hierarchies, knowledge, and language as an imperial and global transit route so that the cultural archive of nineteenth-century Panama reflects these hegemonic power relations. Panamanian national culture constituted itself through the disavowal of blackness so that the cultural archive of Panama privileged the voices of the privileged elite. If "national" Panamanian literature formed through the voices and sanctioned authorship of the creole elite, as Aguirre tells us, subaltern voices were also always mediated through other forms, including the traveler's account, the government document, and the newspaper. As Aguirre affirms:

> This context assumes further urgency in nineteenth-century Panamanian culture, which was riven by internal conflicts between a large black population, which comprised sixty-three percent of the country in the late eighteenth century, and the creole elites, who worried about becoming 'another Haiti,' a revolutionary state would wreck their dream of a trade-based Hanseatic republic and a Panamanian identity, or *Latinidad*, based on the denial and repression of blackness. (Aguirre 19)

The culture archive of Panama not only emerged from a greater historical clash between technologies of modernity and nationalist concerns, but Panamanian nationalist society

56. Claudia Milian and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo's "Introduction: Interoceanic Diasporas and the Panama Canal's Centennial" bring these concepts together when writing on the construction of the Canal Zone in relation to the Global South optic and worlds systems analysis. Coupling a Global South optic, world-systems analysis (as presented by Quijano and Wallerstein), and "interoceanic" as an analytical construct, Milian and Nwankwo consider how the imperial "worlding" of the isthmus lent to a spatial ordering of capital, bodies and knowledge, in which the "North" became the Canal Zone and the "South" became anything outside "North (American)" boundaries (2; 3). The article states that the "ordering and disordering—splitting—of Panama is a powerful example of the North/South divide that resulted in the isthmus, with the "North" settling in the Canal Zone and the "South" becoming anything outside its boundaries" (Milian and Nwankwo 3).

also sought to consolidate peripheral regions by articulating a non-black *Latinidad* within this archive.

Published in 1981, the novel *Chombo* by third-generation West Indian writer Carlos "Cubena" Guillermo Wilson, in many ways, inherits this fraught history of Panamanian antiblackness. Past writing on *Chombo* foregrounds Wilson's celebration of black identity, referencing the négritude movement's return to African "origins" to make sense of the text's Afrocentric expression. An example of such criticism includes the 1993 collection of writings, *Denouncement and Reaffirmation of the Afro-Hispanic Identity in Carlos Guillermo Wilson's Works*. As the introduction states, the consensus within the field of Afro-Hispanic Literature and Culture has been to understand *Chombo* as "the return to one's origins, the call for revision, rectification, and the rewriting of the history of the "forgotten ones," and the search, interpretation, conceptualization and reaffirmation of the "true" Latin American identity" (Birmingham-Pokorny 11). Undoubtedly, Afrocentric and black expression is fundamental to *Chombo*'s politics and form. Beginning with the novel's epigraph, the reader becomes aware of the text's aim to recover lost black histories as it quotes Marcus Garvey: "A people without the knowledge of their history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots" (Wilson 5). This reference to the Caribbean involvement in the pan-African and black Nationalist movements, for which Garvey advocated, foregrounds Wilson's desire to recall and focalize marginalized experiences of blackness throughout Panamanian history. Sonja Stephenson Watson's *The Politics of Race in Panama* (2014) draws attention to *Chombo*'s marginalization from the

Panamanian literary canon precisely because the novel reveals a legacy of racial discrimination spanning. Set shortly after the 1970s Torrijos-Carter Treaties, which designated an end date to the almost century-long US control of the Panama Canal, *Chombo* looks back at the construction of the Canal Zone, the migration of enslaved Africans through the Caribbean and to the isthmus, and even further back to a pre-colonial African imaginary. Wilson foregrounds and recuperates the historically discriminated Afro-West Indian figure El Chombo.

In this section, I argue that *Chombo* animates a more comprehensive and global understanding of histories of black migrations through *and* despite the isthmian disavowal of blackness. Without negating the importance of Wilson's contribution to a national Panamanian canonical archive, this chapter differs from a nationalist reading of Wilson's novel to highlight how this novel articulates a global and itinerant understanding of blackness about histories of global racial capitalism. Through its shifting narrative voices, *Chombo* points to multiple narrative beginnings. Wilson narrates the story of young Lito, whose ancestral curiosity sparks his exploration of Afro-West Indians' migration to the isthmus to labor for the French and, later, US construction of the Panama Canal. When under a mango tree in Colón, reading academic articles about the contribution of Afro-West Indians to the culture and economy of Panama, a group of African elders approaches Lito. There, together they make "varios comentarios sobre la triste situación de los afro-exilados por todas partes de las Américas—Tierras de Lágrimas" (Wilson 33). Finally, the eldest of the group reveals part of the story behind the three gold African bracelets. In this chapter, titled

"Yawoda" for Wednesday, the reader goes on to learn the story of Lito's grandfather, James Duglin, migration to Panama in search of his father, that arrived for the French construction of the canal. Despite this narrative privileging, however, the reader is still ignorant of the bracelets' "real" origin by the end of the chapter. Instead, we are taken along James Duglin's journey from Jamaica to the isthmus and learn of his strife living and working in the Canal Zone. Here, Wilson carries out a genealogical mode of storytelling. As opposed to valorizing a singular "origin" story about the bracelets, the gaps and turns in the elder's narrative reveal multiple beginning points. The entangled trajectories and spatial mapping of *Chombo* emphasize the "routedness" of an African origin story. *Chombo*'s dynamic interplay between the "routes and roots" of Lito's Afro-Antillean family underscores the historical itinerancy of black bodies in transit.[57]

On top of reframing an African origin story as a black itinerancy, Wilson offers a relational, multidirectional, and global rendition of blackness through the spatial juxtapositions of racial histories. For example. Wilson juxtaposes and "globalizes" modes of racial segregation through the back-and-forth movement between local and global. Wilson juxtaposes racial segregation in the United States with the racial segregation perpetuated by the Silver Roll/Gold Roll system in Panama. At an old train station in the port city of Colon, Lito notes, "[A]ntes de las protestas contra la discriminación racial en Selma y Washington D.C. dirigidas por el Dr. Martin Luther King, había una sección *Gold Roll* para los norteamericanos blancos, y otra sección

57. Here, I evoke James Clifford's itinerancies of "routes and roots." See *Routes* (1997).

Silver Roll con asientos incómodos y sin aire acondicionado para cholos y negros" (Wilson 86). By setting off "*Gold Roll*" and "*Silver Roll*" in italics, the novel emphasizes the capitalist and racialized logic of separation and segregation that constituted the Canal Zone in Panama. Afro-West Indians are regulated not only within a hierarchal division of labor, but their movements are also regulated. Upon his arrival in the isthmus James Duglin (Lito's grandfather) and other Afro-West Indians "marcharon en fila desde el muelle hasta la estación ferroviaria de Colón donde pasaron a la sala de espera *Silver Roll*" (Wilson 33). In this passage, "*Silver Roll"* not only alludes to the hierarchical division of paid labor but also makes sense of segregation practices. The narrative mixes time and space by juxtaposing the imperial Gold Roll/Silver Roll segregation of the Canal with that of the Civil Rights era. However disjointed in time and space, these two comparisons point to the relationality between black Americans during the Civil Rights era and Afro-West Indians in the Canal Zone.

This example articulates the hierarchies imposed upon blackness as itinerant in that these systems "travel" from place to place, like how black bodies in transit travel from place to place under the imperative for labor. In *Visible Identities*, Linda Alcoff elaborates on the particularities of this racialized system of classification as they became constitutive not only of racial characteristics but, on a deeper level, *constituted* the identity and subjectivity of canal workers. Alcoff writes:

> During the building of the Panama Canal, workers were divided and identified by the U.S.-owned and run Panama Canal Commission as "gold" (whites) and "silver" (West Indian blacks), denoting the form of currency in which they were paid. "Gold" and "silver" workers were given separate and differently constructed living and they were attributed different characteristics. In Canal

> Commission documents, gold workers were described as loyal, earnest, responsible, self-sacrificing, and enthusiastic. Silver workers were described as shiftless, inconstant, exasperating, irresponsible, carefree, 'yet as reliable a workman as our own American cottonfield hand. Here race explicitly determined economic and social status, but it also was understood by the dominant white authorities to be the *determinate constitutive factor of subjectivity*, indicating personal character traits and internal constitution (for example, blacks were thought to be more resistant to yellow fever). Such publicly instituted and circulated associations between race and subjectivity must naturally affect the self-perceptions of those persons so described. Thus, racialized identities affect not only one's public status but one's experienced selfhood as well. (Alcoff 183)

As Alcoff affirms, this system of racialized classification constituted the very "self-perception" of the West-Indian black population and how black subjects operated on the level of perception and lived experience. I argue that Wilson's *Chombo* acknowledges and rearranges this racial classification system on an objectivist and subjectivist level of racial understanding. For example, by defining this system within the novel's glossary, Wilson acknowledges how, objectively speaking, the "Silver Roll" and "Gold Roll" constituted systems of discrimination specific to the Canal Zone. When Wilson relates this system to US racial segregation practices, he utilizes literary strategies of linguistic and spatial juxtaposition to rearrange this system in terms of "fact" and "history."

Wilson reconfigures this racial system on the level of subjectivity when Lito, the novel's protagonist, rethinks race through his specific point of view. Apart from expanding the "objectivist" and historical parameters of blackness through the juxtaposition of racialized systems of segregation, Wilson expands the subjective parameters of blackness through the ironic figuration of Don Justo as "El Ciego." Early

in the novel, we meet the character of Don Justo, known as "El Ciego," who repeatedly speaks of his "pureza de sangre," interrupting dialogue between himself and the young Afro-West Indian to ask, "¿Es usted de español de cepa pura?" (Wilson 15). On one level, Don Justo's character represents the Panamanian aversion to blackness and the historical amnesia of racial discrimination. [58]We can understand Don Justo's blindness, captured in his name, "El Ciego," as symbolic of this aversion to and erasure of racial prejudice. On another level, Wilson animates a satiric reading of "El Ciego" as the narrative draws out the gaps and contradictions in Don Justo's racial politics by bringing attention to his appearance as "ñato, moreno, y de pelo encrespado" (Wilson 15). "El Ciego," it turns out, is not only blind to histories of racial prejudice, but he is also blind to his dark-colored appearance. Wilson points to the irony of Don Justo's depiction several times in the novel as Don Justo reaffirms, "Vuelvo y repito, todos somos como hermanos y hasta queremos al chombo negro antillano" (Wilson 14). Lito internally responds to the irony of Don Justo's declaration, "Escuche sus palabras: Y hasta queremos al *chombo*…" (Wilson 14). Wilson's figuration of "El Ciego" as the ironic "antithesis" of the figure of El Chombo inverts the racial arrangement of blackness on the level of humor, language, and figurative embodiment.

Wilson's retold isthmian history animates a relational, multidirectional, and hemispheric understanding post-slavery itinerancies of blackness. By understanding this body as work as an iteration of "Isthmian post-slavery itinerancies," I foreground

58. When Lito draws attention to the legacy of Panamanian and American racial prejudice towards people of black descent, Don Justo contests, "Nada de eso—atacó el viejo como una fiera herida—aquí no hay descriminación. Todos somos hermanos" (Wilson 14). Moreover, Don Justo defends Panamanian cultural politics, insisting that any racial prejudice is due to the presence of "los racistas gringos" in Panama (Wilson 14).

how Wilson reimagines the afterlife of slavery through the back-and-forth movement between an "African origin" and a reimagined, as in necessarily relational, isthmus. I point to the novel's expression of "roots" as "routes," the linguistic and spatial juxtaposition of multiple contexts of racial segregation, and, finally, the inversion and subversion of a hegemonic understanding of blackness through the figure of El Ciego and/as El Chombo. To arrange the meaning of blackness, Wilson expresses blackness as both a subjective experience and an articulated object of knowledge. Just as the novel's glossary defines the term "Chombo" formally as, "Nombre despectivo dado al afro-panameño de ascendencia antillana," Wilson undoes this objectivist account of race through the remapping of blackness and the Isthmian politics of non/belonging that surround the black body (Wilson 102). Ultimately, Wilson demonstrates that blackness and the black body, even in its negation, co-constitutes Isthmian histories of migration and racial thinking. Wilson's figuration of El Chombo disrupts and broadens categorical definitions of blackness through a broadened and reimagined rendition of Panamanian blackness. Through the "re/learning" of racial seeing. Wilson transforms black embodiment into a "knowing practice" open to reconfiguration and transformation.

II. Revisiting Migratory Histories of the Sea

A long and diverse writing tradition of "sea reimaginings" contemplate the symbolic significance of Caribbean and transatlantic marine passages.[59] Writers such

59. Such works include Derek Walcott's poem, "The Sea is History" (1978), Antonio Benítez-Rogo's *La Isla Que Repite* (1989), Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1990), and Paul Gilroys' *The Black Atlantic* (1993).

as Paul Gilroy and Édouard Glissant reimagine the sea as a site of migratory crossings and historical consciousness by evoking former histories of the Middle Passage to express a fluid, multilayered, and relational account of migratory voyages.[60] This section underscores the visual and symbolic dimensions of this tradition of "marine reimaginings" by foregrounding Danticat's fictional and nonfictional writing. I situate Danticat's work within this more extensive literary and theoretical tradition of migratory histories of the sea by first foregrounding her short story "Children of the Sea" from the collection *Krik? Krak!* In *Asylum Speakers* (2010), April Shemak relates Danticat's short story with Francisco Goldman's novel *The Ordinary Seaman* (1997) to foreground the category of "limbo citizenship" and histories of "immobilized" migrations.[61] Shemak advances an archive of "New World" refugee narratives to foreground the category of "limbo citizenship" as it relates to refugees across Caribbean, Central American, and North American contexts. I move from the figure of the boat refugee to the figure of the black migrant, as featured across Danticat's writing, to move away from the "top-down" categorization of Haitian migrants as "limbo citizens." In this section, I argue for the need to foreground a more agentic and relational understanding of Haitian migrancy in relation to hemispheric and global

60. For example, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* depicts the ship as a metaphor to speak of histories of transatlantic cultural exchange at the center of black intellectual and diasporic cultural life.

61. The *Ordinary Seaman* tells the tale of ships and people locked in places and in functions. Contrary to narratives of ''people going places,'' through forced labor migration the characters aboard the Urus lose their claim to citizenship. Narrating the story of ''a ship that never moves,'' through the figure of the ship Urus, Goldman presents a hemispheric imagining of the isthmus, which harkens back to a narrative of Northern-Anglo-imperialist exploitation in Panama under the politics of "free-enterprise." The broken and unstable nationality and maritime laws that emerge out of Panama during and around transit construction is the legal structure that keeps the novel's Central American labor migrants in an indefinite space of homelessness so that cage of legal restriction haunts Goldman's labor migrants.

migration histories.

Within her work, Shemak places Danticat's "Children of the Sea" within the tradition of Haitian refugee boat narratives. In her work, Shemak foregrounds an "alternative sea history" of migration marked by surveillance and a lack of mobility. In her reading of "Children of the Sea," Shemak emphasizes the characterization of orphanhood that undergirds the short story. She characterizes the boat refugees as y "exist[ing] in an ontological limbo on the sea, where a young reporter's testimony serves as a precarious lifeline" (Shemak 41). Reading this story as part of a literary refugee, testimonial, and dystopic travel narrative, Shemak imagines the Caribbean Ocean as a central site of travel and limbo existence for refugee subjects. Through the phrase "politics of hospitality," Shemak references the more extensive imperial history of US practices of military interdiction where, for instance, the US Coast Guard intercepts Haitian boat refugees, forbidding their entrance into the US. She reads this history of interdiction as an institutional and "top-down" form of witnessing Haitian migration through, first and foremost, a politics of containment that impedes and, in effect, contains the testimonial claim to asylum.

My reading of Danticat does not negate the element of immobility, orphanhood, and liminal subjectivity found within the ethos of "Children of the Sea." We only need to look at the recent treatment of Haitian migrants at the US-Mexico border to recognize the entrenched and hegemonic history of racial discrimination directed toward Haitian migrants. However, my reading of Danticat's greater engagement with Haitian migration moves toward a less "immobilized" and more agentic rendering of

migrant subjectivities and migrant expressive cultures by highlighting the creative potentiality of visual histories of "looking across the sea." More specifically, I argue that Danticat foregrounds a politics of relationality at the heart of storytelling and the act of migrating through her metaphoric imaging of "children of the sea." Narrated from the point of view of a female letter writer, "Children of the Sea" depicts life in Haiti under the Duvalier regime as the letter writer narrates her experience aboard a wooden boat of Haitian exiles seeking US refuge. As the temporal duration aboard the boat spans, the imagery of "timeless waters" and "endless seas" dissolves all "borderlines of the sea" (*"*Children of the Sea" 3, 6). As the narrator's horizon of hope diminishes, where she "see[s] nothing" and ships become "like a mirage in the desert," she figuratively arrives at the African fate of becoming a child of the sea.[62] Once spatial and temporal boundaries disappear, the speaker describes a figurative "arrival" into Africanness that parallels a Haitian "arrival" into racialization and racially discriminating hierarchies.[63] The figurative "child of the sea" personifies the afterlife of the letter writer and the memory of her lost beloved. Danticat moves from the individual to the collective by allegorizing the sea's temporal and spatial ebbs and

62. The speaker says, "I go to them now as though it was always meant to be, as though the very day that my mother birthed me, she had chosen me to live life eternal, among the children of the deep blue sea, those who have escaped the chains of slavery to form a world beneath the heavens and the blood-drenched earth where you live…Perhaps I was chosen from the beginning of time…In any case, I know that my memory of you will live even there as I too become a child of the sea" ("Children of the Sea" 27).

63. The speaker states, "Yes, I am finally an African. I am even darker than your father" ("Children of the Sea" 11). Juxtaposing the daily experiences on the boat with the experiences of Africans aboard slave ships, the narrator contemplates the irony of the racial discrimination Haitians endure from other black populations, stating: "I feel like sailing for Africa. Maybe we will go to Guinn, to live with the spirits, to be with everyone that has come and died before us. They would probably turn us away from there too. Someone has a transmitter and sometimes we listen to radio from the Bahamas. They treat Haitians like dogs in the Bahamas, a woman says. To them, we are not human. Even though their music sounds like ours. Their people look like ours. Even though we had the same African fathers who probably crossed these same seas together" ("Children of the Sea" 14).

flows. Moreover, the short story's literary structure as a letter foregrounds the relationality between letter-writers as the larger structure of the collective *Krik? Krak!* emphasizes the dialogic relationship behind storytelling. As a letter-writer and storyteller, the speaker as figurative "child of the sea" emblemizes the ethos of relationality at the heart of this short story and the greater collective. Introducing the meaning of "krik? krak!," the speaker states:

> We spent most of yesterday telling stories. Someone says, krik? You answer, krak! And they say, I have many stories I could tell you, and then they go on and tell stories to you, but mostly, to themselves. Sometimes it feels like we have been at sea longer than the many years that I have been on this earth. The sun comes up and goes down. That is how you know it has been a whole day. ("Children of the Sea" 15)

This story-telling scene emphasizes how the act of migrating is contingent upon a collective and relational body of migrants traversing the open sea.

In "Black Bodies in Motion and in Pain," Danticat offers another metaphorical reimaging of black migration histories. In this essay, featured in the *New Yorker*, Danticat allegorizes the migrant condition through an abject yet expansive rendering of the black condition. Musing on the beauty and heartbreak of Jacob Lawrence's painted depictions of the Great Migration, Danticat observes and laments generational histories of "black bodies in motion, in transit, and in danger" ("Black Bodies in Motion").[64] Danticat responds to the murder of nine men and women at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church by an anti-immigrant white supremacist as she describes black bodies "increasingly becoming battlefields upon which horrors are

64. See Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series" of modern art.

routinely executed" ("Black Bodies in Motion"). Shifting between different migratory contexts and embodied points of view that move from a singular and differentiated "black body" to "our flesh" to a more expansive "we," Danticat stitches together an image of modern migrancy through a retelling of migratory movements. Danticat writes:

> These days, it seems that black bodies are more threatened than they have ever been so far in this century. Or maybe we just have more ways to document the beatings, shootings, and other abuses that have been suffered in the recent past. As means of transportation have become more accessible, it also seems that we have more migration than ever. Even children are migrating by the thousands in our hemisphere, crossing several borders to flee gang violence in Central America, while hoping to be unified with their U.S. based parent. Still, we live in a world where…money can move freely, but people cannot. ("Black Bodies in Motion")

Danticat relates the expanded threat around black bodies with the proliferation of racial violence, the expansion of means of transportation, and the unsanctioned mobility of people that ensues from this technology. Here, Danticat suggests a related acceleration of precarity connects a broader hemispheric history of migratory movements. On the one hand, we could read Danticat's depiction of black bodies in motion as a disenfranchised and overdetermined precarious construct. We can default to a "top-down" hegemonic rendering of the black body as "a signifier of something, scripted and coded" ("Black Bodies in Motion").[65] No doubt, Danticat means to evoke this historical understanding of blackness as she cites Franz Fanon: "Black bodies, living

65. Danticat directly cites Great Migration scholar Wallace Best. He writes, "a black body in motion is never without consequence. It is always a signifier of something, scripted and coded. And for the most part, throughout our history black bodies in motion have always been deemed a threat" ("Black Bodies in Motion").

with ‘certain uncertainty,’ to use Franz Fanon’s words, can be in transit, it seems for several generations” (“Black Bodies in Motion”). However, I argue that as much as Danticat is aware of the underlying conditions of precarity that have driven black populations to move throughout centuries, Danticat ultimately desires to transform and reinvent the visual and metaphorical retelling of black migrations and embodiments of blackness.

To demonstrate that Danticat ultimately intends to reinvent black migration histories, I emphasize the agentic, creative, and expansive elements behind Danticat’s retellings of black migrations. For example, in her *New Yorker* essay, Danticat animates a porous and comprehensive understanding of black bodies in motion as she rhetorically juxtaposes the Great Migration’s historical movement of millions of blacks from the rural South to Northern urban centers with the recent expulsion of Haitians from the Dominic Republic, the internal displacement of Hurricane Katrina survivors, and the Northern migration of Central American children. By shifting between these different geopolitical contexts and points of view, Danticat expands the “we” that witnesses the atrocities of slavery’s afterlife, including the murder of men and women at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, into a hemispheric migrant story. Danticat declares: “Human beings have been migrating since the beginning of time” (“Black Bodies in Motion”). This retelling of the history of black bodies is motion is more than hemispheric. By tethering the accounts of black bodies to a more extensive “human history” of migration, Danticat underscores how the global condition of migrancy not only relates black migrations across space and time, but it also necessarily

links them to a collective understanding of migrancy.

By foregrounding Danticat's engagement with histories of Haitian and black migrations, I ultimately center the figure of the black migrant as opposed to Shemak's figure of the refugee. Returning to how my reading differs from Shemak's reading of Danticat, I point to how Shemak ultimately favors the category of "refugee" and "asylum seeker" and the figure of the limbo Haitian boat figure because she links migratory histories of the sea, including Danticat's writing, through the politics of testimony and discourse.[66] To demonstrate Shemak's privileging of discourse in her formulation of the refugee figure, I point to her visual and conceptual treatment of photography. In tandem with Danticat's "Children of the Sea," Shemak foregrounds the US Coast Guard's online photographic archive of boat interceptions of Haitian migrants. In this extensive visual analysis of Haitian boat refugees, as depicted by the US Coast Guard, Shemak highlights how the photographs utilize a "visual rhetoric of Coast Guard hospice" to infantilize Haitian migrants and otherize their bodies (41). She references the visual cleansing of refugees' bodies, the photographs of child orphans, and the photographing of the military training of Haitians to foreground the militarist paternalistic relationship between US hegemonic actors and Haitian migrants. Shemak argues that the archive expresses a "politics of hospitality" in the sense that "the surveillance role of the camera paradoxically allows the Coast Guard to project itself

66. Shemak states: "The words *refugee*, *exile*, *deportee*, *displaced person*, and even *foreigner*, have changed their meanings; they call for another discourse and another kind of practical response, and they change the whole horizon of what is 'political' in citizenship, of what it means to belong to a nation state. The shift in meaning of the vocabulary that is central to the politics of hospitality emphasizes the protean nature of the poetics of hospitality. How will asylum seekers need to reorder their language to become effective asylum speakers?" (248)

as an entity that provides refuge to weary travelers while simultaneously marking the alterity of Haitian bodies" (129-130). Within Shemak's reading of the US "scopic regime," the photographic medium "becomes a means to contain the threat of Haitian physicality by fixing refugees within a visual frame.[67] The containment of Haitian bodies carries deep resonances with the historical treatment of Haitians by the United States government" (Shemak 42). While not negating this historical treatment of Haitian refugees, I move away from a reading of Haitian migrants through the lens of "false witnessing" and the eroticization and othering of Haitian bodies by foregrounding the agentic capacity of reimagining migration histories through the visuality of metaphor.

Within Shemak's interpretation of the visual history of Haitian migration, Haitian bodies are otherized, docile, and contained. This passive rendering of Haitian embodiment goes hand in hand with the "fracturing" of refugee testimonials that, in effect, curtails the asylum speaker's testimony understood, above all else, as a discursive formation inside the workings of discipline and power.[68] I depart from Shemak by foregrounding another dimension of the visual history surrounding Haitian migrants. In effect, I foreground the visuality and embodiment of histories of Haitian bodies in motion as opposed to foregrounding the discursive and testimonial at the

67. Drawing upon Foucault's notion of "scopic regime," Shemak argues that these photographs emphasize the historical surveillance and disciplining of Haitian migrant bodies ultimately reinforces the hegemonic power of the US state within the more extensive history of US-Haiti relations and US interdiction policy. She highlights the hindrance of Haitian boat migrations by US hegemonic actors; "in carrying out interdictions of boat refugees, the Coast Guard represents a surveillance of the war, an 'eye-witnessing' that seeks to contain and control this fluidity [of Haitian migration]" (Shemak 23).

68. Shemak argues that "Coast Guard interdictions not only impede Haitian refugees' physical movements on the seas but also result in fracturing refugee testimonies or otherwise prohibiting them from articulating a 'well-founded fear' to gain access to the U.S. asylum process" (89).

center of Shemak's refugee figure so that the question of reimagining sea history is less about a claim situated within language and more about the politics of relationality at the center of Haitian migrant subjectivities. By foregrounding Danticat's engagement with Haitian and black migrations, I ultimately offer an alternative "archive" and visual history of Haitian migration. Throughout her extensive fictional and non-fictional works, Danticat draws upon the visuality of metaphorical language to advance a more capacious understanding of Haitian migrations in both time and space. Aside from the short story "Children of the Sea" and essay "Black Body in Motion," in her literary memoir *Create Dangerously* (2011), Danticat presents another metaphorical reimagining of Haitian migration. She writes: "Balancing on the metaphorical high seas and bending to their oars without dying is what the majority of Haitian have done, generation after generation" (*Create Dangerously* 14). Throughout the essay "Black Bodies in Motion," the short story "Children of the Sea," and the literary memoir *Create Dangerously*, Danticat deploys an array of literary and rhetorical strategies, including shifting points of view, free association, and the allegorizing of a "metaphorical high seas," to rearrange, broaden and reinvent the visual history of migratory crossings. This chapter responds to Danticat's provocation to consider how we might reimagine hemispheric migratory histories in relation to black bodies, migrancy, and marine migrations across the Caribbean. Not only that, but Danticat's also migratory reimaginations expand the metaphorical "high seas" of the Caribbean to include the migratory passages that, through globalization and racial capitalism, move from the high sea to Central America to the "terra-migrations" across Latin and North

America.

On the hegemonic side of history, we can understand how Haitian migrants, including the ones depicted at the onset of this chapter, reroute their journeys because governments seek to deter them. Ratje's photograph visually captures the historical collision of Prevention Through Deterrence and US Coast Guard interdictions. Yet, through the literary reimaging of migration histories, Wilson and Danticat seek to "reroute" these histories through the reinvention of language, visual metaphor, and history. These writers pull apart and use language for new purposes to undo the historical coherence of the black body as a figure of racial capitalism. By revisiting the migratory histories of the sea through Wilson and Danticat's work, I point to the creative potential of literature in retelling racial history. From the oceanic crossings of the colonial context to the contemporary marine and land crossings across the Caribbean and Latin America, the retelling of migrancy through literary reinvention demonstrates how the visual history of migrancy is alive, dynamic, and ever evolving. "History is alive. Images move like wildfire," Mark Naison, a scholar of history and African and African American studies, responds to slavery's visual afterlife captured in the photographic images of Haitian migrants taken by Ratje (Debusmann Jr). These authors move the imagery around black migrancy through the continual reinvention of language. In the following, I will argue that these authors respond to the hegemony behind migrancy by foregrounding a visual praxis of racial seeing.

III. Visual Praxes of "Underseeing"

In this section, I build upon the previous sections' readings of Wilson and

Danticat to argue that cultural studies of migrancy within US Central American and Latinx studies need to be in dialogue with black expressive cultures because of the attention these authors give to the specificities of race, racialization, and racial seeing. Wilson and Danticat "look across" migratory passageways to retell the racial imaginations undergirding migration histories. Moreover, these two authors also animate a "knowing practice" that emerges from, yet exceeds, black embodiment. These authors not only help us make sense of how slavery's past continues to unfold and persist in the present, but these writers mobilize literary devices within and out of a profoundly material, phenomenal, and embodied understanding of the world and blackness. I demonstrate this point by introducing the figure of "the underseer" as a complication of Christina Sharpe's idea of "the underwriter," as featured in her book *In the Wake* (2016).

Sharpe's *In the Wake* offers a theoretical approach to understanding slavery's material and symbolic afterlife. Structuring her book around metonymies of slavery, including "the ship," "the hold," and "the weather," Sharpe translates the symbolic "wake" left behind by slave ships in the Atlantic into those imaginary and ontological spaces in which slavery's unresolved legacy continues to unfold. For Sharpe, "wake work" acknowledges this legacy in all the ways modern society constitutes itself through anti-blackness and reclaims black ontological spaces in a world that seeks to deny it. As Sharpe tells us, being in the wake is as much a lived condition as it is an ethical choice to confront and subvert the historical negation of blackness.

Through my reading of Danticat, I frame "wake work" as less of a "language

refashioning" and more of a visual and embodied form of reimaging. I contend that the visual reading practice of "underseeing" is like "wake work" in the sense that Wilson and Danticat "underwrite" these black histories of racialized embodiment by rearranging the material order and appearance of blackness. If "underwriting" is "something less than writing" that expands out "wake like" to advertise the fact of a metonymic ship, as an image stitched together to form an image of slavery's persistence, then "underseeing" is "something less than seeing" that while advertising the fact of racial distinction or racial discrimination, stitches together another order of racial embodiment through, and despite of, the persistence of antiblackness. In this sense, "the underseer" foregrounds black embodiments' visual, material, and phenomenal dimensions.

To elucidate the visual reading practice of "underseeing," I turn to Danticat's reading of a "racial encounter" in her memoir of *Brother, I'm Dying*, where Danticat recalls her uncle's memory of life in Haiti during past US occupation. In a passage near the end of the novel, Danticat's uncle, Joseph, recalls US marines kicking around a ball. Danticat writes:

> When my uncle finally reached the marketplace at midday, after hours and hours of walking, he saw a group of young white men in dark high boots and khakis at its bamboo-fenced entrance. There were perhaps six or seven of them, and they seemed to be kicking something on the ground. My uncle had never seen white men before, and their pink, pale skins gave some credence to his mother's notion that white people had *po lanvè*, skins turned inside out, so that if they didn't wear heavy clothing, you might always be looking at their insides. As my uncle approached the small circle of men and the larger crowd of vendors and shoppers watching with hands cradling their heads in shock, the white men

> seemed to him to be quite agitated. Were they laughing? Screaming in another language? They kept kicking the thing on the ground as though it were a soccer ball, bouncing it to one another with the rounded tips of their boots. Taking small careful steps to remain the same distance away as the other bystanders, my uncle finally saw what it was: a man's head. The head was full of black peppercorn hair. Blood was dripping out of the severed neck, forming dusty dark red bubbles in the dirt. Suddenly my uncle realized why Granpè Nozial and Granmè Lorvana wanted him to stay home. Then, as now, the world outside Beauséjour was treacherous indeed. (*Brother, I'm Dying* 246-247)

In *Latinx Literature Now* (2019), literary critic Ricardo Ortiz reads the significance of this passage through *Brother, I'm Dying*'s generic operation of literary memoir.[69] Ortiz underscores how this passage operates through the distance of removal as it is written and presented to its readers. Specifically, he highlights the "distance of removal" at work in this passage on the geography, chronology, and reporting level as the interlocutor Danticat narrates her uncle Joseph's eye witnessing from some future place and time. As Ortiz affirms, not only is Joseph's memory mediated (at a "further

69. Ortiz expands upon Danticat's understanding of the creative act to underscore Danticat's animation of an "immigrant itinerancy." He writes: "[W]e should not underestimate the importance of the 'immigrant' itinerancy of the writing act in the ways it makes sense to both Danticat and Derrida. For Danticat certainly it is crucial that, as the life of the writer might always entail an itinerancy that transports her from country to country, from home to home, the afterlife of the text always entails an even more capacious potential for circulation" (Ortiz 18). With a Derridian insistence on the existential precarity of the reading act, Danticat traces a related condition of precarious risk that befalls the circulation of immigrant art and writing. For Ortiz, by qualifying a historical relationship to precarity within her own life experiences as a writer, Danticat animates a more general and ambitious construction of the immigrant writer and diasporic art's social afterlife. Under the unifying principle of "creating dangerously," Danticat broadens a specific immigrant "scene of the production, performance, and circulation of discursive acts and imaginative, expressive material" to express a more general and essential construction of the scene of writing and the writer that emphasize conditions of precarity. To animate a more fluid understanding of Haitian diasporic literature, Ortiz underscores the diasporic writers' deployment of literary resources that cut across and merge registers of fiction and history to offer alternate theories of the ontology of literary acts and practices. Ortiz elaborates: "Danticat proposes… a construction of the writer in much more generally possible contexts, those that emphasize conditions of precarity, and of an existential, historical immanence so new and so potentially fleeting as to feel more like an evanescence, but where the creative will nevertheless assert itself enough to risk both the very event of that assertive utterance, and also the mortal consequence(s) that might, and in too many cases will almost certainly, follow'" (16).

remove") through Danticat's point of view but it is also mediated through the racial account of Joseph's mother (Danticat's grandmother). As a "tool for handling the encounter between black Haitians and their white American occupiers," Ortiz writes, Joseph's mother offers "the figurative characterization in kreyól of white people having inverted skins, where that invocation of inversion seems to both promise access (however violent) to the interiority of those occupiers" (45). For Ortiz, the rhetorical inversion of readerly expectations where the object being kicked around might be a soccer instead of a man's decapitated head in hand with the symbolic inversion of "inverted skins" points to the significance of narration, figuration, and invention in mediating a literary memoir that exceeds recording and mimesis. Situated within his argument about the state of Latinx literature now, Ortiz marks this passage and Danticat's *Create Dangerously* as a return to the philosophical and ontological act of writing. While acknowledging the value of Ortiz's observations on the operationalization of inversion, I move away from a rhetorical or generic interpretation within this passage to emphasize this encounter's phenomenological dimension.

Through the inversion of readerly expectation around racialization, I emphasize the racial literacy animated in this passage from *Brother, I'm Dying*. Not only does the inversion of readerly expectations operate on the level of genre and reportage, but inversion also operates on the level of racial embodiment. At this level, consciousness rearranges and eventually "settles" into a particular racial configuration. I suggest that we understand the figurative characterization in kreyól of "po lanvé" not just as a noun of "skins turned inside out" or "whiteness turned inside out" but as a verb of seeing

race "inside out." As the act of seeing under the skin, "po lanvé" defamiliarizes the historical "looking relation" underpinning black and white bodies by rearranging the fleshy materiality of blackness and whiteness. Moreover, "po lanvé" as a form of "underseeing," that is, seeing under the skin, foregrounds the relational nature of seeing, racial seeing, and racial embodiment. In line with the phenomenological understanding of the world, the operationalization of this passage is contingent upon multiple forms of relationalities, including: (1) the witness/interlocutor relationship between Danticat and Joseph, (2) the reader/writer relationship between Danticat and us, the reader, (3) the looking relationship between Joseph, American Marines, and the head, and (4) the relationship of "racial knowing" between Joseph and his mother. These multiple, interconnected, and interdependent relationalities all point to the fact that perception, including the perception of race, is contingent upon consciousness necessarily understood as a social process. More than the "promise [of] access….to the interiority of those [white] occupiers," Danticat's phenomenal understanding of the world fulfills it. As much as the literary devices and rhetorical strategies of this phenomenological encounter operate on the level of genre and language, there is something profoundly material about Danticat's "underseeing." More than a return to a philosophy or an ontology of reader/writer relationalities, this passage marks a return to the phenomenal as it transforms the consciousness and enfleshment of blackness. Even within this moment of extreme violence where a black body is more than disfigured and literally decapitated, Danticat's attunement to racialization not only inverts our understanding of what is and how is race *raced*; she draws out the creative

contingency of racial reimagination through the operationalization of literary reinvention.

Writers across minoritarian discourses, including black studies and critical race and ethnic studies, turn to the phenomenological theory of inter-embodiment and co-perception to emphasize how racism makes productive use of visual perception to demarcate and organize humankinds. In *Visible Identitie*s, for example, Alcoff argues that racializing perceptual practices are used to produce a visual registry of factual and epistemic_credence so that "[a] body that is racialized…is overdetermined through racial classifications and their associated attributions" (197). For Alcoff, the epistemically relevant point about race is that the source of racialization, or at least one important source, lies in the microprocesses of subjective existence.[70] She notes that subjectivist and objectivist approaches to understanding race are not mutually exclusive, noting how Franz Fanon's account has elements of both. As Alcoff argues, objectivist approaches to race, referencing processes of colonialization, cultural traditions, metanarratives of historical experience, and race's effect in the public domain all through a third-person perspective, can neglect "the microinteractions in which racialization operates, is reproduced, and is sometimes resignified" (183). She notes that, in contrast, subjectivist approaches that emerge from the lived experience of

70. In *Visible Identities*, Alcoff pursues a subjectivist approach to race, utilizing Merleau-Ponty's nonfoundationalist account of lived experience. In her extensive overview of past theoretical accounts of racialization, Alcoff sides with the position of Omi and Winant, affirming that any adequate account of race needs to address both the macrolevel and microlevel, or objective and subjective levels, of racialized social relations. Alcoff defines the macrolevel account of race as the "economic, political, and cultural structures, or 'sites,' in which the formation and management of racial collectivities occur" and thus what she calls an "objectivist account" (183). She defines the microlevel as "the microprocesses by which individual identities are formed" (183).

racialization can reveal "how race is constitutive of bodily, experience, judgment, and epistemic relationships" (183). Scholars across black studies, Caribbean studies, decolonial, and critical race studies continue to turn to Fanon's famous account of racialization in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) precisely because Fanon is so attuned to both the subjectivist and objectivist dimensions of racialization as they play out in history, psychic life, and the "microinteractions" of everyday life. We can locate the enduring legacy of Fanon's famous account of racialization because of his attentiveness to the "macro" and "micro" of race and racialization.

In response to Alcoff's invitation to foreground more subjectivist accounts of how race works, I foreground the work of Wilson and Danticat.[71] As I have demonstrated in the previous sections, both authors are attuned to both objectivist (as in "macro") and subjectivist (as in "micro") accounts of how race works. These writers demonstrate how the medium of literature can mobilize as much as immobilize the enduring legacy of racism as a racializing perceptual practice through the insistence of the capacity for reinvention and transformation. Through the figuration of El Ciego as El Chombo, Wilson not only inverts readerly expectations about the meaning of blackness, but Wilson also locates an alternative "knowing practice" within the point

71. Elaborating on the significance yet danger of subjectivist and phenomenological accounts of race and racialization, Alcoff writes: But it seems to me that although subjectivist approaches have important advantages in accounting for how race works, they have been underdeveloped in the recent theoretical literature, even while there are many first-person memoirs and rich descriptions of racial experience that might be tapped for theoretical analysis…A possible reason for the hesitancy one might have in going in this direction is a fear that phenomenological description will naturalize or fetishize racial experiences. This can happen when descriptions of felt experience begin to operate as *explanations* of felt experience, as if the experience itself is fully self-presenting and explanatory…. In other words, racism is the unfortunate but inevitable result of human cognitive processes. Phenomenological descriptions that detail the overwhelming salience of racializations for given individuals might then be used as support for such a belief (Alcoff 185).

of view of the young character of Lito that disrupts inherited knowledge around racial discrimination and the "order" of black embodiment. By recognizing the false belief systems basing El Ciego's way of seeing race, Lito "undersees" the humor and paradoxes that base Panamanian racial politics. Through their "macro" and "micro" attention to how racialized meaning travels, becomes reproduced, and rearranged through the directedness of consciousness, both Wilson and Danticat deliver an affirmative "yes," we can and should unlearn and relearn racial seeing.

Ultimately, the unity between these Haitian American and Afro-Panamanian bodies of writing lies in their practice, process, and destination, not in their origin. The figure of the underseer, as an alternative to the historical figure of the overseer, transforms the order of consciousness on that "primordial layer" of racialized embodiment by not only acknowledging the ontological relationship between seeing and being seeing but by operating out of that interdependent relationality that, in turn, transforms histories of objective and subjective thinking around race and blackness. Through their objective (as in historical) and subjective (as in visual and embodied) engagement with racial histories of seeing blackness, Wilson and Danticat demonstrate how blackness not only continues to unfold within past and present contexts of hemispheric and global migrations temporally and spatially. They mobilize the expressive power behind the embodiment of blackness.[72] Together they foreground "the

72. In the past, Danticat has pointed to the significance of racial encounters within US racial politics. In this interview, the interviewer asks Danticat: "As a pre-adolescent Haitian girl moving to New York in the 1980s, did race factor at all in your development? Have you had to deal with racism?" Danticat responds, "I lived in an all-Haitian, all-black, all-Caribbean atmosphere until I went to college. I didn't face a conscious racist act that I recognized until I went to Brown and was called a brown dog by some drunken football player…I remember thinking that day, so this is what if feels like. Maybe because I

black body" as a relational ontology and knowing practice. The visual praxes of "underseeing" rearrange the order, texture, and surface appearance of racial consciousness and materiality, reclaiming the agentic capacity to see and structure the world through seeing the world and race both "sideways" and "inside out." These two writers not only address the macrolevel of race through their "metaphorical" re-historicizing, but they also attend to the microlevel of race through their attention to unlearning and relearning racial seeing.

Ultimately, this chapter responds to the need for more relational accounts of race, racialization, and migrancy. As Alexander Weheliye affirms in *Habeas Viscus* (2014), black studies as an epistemic project have historically foregrounded the relational and visual character of race and racialization.[73] Operating within and across the confines of black studies, the work of Danticat and Wilson foregrounds an attentiveness to the specificities of racialization. US Central American and Latinx studies require more of this attentiveness. US Central American and Latinx studies must respond to the value of visual retellings of blackness and the phenomenologies of black embodiment. In the end, when we place US Central American and Latinx studies in conversation with black migrancies, we not only cut across Hispaniolan-, Caribbean-

was shielded inside my community, I didn't recognize it as directed to me until it was that obvious" (Adisa 384).

73. Weheliye argues that "insisting on black studies as a mode of knowledge production provides the conditions of possibility for viewing race as a set of articulated political relations or assemblages, and not a biological or cultural descriptor" (19). Moreover, he states: "Since blackness has functioned as one of the key signifiers for the sociopolitical articulation of visual distinctions among human groups in modernity, black studies have developed a series of comprehensive analytical frameworks—both critical and utopian—in the service of better understanding and dismantling the political, economic, cultural, and social exploitation of visible human differences" (Weheliye 4)

, isthmian-, and Latinx- epistemic traditions, we move towards relational, social, and interdependent accounts of migrant ontologies. A relational and interdependent understanding of migrant ontologies is ultimately what this project traces and offers.

By placing the literature of Wilson and Danticat at the beginning of this larger dissertation project, I acknowledge the vital contribution of phenomenologies of blackness and visual and embodied theorizations of race in black studies and borrow from black studies to fill the gap of theories of relational racializations in US Central American and Latinx studies. More than that, I suggest that the post-colonial moment of slavery serves as an alternative and unacknowledged "origin point" of Latinx ontologies even as the political and epistemic project of *Latinidad* negates and disavowals histories of blackness. Understood as a relational ontology and praxis of racial seeing, blackness co-constitutes the hemispheric construction of Central American and Latinx migrant subjectivities. Hemispheric histories of seeing blackness transgress artificial boundaries between Latinx, Caribbean, and Central American studies because racial accounts of migrancy are not only global in scope, as they spill out of and relate to different iterations of racial capitalism, but also because these histories of racial seeing are an ever-evolving, dynamic, and unresolved aesthetic and expressive set of practices.

Chapter 2: The Tattooed Body: Inhabiting *Marero* Melancholia in Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre* (2009)

Lo único que sé es que todo mi vida ha sido una mierda.
—El Casper, *Sin Nombre*

We learn from our traveling companions.
—Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*



Fig. 1.2. "Lil' Mago and Willy 'El Casper'" (Bonobo1990)

In 2009, American filmmaker Cary Fukunaga debuted his first cinematic film *Sin Nombre*. This latest rendition of an immigrant tale and gangster story received international acclaim (including the 2009 Sundance Film Festival award) for its acting, directing, and cinematography excellence. Having spent two years researching the lives

of Central American migrants and *mareros*, Fukunaga shot this film in Mexico, working with actual migrants and gang members throughout the production process.[74] As evidence of the film's impressive afterlife, this amateur artist's sketch captures a rare, shared moment of intimacy between two *marero* figures from the film (see fig.1.2). As members of the same Chiapas-based Mara Salvatrucha gang, El Casper and El Lil' Mago fare brothers and adversaries in the film. The *marero* figure of El Lil' Mago impresses the narrative through his diabolical persona as a ruthless *mara* leader. The large MS-13 devil horn tattoo on his facial profile coheres to El Lil Mago's storyline as a satanic murderer and fore. Yet, the pencil marks of this artist's vernacular rendition offer us a portal into another world where we witness El Lil' Mago's vulnerability as a sensitive brother and gentle father. The gang leader's melancholy face, like the sad countenance of the fading tattooed clown, leaves us with another impression. El Lil' Mago embraces his son while directing his gaze to his gang brother. As the wandering figure of the narrative (much like Casper the friendly ghost), the character of El Casper impresses the film, as this sketch, with traces of guilt, sorrow, and sadness. El Casper's tattoos—including the 'tear' tattoo under his eye and "perdóname madre mía" ("forgive me, my mother") neck tattoo—clue us into the figure's storyline of loss, escape, and possible redemption (Bonobo1990). This reading of the film suggests that behind the tattooed persona of the *marero* figure, we find paradoxes of feeling. Tattoos materialize in this migratory world as points of

74. "*Marero*" refers to a member of a *mara* in the US, Mexico, or Central America. "*Mara*" refers to one of several gangs of Central American origin.

ambivalence and contradictory meaning.

This chapter takes the negativity of the *marero* figure—*the marero tattoo*—as its organizing principle to offer an argument about how *marero* subjects come to figure. Like lines etched on the body over space and time, the *marero* tattoo has accumulated social meaning and capital to tell us a hemispheric story of marginalization, displacement, and violence. I begin by detailing historical moments across the US and Central America when the tattooed *marero* subject has advanced into our collective attention, starting with the ethnographic work of Elana Zilberg. After considering this more extensive social history around the making of *maras* and the *marero* subject, I return to the film case study of Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre*. Here, I examine the affective and phenomenological "cultural work" of *marero* tattoos, exploring the role of tattoos (and other *mara* objects) in making ideas, collectivities, and things. I then offer an argument about the cultural afterlife of the *marero* figure and, more specifically, the tattooed body's diasporic legacy of racialization in the contemporary moment.

Like the contrasting theater masks of El Casper's "Smile now, cry later" tattoo and the character foil of El Casper and El Lil' Mago, anthropologist Elana Zilberg conceptualizes a dialectical trope of *doble-cara* ("two face") to make sense of the long and convoluted historical origins of the transnational street gang MS-13. Through the figure of "gangster in guerilla face," Zilberg points to how popular representations of crime and terrorism reveal a convoluted and intimate political history between the US and El Salvador that plays out on the level of media discourse, neoliberal practices and

spatial practices.[75] Zilberg's redeployment of *doble-cara* vis a vis the gangster refugee conceptualizes the criminalized deportee as the embodied return of political violence and, in short, "the return of the repressed" (*"*Gangster in Guerilla Face" 41). The *marero* haunts contemporary Salvadoran society not only by the *real* threat it poses to the security of its citizens but also by the *marero* figure's unmasking of entrenched histories of police and state violence. As Zilberg affirms, "Police or state violence is the most corrupt part of democracy precisely because it places violence in a ghostly space, a space that is hidden, where the law becomes its own transgression" ("Gangster in Guerilla Face" 47). Within this "hidden" and "ghostly" space, we can begin to account for the transnational production of the *marero* subject.[76]

Zilberg arrives at this more extensive social and political commentary around MS-13 by attending to spatial patterns of migration, deportation, policing, and re-entry that she names "neoliberal securityscapes." Her transnational account of the *mara* history begins in the 1990s amidst the Los Angeles "gang crisis." Starting in the 90s,

75. Zilberg draws upon Walter Benjamin's idea of "dialectical image" and his writing around montage to consider how "seemingly opposite or contradictory elements" disrupt contextual and semiotic meaning and, therefore, leave "the image's ideational elements in productive suspension" (*Space of Detention* 16). She foregrounds the strange and "puzzling" photograph of a tattooed covered *marero* protesting as a FMLN political activist, what she calls "*La Mara Salvatrucha in FMLN face.*" Zilberg unravels the "crisis in meaning" behind the figure of the gangster refugee by posing the question: what makes figures and instances of political violence appear both so strange and yet familiar that they appear to be feeding off each other as forms of mimetic correspondences? ("Gangster in Guerilla Face" 50) This dialectical image of two different figures of resistance and displacement paves the conceptual ground for Zilberg's argument that mainstream discourses around transnational gangs shore up a transnational "'gang-crime-terrorism continuum'" (*Space of Detention* 18).

76. There exists a diverse body of literature around the national and transnational emergence of *maras*. This writing ranges from New Journalism pieces as Oscar Martínez's *A History of Violence* (2016) to interdisciplinary book compilations such as *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* (2011). There is also a growing number of documentaries that account for the emergence of Central American street gangs. My reading foregrounds scholarship that approximates cultural studies and, more specifically, focuses on the "troping" of the *marero* criminal type across culture and politics.

after the Los Angeles Rodney King riots, the US saw a "crackdown" on gang crime through the implementation of zero-tolerance legislation and gang abatement strategies. These state and police efforts, concretized through transnational security agreements, produced a detention-deportation-gang-prison pipeline that imbricated the social fabric of both the US and Central America. Zero-tolerance gang-abatement strategies and accompanying legislation created a growing supply of crime by subjecting more and more actions to penalties and increasing the penalties of actions deemed criminal (Zilberg, *Space of Detention* 7). The criminalized youth deportee and surrounding transnational gang youth crisis became a historical byproduct of US deportation efforts, US gang abatement strategies, and the exportation of US zero-tolerance policing strategies to Central America, in El Salvador, known locally as "*mano dura.*" Gang abatement strategies' social and cultural ramifications included the regional and hemispheric growth of an urban and incarcerated gang culture. The prevailing regional and hemispheric political patterns that emerged from this period fueled the transnational rise of street gangs like MS-13, even though the gangs functioned locally.[77]

Besides investigations focusing on transnational gangs' economic and political origin, past scholarship has also paid mind to state and media discourse that frames the gang as a new and emerging "criminal type." In *Space of Detention*, for instance,

77. As much as the phenomenon of Central American street gangs emerges out of "transnational forces" and, thereby, has been researched through transnational forms of historical, sociological, and ethnographic frameworks, the local continues to play an essential function in both the social understanding of *maras* and within the sociality of *maras* themselves. See pp. 12-13 of *Space of Detention*. Also, see, John Hagedorn's "Making Sense of Central American Maras" in *Air and Space Power Journal* (2008).

Zilberg links the criminalization of the *marero* criminal type to the "unquestioning reproduction" of "state-centric" discourse surrounding displaced subjects such as the "illegal immigrant" (14). She argues that the inter-American obsession with transnational gang youth and the widespread production of the *marero* criminal type emerges out of earlier common-sense narratives of Latino territorial transgressors, which include the figure of the Latino looter, street hoodlum, criminal deportee, and terrorist. Again, Zilberg points us to the historical importance of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. For Zilberg, the media reframed the riots from a Black story that scrutinized police violence against Black bodies to a brown "immigration story" that focused on the 'lawlessness' of Latino looters, pointing to more significant social anxieties around the transgression of spatial boundaries. The figure of the Latino Looter reanimated the common-sense narrative that Latinos and those of Latin American background threaten the order of national sovereignty not simply through the promotion of lawlessness but through their social investment in "boundary transgressions and transgressive mobility" (Zilberg, *Space of Detention* 15). Building upon Michel de Certeau's idea of the "law of place," Zilberg considers how the transgression of law slides into the transgression of spatial boundaries. Behind hemispheric patterns of circulation and the production of a surplus class of criminalized youth, we find a transnational history of state efforts to control the mobility of subjects considered dangerous. These subjects, including the looter, street hoodlum, and criminal deportee, for Zilberg, evolve out of a "career or prehistory" of the "master trope" of the illegal alien (*Space of Detention* 15). Zilberg affirms that these criminal types have a "future trajectory" in the figure of

the terrorist. Yet, one could argue that the future of Latino terrorism is already here, given the escalating criminalization of transnational street gangs and migrant populations, including children.

Sociologist Steven Osuna builds upon this idea that the *marero* criminal type has evolved as a socially constructed political category under which distinct yet related discourses (including migration, race, and the economy) have been integrated. Osuna foregrounds critical moments in Salvadoran history, including the failed Salvadoran revolution (1979-1992), the post-war development of a neoliberal Salvadoran economy that integrated the economy into a global capitalist system, and the Salvadoran sponsoring of US policies, to argue that *maras* like the *marero* social class result from class disparities and the polarizing contradictions of a capitalist state immersed in global capitalism. For Osuna, these polarizing contradictions materially result in the integration of criminalized deportees and local marginalized Salvadoran youth into a "transnational surplus population." Osuna utilizes the concept of "transnational moral panics" to name the ideological process where popular media and the elite political class displace more significant social fears and anxieties around material scarcity and inequities onto a social group of 'transgressors.' For Osuna, this "moralizing" ideological apparatus is transnational as it is "interconnected through flows of social knowledge, people, capital and policies that cross nation-state borders" (8). We can credit the moral panic over MS-13 to the history of mass repression and expulsion in El Salvador as much as to the history of US imperialism that helped insert El Salvador and surrounding Central American countries into a modern capitalist world system,

along with the racist neoliberal restructuring of policing that began in Los Angeles. US and Salvadoran political leaders and media discourse obscure the reality of structural inequities through shifting "*mara-related*" social labels that equate *mara*s with moral degradation. We need only recall how former president Donald Trump, on repeated occasions, referenced in his political speeches MS-13 and *mara*-related racial markers like "savages" and "bad hombres" that, in turn, evaded a closer critique of capitalist social relations both inside the US and across international borders to grasp the spectacularizing ideological work of moral panics.

In visual popular culture, the sensationalizing cultural work around transnational street gangs like MS-13 has cohered around *mara* tattoos and the *marero*'s tattooed body. Whereas the MS-13's iconic signature of devil horn tattoo and hand sign came out of the urban influence of heavy metal culture in Los Angeles, in visual culture, the *mara* sign and related tattoo iconography have taken up a life of their own.[78] Visual cultural productions across television, film, journalism, and art exhibitions foreground the *marero*'s tattooed body through close-ups and full-body profiles of incarcerated gang members. National Geographic's documentary series *World's Most Dangerous Gang* (2006) accompanies visual depictions of tattooed *marero* with sensational terms and language.[79] In provoking sensations of grand-scale

78. See pp. 227 of *Space of Detention* and John Hagedorn's "Making Sense of Central American Maras" for more on the urban, Los Angeles-based origin of MS-13's tattoos and other symbolic iconography such as the "devil horn" hand sign.

79. Adam Hinton's photography project, "The Penas Ciudad Barrios, El Salvador," documents the inmates and gang cultures of the Penas Ciudad Barrios maximum security prison in southern El Salvador. Newspaper articles across the US and UK have featured Hinton's photography under sensationalizing headlines emphasizing the dangerous nature of the gangs. Hinton's project went on to win the best photography awards. Hinton, Adam. "The Penas Ciudad Prison, El Salvador." *Adamhinton.net*,

fear and panic, the emergence of a "tattooed" visual corporal archive reinforces commonsense narratives that Central American street gangs pose the highest "transnational threat" to the security and sovereignty of Western democracy. We can think of *mara* tattoos and the *marero*'s tattooed body as a type of negative organizing trope that converts criminalized youth into inherent, racialized social constructs of violence. Visual Art studies scholar Kency Cornejo credits the international media attention directed towards the *marero* tattooed body to more extensive histories of systematized violence in the isthmus, including a Western imperial gaze that is both fearful of and fascinated by subaltern/marginalized subjectivities and an "aesthetics of violence" cultivated during armed conflicts to criminalize youth and promote repressive state policy in El Salvador (65). The "new" configuration of the *marero* criminalized body replaces the "1980s unpatriotic persona of a leftist subversive" to further entrench a "culture of fear" in the isthmus (Cornejo 65). [80]Today, the "unique criminalization" projected onto the tattooed body leads to the racialization and criminalization of Central American migrant youth and families.

For Cornejo, decolonial performance art speaks back to the criminalizing and

---

https://adamhinton.net/project/the-penas-ciudad-peison-el-salvador. Malm, Sara. "Up close and personal with the gang members of El Salvador: Inside the prison that is dangerous even the guards won't go in." *Dailymail.com*, Daily Mail, 6 September 2015, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3224098/Up-close-personal-El-Salvador-gangmembers-inside-prison-dangerous-guards-not-in.html#ixzz4QNBheBZU.

80. In "Visual Counter-Narratives" Kency Cornejo links the current criminalization projected onto Central American youth to earlier histories of state-sponsored criminalization in the isthmus. She cites the orchestrated killings in the rural countryside as one example of state strategy that, in effect, criminalized subversives through a "culture of fear" to put unwanted populations up for elimination during the region's armed conflicts (Cornejo 65). She argues that the relation between the visual, the criminal, and violence, all of which together produce grand-scale fear, continue to exist as an ongoing strategy of power both inside and outside of Central America.

racializing gaze projected onto the Central American tattooed body by exposing the role of US and Central American hegemonic state actors in breeding a transnational culture of fear and violence. Through the power of embodied storytelling, the performative work of Central American artists foregrounds the inconsistencies between public discourse, actual immigration policy, and the lived experience of marginalized and displaced populations like that of Central American family units, unaccompanied children, and criminalized men. The "visual and corporal gestures" of specific geopolitical performative embodiments serve as "visual counter-narratives" to textual forms of knowledge and common-sense narratives entrenched in colonial and racist thinking (Cornejo 64). For example, Ronald Moran's *Terapia Para un Dulce Sueño* (2011) and Danny Zavaleta's *Retrato Hablado* (2009) bring to light the paradoxes and ambiguities around the normativization of gang violence in Central American society. For Cornejo, graffiti and other visual markers shore up a psychology of violence deeply entrenched in the Central American individual and collective imaginary. Their art demonstrates how gang visual culture alters private and public spaces for citizens who monitor their physical movements. Regina Galindo's *Ablución* (2007) offers a paradoxical rendering of the *marero* as a clean yet "tainted" subjectivity that cannot escape past trauma and the social prejudice of the tattoo and other signs of the flesh.

This chapter utilizes tattoos as an entry point into the cultural work of the tattooed body and the psyche of *marero* subjectivity. By attending to "tattoo work," I arrive at a formulation of performativity distinct from Cornejo. In her reading of *mara*-related visual art, Cornejo locates the "countering" cultural work of visual narratives in

embodied forms of knowledge stemming from "geopolitical embodiments and location" (Cornejo 64). Building on Diana Taylor's validation of the "repertoire" and the performative power of embodied memory, Cornejo distinguishes textual and embodied forms of knowledge production, finding the former entrenched in colonial thinking. As opposed to grounding the *performative* work of the visual upon the distinction between textual and embodied forms of knowledge, this chapter understands the performative work of *mara* tattoos and the *marero's* tattooed body as affective forms of meaning-transfer processes entangled in *both* the textual and the embodied. I arrive at this conceptualization of performativity by paying attention to the "countering work" already embedded within the work of narration. Narration exposes how the body's orientation, like textual orientation, opens us up to affective worlds, states, and qualities.[81] The premise here is that *narratives, like objects, ideas, and bodies, become affective as points of conversion*.[82] We can only arrive at the specificity

81. In *Queer Phenomenology,* Sara Ahmed argues that the extension and directionality of bodies and the relationship between bodies and space are not an everyday occurrence; both are determined by lines that direct us. Ahmed investigates the nature of bodily and spatial directionality through the concept of *orientations*. She writes, "The concept of 'orientations' allows us to expose how life gets directed in some ways rather than others through the requirement that we follow what is already given to us" (21). "Orientations" reanimates the study of space by showing the constructed nature of space and spatial directionality. The meaning of the verb 'to orient' (according to the OED) already reveals the contrived organizatIon of space in its double meaning. 'To orient' means (1) "to place or arrange (a thing or person) so as to face the east" and (2) "to position or align with, or in a particular way relative to the point of the compass, or other specified points." The alignment with "the east" inherited in the word 'to orient' exposes the biases of the West that, over time, became neutralized in language. Ahmed's orientations re-centers the body in the cultural study of affect by paying mind to the forces of our surroundings that affect the body and take it outside of itself. Bodies and objects become orientated by how they take up time and space. Over time, the ordering of the social becomes orientated as well.

82. Here I adopt an approach Sara Ahmed utilizes throughout her emotive and phenomenological writing. The basis of Ahmed's writing contends that to be affected is to be moved, and when we are moved by things, we make things, including different worlds. To understand how affect and ideas travel and *move us,* she attends to how a subject registers any given entity within and outside its' horizon of experience. If the registering of any one entity depends on its 'conditions of arrival,' then 'conversion points' or 'affective reorientations' describes instances when a subject registers an entity *differently*. My

of geopolitical embodiments by attending to the affective 'stickiness' of objects and the body's facing, turning, and tending.[83]

This chapter understands the popular production of the transgressive *marero* figure hinges on a collective "turning away" or "turning towards" gang tattoos and tattooed bodies. Zilberg's "Latino transgressor," Osuna's "moral panics," and Cornejo's "new post-war criminalized Central American body" all offer conceptual paradigms for understanding the cultural and political troping of the *marero* figure as a dangerous criminal type. [84]Building upon this past attention to the *marero* figure, I turn to Sara Ahmed's "queer phenomenology" to understand how the narrative turning around tropes both emerge out of and differ from the lived experience of tattooed bodies. [85]When we narrate the social fear and anxiety around dangerous, transgressive

---

reading contends that affective reorientations, or 'disorientations,' when the world becomes small and inhospitable, are brought about by experiences of violence.

83. Sara Ahmed teaches us when feelings, be it good or bad, accumulate around an entity, the given entity 'picks up' traces of those feelings. When an entity becomes saturated with good or bad feelings, they become 'sticky objects. 'Stickiness' gives name to the capacity for an object to impress not just the body and the skin of the body but also the skin of the social. My reading of tattoos as kinds of "sticky objects" embraces a methodology practiced by Ahmed and a greater body of queer, feminist, and WOC scholarship that understands subjects and objects as messy 'entanglements' and seeks to move away from object and subject fetishism (including the presumed autonomy of the white male subject) by finding alternate ways to 'make things matter' (See pp. 211 of *Willful Subjects* for more on Ahmed's delineation of a feminist approach that diverges from a stricter idea of 'object-oriented ontology' (OOO) or what some now call 'the object turn').

84. Through their attention to the *marero* criminal type, Zilberg, Osuna, and Cornejo have also offered explanations for understanding how *marero* criminality slides into migrant criminality. The cultural and political rhetoric surrounding *mareros* carries direct repercussions for Central American migrants as they become the target of racialized and criminalized anti-immigrant rhetoric in the US. Through the association with the figure of the *marero*, the Central American migrant figure adopts the attribution of willfulness of its neighbor. Racist characterizations have consequences for the treatment of asylum-seeking migrants at the border, as for those populating detention centers. For many, it is not coincidental that the emergence of the *marero* criminal type and categorization of MS-13 as a terrorist organization paralleled the escalating criminalization of Central American migrant populations and the bolstering of national security along the US/Mexico border during the Trump administration.

85. We need only turn to the Greek origin of the word "trope" ('tropos') from 'trepein' 'to turn' to understand how figures come to life through the 'turning' of one's gaze towards or away from objects, ideas, and bodies.

figures as a story of bodily orientations, we consider not only how subjects and objects become affective as points of conversion but also how affects direct the distribution of morality and ideas of social worth. [86]When Osuna describes (via Stuart Hall) the 'shifting of mara labels' and Zilberg describes (via Michel de Certeau) 'the hiding and turning of techniques or procedures' around the *marero* figure, the former understands the turning around tropes play out on the field of a moralizing ideological apparatus while the latter foregrounds the role of spatial practices and spatial life.[87] My approach lands somewhere in between these different methodologies. By tracing how hate, desire, and feelings of un/worthiness' saturate mara-related objects, we begin to uncover how mara objects and subjects participate in the making of things, including the *marero* figure's capacity for world-making.

The first section, "Tattoos as Lifelines," traces the *orientating work* of *mara* tattoos as experienced from the point of view of the *marero* El Casper. This section argues that tattoos and tattooed bodies, as "orientation devices," constitute the aesthetic tissue of the film and provide a shared horizon of experience for *mareros* and non-*mareros*, bringing a hierarchical and patriarchal world order into view. [88]Through the

86. In *Willful Subject,* Ahmed goes so far as to make the argument that distribution of moral worth has effects on the material distribution of socioeconomic resources.

87. When we understand how bodies become affective as points of conversion, we can move to consider the racial reframing of the LA riots (that Zilberg narrates in *Space of Detention*) as one example of when the affective saturation of one 'dangerous' body (the Black body) converts into the affective saturation of another (the brown body).

88. For Ahmed, *orientation devices* guide the body in the *work* of feeling at home. The *where* of the body depends on how the *here* of the body aligns with space, responding to the world around it. Where the body *faces* depends on the relations of proximity and distance between objects and other bodies. "Orientation devices" (or "homing devices") constitute the field of *reachable* objects within the horizon of the body. Like the philosopher's table or the writer's pen, orientation devices facilitate the extension of bodies into "livable or inhabitable space" (11). It is not just the *turning towards* or *reaching out* that gives the body the capacity to extend out, but also the intimacy of familiarity that allows the body (and

subjective experience of El Casper and the recruited subject of Smiley, both operating under the orders of gang leader El Lil' Mago, we come to understand the central role of the masculinized body in redirecting *mara* youth towards a shared experience of masculinizing affects, where bad feelings around aggression and violence turn into good. The idea of "tattoos as lifelines" points to the already determined *marero life course* predicated on recruitment, initiation, violence as power, and death, epitomized in the spatial, bodily and affective directionality of Smiley's *jump-in* initiation. This section argues that *mareros, in line* with the feelings and desires of *la Mara*, turn towards the tattooed body at the very point of community-making. As witnessed through the point of view of Smiley, and specifically Smiley's introduction to *El Destroyer* and forced killing of the *chavala*, this section argues that the effect of investing time, energy, and resources in the tattooed *marero*'s rite of passage produces the very *affect* of a *mara* social collective and *marero* sociality of being.

The following section, entitled "Traveling Companions," accounts for El Casper's figurative evolution from *marero* to the fleeing civilian, Willy. Here, I draw upon Sara Ahmed's notion of *desire lines* and *points of disorientation* to make sense of El Casper's *queer-like* affinities, including El Casper's relationship with the local Mexican girl Martha Marlene and the Honduran migrant Sayra. As these feminine subjectivities stand outside the affective world order of *la Mara*, for our masculinized

---

the bodies that will eventually follow) to impress the sociality of space. Strange objects and strange surroundings become familiar through the habit of repeated extension. Over time, habitual movements become invisible and what we feel is simply a feeling of being at home or of being in place. Orientations reanimate our conception of not only space and the body but also remind us of the capacity behind *bodily dwelling* to animate worlds.

marero, they set into motion different lines of connection, association, and exchange. This section offers up the analogy of 'traveling companions' to understand the kinship between the ex-*marero*'s phenomenology of fleeing, as experienced from El Casper's point of view, and the Central American phenomenology of migrating, as experienced from Sayra's point of view.[89] In the central scene of "Contigo," Willy's self-narrative of injury and tracing of tattoos reorients Willy towards a shared experience of loss through Sayra's interjection. This section argues that Willy's embodiment of a history of alienation and loss is distinct yet akin to that of Sayra's. Willy inhabits a *migrant orientation* where migrant and *marero* understand their shared affective experiences of unwillingness, desire, and loss. Yet, even as *Sin Nombre* locates hope in these queer affinities, Willy's inability to erase his teardrop tattoo, or 'tattoo-in-reverse,' figuratively foregrounds El Casper's inability to efface himself from his *marero* past.[90] The *marero*'s "bad inheritance" culminates in Willy's death at the US-Mexico border.

The following section, entitled "Willful Melancholia," draws upon the social and historical legacy of racialized embodied experiences at the US-Mexico border to unpack the social labor behind the making of the *marero* figure as both a willful and melancholic subject. Building upon the notion of migrants and *mareros* as figurative

89. Here, I draw upon Sara Ahmed's word usage to consider another historical linkage. In *Willful Subjects*, Ahmed proposes that the figure of the feminist killjoy featured in female trouble-making fiction is not only often attributed as being willful and "get[ting]in the way of happiness" but that the feminist killjoy shares a "historical itineracy" with the willful subject. She links unhappiness and willfulness on the level of subjectively lived and affective experience and on a social level of the collectively imagined that operates in fiction and real contemporary discourses (*Willful Subjects* 2). In this way, Ahmed conceptualizes feminist killjoys and willful subjects as "traveling companions" (*Willful Subjects* 3).

90. Zilberg remarks on the "tattoo-in-reverse" to elaborate on tattoo removal's cultural and political significance. Given that the Salvadoran government's "Mano Dura" and "Súper Mano Dura" state initiatives targeted criminalized youth through the "visual logic" of tattoos, tattoo removal took on a special significance both inside and outside *mara* cultures (See pp. 230-31 of *Space of Detention).*

traveling companions, this section argues that through the point of view of El Casper, who in the final scene experiences both a *marero* and migrant death, *Sin Nombre* traces a historical itineracy between the willful, melancholic *marero* and the willful, melancholic migrant. In the border death sequence, the tattooed body joins the social history of the migrant body, who (under the territorial gaze of national sovereignties and *la Mara*) inherit a death sentence or the charge to recede, go back, and accept death-in-life. Under the social logic of willfulness, tattoos become more than just orientation devices; tattoos as a language of will point to the social distinction between willing and willful parts. In turn, we can understand the gang collective as an affective community and, importantly, a social body reproduced through recruiting willing parts and eliminating unwilling parts. By portraying El Casper/Willy as a spectral figure in the film, this section then considers how the relations of un/willingness underpinning marero subjectivity accompany a historical-looking relation that differentiates the *marero* figure as a tattooed menace—a figuration epitomized in El Lil' Mago.

We can locate the spectacularity and spectrality of the *marero* subject not only in this external differentiating gaze but in the embodied consciousness of alienation that undergirds the figure of El Casper/Willy and the collective psyche of the *marero* subject "*Marero* melancholia*"* names the repressed consciousness of wretchedness that brings the *marero* subject to account for a hemispheric history of violence and injury. As a form of cultural depositing and social inheritance, marero melancholia *brings to figure* the paradoxical positionality of the *marero* political subject as part of a subjugating and subjugated social class. This paradoxical social haunting not only

manifests in the ambivalent nature of *marero* tattoos but also in the figuration of the *mara*'s will as "devil work." Where the *marero* attributed with "good *ill* will," sin lands as the absence of guilt and the "freedom" to will and kill, for the *marero* attributed with "*ill* will," or willfulness, sin registers as a form of haunting. The *good ill will* becomes central to the presentation of *marero* masculinized subjectivities as *marero* men inherit both the freedom and burden of devil work, that is, gang indoctrination and consequential masculinization. Through the distinct yet shared experiences of El Casper, Willy, El Lil' Mago, and the other *marero* characters of the film, we understand how the making and unmaking of *marero* subjectivity and sociality occur at the very intersection of freedom and force. Just as the visual symbolism of "devil work" becomes part of the marero figure's cultural afterlife, I frame devil work as an analogy for *la Mara*'s arrival into diasporic consciousness.

I. Tattoos as Lifelines

Sara Ahmed writes that the sociality of lines reveals to us how bodies take up space and get directed in this world of shared inhabitance. Lines are external traces left on the skin that convert into "signs of the past, as well as orientations towards the future, a way of facing and being faced by others" (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 18). The "skin of the social" has lines "as a border that feels and that is shaped by 'impressions' left by others" (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 9). I apply Ahmed's analogy to the sociality of space in *Sin Nombre*. Fukunaga's Mexico is a precarious world of violence, checkpoints, extortion, surveillance, and trespassing. The film interweaves two main storylines in liminal "border spaces" across Central America, Mexico, and the US. The

first is of the character El Casper, a *marero* belonging to the local MS-13 gang in Chiapas who, early in the film, confronts the decision to flee. The other storyline is of Sayra, a Honduran girl whose reunion with her estranged father, Horacio, prompts her migration to the US. These two storylines converge on a freight train heading towards the line of the US-Mexico border. Like the lines on the flesh and the lines that direct space, the storylines of *Sin Nombre* derive from a social inheritance; they are lines that direct us.

The first visual directs us to a *marero*'s daydream. The frame features "a weathered, yet serene poster, of a green landscape (Texas?)" (Fukunaga 1). After closing in on the forest, the frame jumps to a shot of a "gaunt-faced 17 year-old" staring at the image across from him as he smokes a cigarette. The young man sits beside a table inside the cramped living space of a run-down concrete home that "resembles a favela" (Fukunaga 1). As the film's script details, the young man stares "with a curious indifference, it's hard to know what he thinks" (Fukunaga 1). Yet his "indifferent gaze" lingers on the forest, impressing this scene with a small moment of curiosity and wonder. With its promise of 'somewhere else,' it seems as if the forest calls out to the young man. (Perhaps we even begin to see a wandering pathway in the uninhabited forest.) The world of *la Mara* starts to unfold when the young man stands up. A close-up of his backside gives us a full shot of his tattooed body. The bold gothic tattoo letters "MS" at the center of the young man's back grab the viewer's attention. The graffiti words "MS-13" loom in the shadows of the shot on a concrete wall. This interior sequence follows with close-ups of the *marero*'s tattoos as he walks down the urban

streets of Tapachula, Mexico. If space gets directed by acts of foregrounding and backgrounding "to sustain a certain direction," then we can consider how sustained attention to the young man, El Casper, occurs through the juxtaposition of tattooed body parts (the back, the neck, and the face) with the contrasting social scene of the film (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 31). Through acts of spatial relegation, the film announces the arrival of the tattooed *marero* El Casper. The initial ambiguous setting of the serene forest, the lingering effect of the camera, the eerie background drumming of a didgeridoo, and, finally, the alternating shots between the forest, the somber-looking young man, and close-ups of his *marero* tattoos offer us a preview of this complex world of familiarity and estrangement.

Mara tattoos dramatize the film's ordering of bodies, objects, and spatial territories. In contrast to the cramped interior shots of El Casper's home, the exterior images of the city of Tapachula show the expansion of the *marero*'s capacity to move in space. The tattoo close-ups accompanying our spatial introduction to the film's exterior environment highlight the importance of reception behind *marero* tattoos and objects associated with MS-13. The locals of Tapachula recognize El Casper as a *marero*—with his tattoo marks and gun in his back pocket—and respond to the *marero*'s bodily cues. El Casper enters a van. The van driver hands him over a wad of money. El Casper greets fellow *mareros* on the street. He grabs a bicycle from the gang's nearby stockpile and continues his patrol "through the maze, weaving around pedestrians and vendors" to collect gang allowances (Fukunaga 1). He steps inside a local shop, and the cashier hands El Casper another wad of money. This "maze-like"

depiction of Tapachula, featuring visual shots of El Casper riding along old train tracks and across a run-down bridge, shows the *marero*'s expanded mobility in space; the film's spatiality shows how *mara* tattoos operate as "orientation devices.[91]" Tattoos provide a shared horizon of perception and experience for *mareros* and non-*mareros*. Bodies not "in line" must bend to the demands of the *mara* collective, like how objects (such as money, weapons, and modes of transport) cohere around the tattooed body. Given the capacity for *mara* tattoos to impress objects, subjects, and the environment, it is not difficult to imagine the social allure of MS-13 gang life to yet-to-be-recruited youth. *Mara* tattoos clue us into the directionality of *mareros* and non-*mareros* and how that directionality is not casual: it is already organized. Like the dilapidated bridge, train tracks, and graffitied urban maze, El Casper follows a sociality of lines that have already taken shape. For the tattooed *marero,* a world of domination comes into existence. Understanding tattoos as orientation devices allows us to imagine how *mara* tattoo iconography does not simply constitute the film's spatial and bodily "tissue." Turning toward the tattooed body brings a specific world order into view.

Orientations explain how the making of the *marero* subject occurs through the tattooed body's turning towards a shared experience of masculinized violence. Orientations involve understanding how bodies are gendered by how they extend into

91. Ahmed utilizes the concept of 'orientations' to explore how life gets directed in some ways as opposed to others through, "the requirement that we follow what is already given to us" (*Queer Phenomenology* 21). She argues that 'orientation' is a powerful technology in that history forgets how some bodies, more than others, have the capacity to extend themselves out into space. "Orientations" disguise presumptions of neutrality that dictate hegemonic spaces of whiteness and heterosexuality, including the labor behind the male philosopher's writing table. If to be orientated is "to be turned toward certain objects," then we can move to consider how the *marero* turns towards tattoos and the tattooed body to "find his way" (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 1).

space. Such is the case for the young male character Benito. After picking up Benito from his home, El Casper takes the recruit to see the gang's leader El Lil' Mago. El Lil' Mago stands over the recruit in this scene to initiate Benito's "jump-in." The phrase "jump-in" captures how the social activity of joining ("jumping into") the *mara* world goes hand in hand with the physical experience of violence. Both movements—"jumping-in" and the experience of "being jumped"—are the same. Here, Benito's body becomes the scene's focal point as El Casper and a dozen other MS members participate in the ritual 13-second beating of the recruit. The rest of the *mara* family crowds around the spectacle. With umbrellas in hand, *mara* women egg on the aggression. The beating begins with El Lil' Mago's counting, "uno…dos…tres…" (Fukunaga 3). Waiting for the beating to end at thirteen, El Casper "halfheartedly punches" Benito (Fukunaga 3). When El Casper sees El Lil' Mago staring at him, El Casper delivers the boy a powerful final blow. Looking upon the boy's bloody face that forms "a crying smile," El Lil' Mago jokes, "Look at this kid, Casper, he's all smiles" (Fukunaga 3). Benito earns his new *MS* name, "Smiley." Smiley's jump-in reveals the body's central role in redirecting a young boy's life toward a shared experience of masculine aggression. Smiley's body converts the prevailing feelings of fear and aggression that constitute the overall affective value of the scene (and in film in general) into good feelings: he is smiling. The *marero*'s masculinized body, in effect, converts bad feelings into good.

Through the viewpoint of Smiley, we witness how tattoos impress the skin of *mareros* and their very space of inhabitance. As part of Smiley's "orientation," El

Casper gives Smiley a tour of the gang's local home and headquarters of *El Destroyer.* Through interior shots of *El Destroyer*, the viewer witnesses the "homing devices" that make up the intimate world of the local MS-13 gang.[92] All the inhabitants of *El Destroyer* greet the pair with the "M" and "S" hand signs. El Casper introduces Smiley to two "Guanaco" (Salvadorean) members, who recently arrived to check in on the chapter's business. Another member, El Peluguin, applies a tattoo to El Turbino. The tattoo recipient remarks, "Did he get a chavala yet?" Smiley gestures 'no' timidly (Fukunaga 16). They walk to another room with a TV and "parts for building pipe guns, machetes, bats, chains and other sundry weapons" (Fukunaga 17). Smiley directs his attention to a "*chimba*, a home-made pipe gun" that sits among the other weapons (Fukunaga 17). Noticing Smiley's interest, El Casper places the pipe gun down, "When you earn it. For now, you share like everyone else, what's from *La Mara* is for *la Mara*" (Fukunaga 17). Here, El Casper instructs Smiley in the *mara*'s politics of allegiance. Smiley will only be fully initiated and earned a weapon once he proves his loyalty to the gang. To demonstrate complete devotion, a member must murder a *chavala* (a member of an outside gang). With the arrival of the tattooed *marero* El Casper, the remaking of Benito into the *marero* Smiley, and the depiction of home life inside *El Destroyer,* we begin to understand how tattoos, like weapons, circulate as "homing devices" that help *mareros* find their way and feel at home in this world of shared inhabitance. Tattoos serve as pedagogical tools that instruct the *marero* how to behave

92. Ahmed writes, "If orientations are as much about feeling at home as they are about finding our way then it becomes important to consider how 'finding our way' involves what we could call 'homing devices'" (*Queer Phenomenology* 9).

under the *mara* family.

As a rite of passage, tattoos and tattooing offer a shared horizon of experience for *mareros*. Writing on the sociality of lines in *Queer Phenomenology,* Ahmed states, "Collectives come to have 'lines' in the sense of being modes of following: to inhabit a collective might be to follow a line, as a line that is already given in advance" (119). This reading of the *mara* world in *Sin Nombre* adopts a similar logic. Social investigations of *maras* have shown how *mareros* are most likely to die young or end up incarcerated. [93]Turning towards *la Mara,* the *marero* follows lines that already direct him. When considering the social work of tattoos, we can think of MS-13 tattoos as types of "lifelines." [94]Tattoos are "lifelines" instructing the spatial, gendered, and affective lines *mareros* adhere to; they function as forms of "alignment," ways of being in line with other *mareros*. Tattoos are also "lifelines" in how they signal the social lines that *mareros* follow to "feel at home" in their bodily and shared dwellings. Tattoos are also "lifelines" (in the optimistic sense of the word) in how for some dislocated and disenfranchised youth, *mara* life might offer a chance to get out of an already impossible world or unlivable situation.[95] When *mareros* align with the shared feelings,

93. See documentary *Los Hijos de Guerra* (2014) and Oscar Martínez's *A History of Violence* (2016).

94. Ahmed explains that a "lifeline can also be something that expresses our identity, such as the lines carved on the skin are created as an effect of the repetition of certain expressions" (*Queer Phenomenology* 18). She argues that what is 'present' or close to us is not casual, but already determined: "we do not acquire our orientations just because we find things here or there. Rather certain objects are available to us because of lines that we have already taken: our 'life courses' follow a certain sequence, which is also a matter of following a direction or of 'being directed' in a certain way" (*Queer Phenomenology* 21).

95. More on the optimistic lifeline according to Ahmed: *"*A lifeline thrown to us is what gives us the capacity to get out of an impossible world or an unlivable life. Such a line would be different kind of gift: one that is thrown without the expectation of return in the immediacy of a life-and-death situation" (*Queer Phenomenology* 18).

desires, and moral directionality of *la Mara,* they turn towards other tattooed bodies at the very point of making of an affective community. *La Mara* operates as an imagined community in which *mareros* share a collective orientation around experiences of violence—experiences embodied in the tattooed figure. The "effect" of investing time, energy, and resources in the rite of passage for the tattooed body produces the *very affect* of a social collective.

The making of a *mara* collective involves the policing and marking of boundaries. Part of being a *marero* is policing the boundaries of *mara* territory, including that of *La Bombilla*. Serving as a migrant rest stop, *La Bombilla* holds an important spatial function in the film. It marks territorial and social edges of belonging; even as diverse bodies move through the run-down train station. Those edges of belonging come into question when *la Mara* learns of El Casper's failure to police *La Bombilla* and of the *marero*'s growing indifference towards gang duties. The gang's top leaders strictly monitor the movements of its members. El Lil' Mago questions El Casper on his whereabouts. He asks, "You went to *La Bombilla*?" El Casper answers, "Yeah, we didn't see anything" (Fukunaga 18). El Lil' Mago "eyes El Casper sadly, then turns his attention back to Smiley" (Fukunaga 18). He escorts El Casper and Smiley to a cage with a bleeding captive, identified by the 18th Street tattoo "XVIII" across his stomach (Fukunaga 18). El Lil' Mago informs the two that El Sol found the gang member in *La Bombilla*, adding further suspicion around El Casper's whereabouts and loyalty. The captive—identified in the film script as a "bleeding immigrant"—pleads for life, assuring El Lil' Mago that he no longer belongs to the 18th Street gang

and seeks to migrate north (Fukunaga 18). El Lil' Mago ignores the captive's plead saying, "This is *Mara*-land *pinche chavala*" (Fukunaga 19). He then orders El Casper to assist Smiley in killing the *chavala*. By eliminating the *chavala,* El Lil' Mago sets El Casper and the *chavala* "straight," reminding El Casper what happens to MS outsiders and those that deviate from the way of *la Mara*.[96] Having killed his first *chavala*, Smiley joins the MS family. We can think of the *chavala*'s tattooed body as another 'technique' the narration utilizes to mark out *la Mara*'s social edges of belonging.

If the *mara* lines directing El Casper dictate his social positionality as a gang recruit, then El Casper must, in turn, reproduce those lines. In the eyes of *la Mara*, for a *marero*'s life to count as a "good life," he must reproduce the history he has inherited.[97] When El Casper deviates from the official paths of gang life, these experiences of pleasure leave traces on the "skin" of the narrative. Such "desire lines" occur when El Casper takes a video camera belonging to *la Mara* and commands Benito to keep silent.[98] Later, El Casper ignores the order to patrol *La Bombilla*. Forcing

96. In *Willful Subjects,* Ahmed offers a queer reading of the will by recognizing that the will already has a queer potential in that often, the will emerges along the lines of desire and often through the association of will with error. When the will "names the possibility of deviation, then that possibility becomes intrinsic to will" (12). When we approach the idea of will as a "technique, a straightening device" and a "way of holding a subject to account," then we can understand how the will's "willfully masks" the will's queer potential (the will is errant) (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 7). The point being here, "you can only straighten what is already bent" (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 7). The potential of the will can be narrated as something positive, or it can be narrated as a problem or threat.

97. Ahmed speaks here about the lines that govern a heteronormative life. In her view a 'straight life' only counts as a 'good life' when it, "return[s] the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching points along a life course" (*Queer Phenomenology 21*). If a "queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return," then we might consider how El Casper's life becomes *queer* in the sense that he fails to provide *la Mara* gestures of return (*Queer Phenomenology* 21).

98. As Ahmed writes, desire lines leave their "own marks on the ground, which can help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways" (*Queer Phenomenology* 20). Lines also

Benito's discretion, El Casper buys a rose from a local vendor and visits his girlfriend Martha Marlen, who El Casper attempts to keep hidden from the gang. Inside Martha's bedroom, a space of domestic secrecy, El Casper expresses his desire for Martha. These interior shots, filled with feelings of intimacy, contrast with the film's larger social world that houses everyday violence. Later, at *La Bombilla*, El Casper playfully records Martha with the stolen video camera. Objects, like El Casper's video camera, become saturated with good feelings of pleasure. During these playful interactions with "love objects, "we begin knowing the other side of El Casper as Willy. During the bedroom scene, Martha playfully traces the letters of the tattoo "MM" (her initials) on El Casper. As lines of deviation impressed upon the *marero* body, we can think of the tattoo "MM" as another manifestation of Willy's desire lines. El Casper's desires leave a mark on his body, a pressure point that will eventually reorient El Casper. As the *marero*'s alienation from the *mara* world intensifies, so does the range of affects and modes of explanation multiply in the film to fill that gap in experience.

II. Traveling Companions

Part of the work of this analysis is to expose "sideway moments" where strange objects and feelings come into the world of the familiar. For Ahmed, the force of desire moves us closer to objects and bodies "out of line" with the world around us. Queer desires are often *sideway encounters* that place a different object in reach.[99] But more

mark out boundaries of reproduction or the refusal to produce in a particular way: "the lines of rebellion and resistance that gather over time to create new impressions on the skin surface on the skin of the social" (*Queer Phenomenology* 18).

99. Ahmed utilizes the term "queer," not in the sense of sexual orientation but more in the general sense of "oblique" or "off-line" or "wonky" to describe those forces that move us "sideways" (See pp. 564-5 of Ahmed's "Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology" (2006)).

than that, a sideway encounter might open the door to a different world. As Ahmed posits, "Orientations affect what bodies can do: it is not that the object causes desire but that in desiring certain objects, other things follow, given how the social is already arranged" ("Orientations" 563). Even though Willy's desire for Martha might not be queer (in the sexual sense of the word), the *marero*'s affinity is a queer one in that Martha—a local Mexican girl socially positioned outside the world of *la Mara*—sets into motion a different set of lines of connection, association, and exchange within the narrative world of the film. For El Casper, who hails from a world directed by the lines of masculinized aggression, Martha is a queer object; she is "a retreating object, threatening to become out of reach" ("Orientations" 566). If we take the social as already arranged, then the forces of desire must be powerful enough to grate against lines that are already established. The potentiality of a queer desire might open to a "migrant orientation," the lived experience of encountering the world differently.[100]

After finding evidence of El Casper's and Smiley's failure to patrol *La Bombilla*, the gang leaders have *corte* ("court") to hold the *mareros* to account for their actions. An eerie sensation of death saturates this scene set in a cemetery. Martha secretly follows El Casper into mara territory during the gang's meeting. El Lil' Mago responds to the arrival of this outsider by telling El Casper, "I can show her out. Or she can wait and watch. Which do you prefer? You're not going anywhere" (Fukunaga 38).

100. Ahmed utilizes the term "migrant orientation" to describe the lived experience of encountering the world differently. The feeling of being 'out of place' with the surrounding world seldom accompanies arriving migrants in a foreign land; migrants face "the home that is lost" and "the place that has yet to be inhabited" (Queer Phenomenology 10). Yet, for Ahmed, the 'double-viewpoint' of a migrant orientation does not necessarily lie in the migrant body.

El Casper stares anxiously at Martha as El Lil' Mago escorts Martha out. As part of El Casper's punishment, members of *la Mara* start beating El Casper: "WHAM. It's as if the GROUND comes up to meet his face" (Fukunaga 39, emphasis text). In the following sequence, Martha never makes it outside the cemetery. El Lil' Mago strokes Martha. When she resists, he grabs hold of her attempting to rape her. Martha's face slams hard into the ground, piercing her skull. Once El Lil Mago returns, he informs El Casper Martha is gone, saying, "Devil took her." (Fukunaga 42) As the most vicious and ornamented tattooed body, El Lil' Mago inhabits the devil incarnate. In stating the "devil took her," El Lil Mago deems Martha a dead object. Through Martha's murder, El Casper arrives at an affective and moral crossroads in the narrative.

The feminine body constitutes the affective vehicle for El Casper's transgression, reorientation, and conversion into the civilian Willy.[101] As the screenplay of the film notes, "from this moment on, **El Casper** is no longer El Casper, he has become the civilian **Willy** and will be described as such." (Fukunaga 50, emphasis text)

101. Following the cemetery scene, El Lil' Mago takes El Casper and Smiley on a "little family vacation" (as El Lil' Mago phrases it) to Tonála (Fukunaga 42). In Tonála, the *mareros* intercept a train heading northward towards the U.S. El Lil' Mago intends to target fleeing migrants riding on top of the train. Pulling out their weapons, the *mareros* climb the moving train: "Smiley has his new chimba, El Lil' Mago a .45 Pistol, and El Casper a machete" (Fukunaga 46). Migrants huddle in the rain under a plastic tarp, a visual that emphasizes their vulnerability. With his new weapon in hand, "Smiley shakes with excitement, intoxicated with the new power," as he points his *chimba* to a fearful male migrant (Fukunaga 47). El Lil' Mago singles out Sayra for her looks, telling El Casper, "Casper, spit in my face if she don't look like a mini Salmita?" (Fukunaga 48) El Lil Mago grabs hold of Sayra, attempting to rape her. Sayra screams and tries to free herself. Witnessing this scene of attempted female rape pushes El Casper to his emotional and ethical limit: "El Casper's machete bearing down on him, slicing two inches into his neck and severing his jugular. El Lil' Mago stares at El Casper in confusion, his face quickly losing color. El Casper hacks twice more." (Fukunaga 49) Smiley looks at El Casper, frozen and confused. El Casper cries angrily, "He killed Martha Marlen" (Fukunaga 49). He yells at Smiley, "Go home Benito! Go back to your Grandma" (Fukunaga 49). Smiley leaves El Casper alone on the train: "Nauseated, WILLY stumbles to the other end of the boxcar and vomits, placing the chimba and the bloody machete next to him" (Fukunaga 50, emphasis text). Afterward, the *marero* sits alone on the train.

We can think of this turning point in the narrative—where El Casper rips all ties to *la Mara* by "slicing" El Lil' Mago's head—as an affective reorientation. Whereas the *marero* El Casper directed his energy and feelings towards the will of *la Mara* collective, the civilian Willy turned towards protecting the vulnerable feminine body. El Casper deems El Lil Mago's actions wrong and acts on that affective impulse. El Casper's unwillingness to abide by the ethical directionality of the gang (prey on the most vulnerable bodies) occurs through the affective animating of Martha's and then Sayra's feminine body. The depositing of fear and panic in the feminine body reorients the basis of El Casper's relationality with the world. Just as El Casper is moved by his desire for Martha and Martha's loss, the potential attack on Sayra sets El Casper's most significant transgression into motion. El Casper turns away from *la Mara* to become an unwilling subject and, in effect, a fleeing *marero*.

The film's title, "Sin Nombre," which translates in English to "nameless," captures the significance of the protagonist's conversion from El Casper to Willy in emphasizing Willy's namelessness as a form of homelessness. After El Lil' Mago's death, Willy sits as a lone figure on the train, the migrants around him too afraid to proximate the ex-*marero.* An alliance between Willy and the other migrants on the train seems unlikely. Yet, Sayra, grateful for the *marero*'s intervention on her behalf, befriends Willy despite her father's and uncle's disapproval. Sayra approaches Willy, offering him food scrapes. "My name is Sayra," she says (Fukunaga 55). Willy "hesitates at first, about to say 'Casper,'" and then says, "Willy" (Fukunaga 55). As the script reads, "Saying it, instead of 'Casper' fills Willy with remorse. That part of him

is dead now" (Fukunaga 55). In turning away from *la Mara,* Willy loses his footing in the world—he is disoriented. More than that, we could say that Willy ceases to inhabit a body extended by the arrangement of the social. He is not safe in *mara* territory; he is in 'no man's land.' Eventually, Sayra abandons Horacio and Orlando to join Willy's side. Stunned that Sayra left behind her family on the train, Willy says, "Jesus, Sayra. Don't you get it? I'm a dead man…You have no idea what you've done" (Fukunaga 79). Willy warrants himself a dead subject.

Because of Willy's loss of Martha and social ties to *la Mara*, the narrative keeps hope afloat through Willy's friendship with Sayra. For Willy, a new path opens in his newfound relationality with Sayra. Writing on the sociality of lines, Ahmed recognizes the potentiality of such "sideway moments" generated by feelings of loss and the loss of love. She states: "[W]hat happens when we are 'knocked off course' depends on the psychic and social resources 'behind' us. Such moments can be a gift, or they might be the site of trauma, anxiety, or stress about the loss of an imagined future" (*Queer Phenomenology* 19).[102] Willy experiences the loss of a loved one, the loss of identity, community, and an imagined future encapsulated by the former three. Yet, Ahmed insists that the experience of disorientation is not a dead-end either. She writes, "'getting lost' still takes us somewhere" (*Queer Phenomenology* 6). In forming new ties of connection with Sayra, El Casper's loss is Willy's gain. Willy's reorientation changes the directionality of the narrative. [103]Instead of living a settled life as a *marero*

102. Something Ahmed has been arguing all along her emotive and phenomenological writing is that the distribution of affective value and moral worth has effects for socioeconomic resources, including those resources that are "behind" the individual at their moment of arrival in this life.

103. Ahmed writes that "[b]ecoming reorientated," that is, the experience of stepping in a different

in Tapachula, a new pathway opens for Willy, including the possibility of migrating to the United States. Yet, the psychic and social resources "behind" our unwilling *marero* remains to be seen.

A question that the politics of *Sin Nombre* directs us to is: can the migrant world, a world already filled with so much precarity and uncertainty, make space for Willy? Migrant bodies experience stress from their mere presence or arrival. Unlike the *marero* in his home territory, the migrant experiences spatial and bodily restrictions from the life forms surrounding it. A prevalent form of stress for the migrant body is the 'stopping device,' the experience of being stopped.[104] Ahmed elaborates on this form of spatial restriction: "For bodies that are not extended by the skin of the social, bodily movement is not so easy. Such bodies are stopped, where stopping is an action that creates its own impressions" (*Queer Phenomenology* 140). Through Sayra and her family's storyline, we witness the experience of being stopped. Upon crossing the Guatemala/Mexico border, Sayra, her father Horacio, and uncle Orlando encounter the Mexican border patrol. One police official states, "Welcome to Mexico. Papers? … Okay, friends, first, you will empty your pockets of any and all forms of money and valuables. Then you will take each item of clothing off and place it on the floor in front of you. Start with your shoes" (Fukunaga 12). The Mexican officials leave the migrants without money. They are stopped again by *mareros* on the train, where El Lil' Mago

direction may even open up a new world that "acquires a new shape and makes new impressions" (*Queer Phenomenology* 20).

104. Another way of thinking of the border interpellation, or "asking for papers," is Nicholas De Genova's "border spectacle" that refers to the ongoing fabrication illegality at the border. (See "Spectacles of migrant 'illegality': the scene of exclusion, the obscene of inclusion" (2013))

meets his death. The migrant's burden becomes evident during the train sequences. Migrants use flashlights to scan for "bandits, *Migra*, and *Mareros*, like WWII air-raid searchlights, only here they are pointed at the ground" (Fukunaga 51). The experience of being stopped impresses upon the migrant body over and over again so that accumulated impressions become traces on the skin hardened over time: "On the train, 200 hundred immigrants stretch, wary, stressed and paranoid, work out the kinks in their body from the long hours on the train; ready to scatter if LA MIGRA has set an immigration checkpoint/raid for them in the train yards" (Fukunaga 79). As a form of the political and affective economy the "stop and search" affects migrant bodies in disproportionate ways. The experience of being stopped leaves irreparable marks on the experience of migrancy.

The story of Willy, the ex-*marero*, takes the narrative in a new direction. Having already been identified and shot at by *mareros* out looking for him, Willy knows that space no longer accommodates him. The act of Willy's betrayal is imprinted in the very spatiality of the film. After visiting Tía Toña (an acquaintance of Willy) and receiving her aid, Sayra and Willy come across a concrete tower marked with an "MS" and "the Devil's Hand" (Fukunaga 84; emphasis text). Below the MS graffiti symbols are the words "*Lil' Mago, El Caspar no pasará!*" (Fukunaga 84; emphasis added).[105] The sensation of restriction associated early in the film with interior spaces extends out to the streets of Mexico. The graffitied message serves here as another stopping device. The unmaking of the tattooed *marero* El Casper and the remaking of Willy as Sayra's

105. This phrase translates in Engish into "El Casper will not pass!" (my trans).

migrant companion leave a distinct impression on the sociality of space. The character Sayra follows her own "desire line" by leaving Horacio and Orlando to join Willy. Once Horacio and Orlando realize that Sayra has left them to join Willy, contemplating her fate, he states: "We keep going, or we won't make it…There's nothing we can do. She's on her own path now" (Fukunaga 80). El Casper's wayward affinity to Martha and later Sayra leads us to this turning point in the narrative.

Writing on *Sin Nombre* in "The Central American Transnational Imaginary," Yajaira Padilla notes the fact that for Central American migrants, all of Mexico can be considered an "extended border zone" that puts their lives at risk of violence, harassment, and death by way of contact with a transnational gang, corrupt Mexican officials, and paramilitary groups (161). Padilla argues that the film highlights this fact by "de-emphasizing the actual physical 'crossings'" of characters between the national boundaries of Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States that migrant characters encounter (161). By emphasizing a phenomenology of being stopped as much as a "stranger" genealogy of *coming after* that plays out along and across the film's geopolitical terrain, this reading posits that national border spaces are not so much "de-emphasized" as much as they are threaded into a larger social scene of migrant vulnerability and precarity. We witness this precarity in Horacio's death by train, the detention and deportation of Sayra's uncle, and the encounters between migrants and *mareros* on the train and elsewhere. In the film's border sequences, "lifelines" become much more valuable for migrants. Lifelines can be objects that help migrants extend out into space, including the small water rafts depicted at the Guatemalan border and

the inner tube carrying Sayra across the Rio Grande River. "Lifelines" can also be traveling companions whose inside knowledge, like Willy's, helps Sayra gain footing in the United States.

In this scene titled "Contigo," we see how despite Willy's intent to move on, his past experiences with *la Mara* continue to shore up in the present moment. Following Tía Toña's instructions, Willy and Sayra are aboard a medium-sized car trailer loaded with crashed cars, awaiting their next destination. As they wait on the car trailer, Willy asks Sayra, "Scared?" (Fukunaga 85) She responds, "No. Why? I'm with you, I'm fine" (Fukunaga 85). Willy responds, "You're not fine *because* you're with me" (Fukunaga 85; emphasis text). Sayra says, "I don't care…I trust you" (Fukunaga 85). He responds, "Why? I don't even trust me" (Fukunaga 86). Willy points out the many past scars he received over the years as a member of *la Mara Salvatrucha* as proof of his wretchedness and danger to her. Lifting his pant leg to show a scar on his calf, he says, "You see this scar here, a police officer in Tamaulipas shot me when I was leading a group of *pollitos* to the border, for my *clica*" (Fukunaga 86, emphasis text). Pointing to another scar across his rib cage, Willy says, "This is where I took a bullet from a *diecioyo*, for my *clica*" (Fukunaga 86, emphasis text). Willy gestures: "And here, and here, and here, all for my *clica*—my family" (Fukunaga 86, emphasis text). Willy points to his cheekbone and slowly contorts, "I got this the night my 'homies,' who I'd been defending with my life, killed the girl I loved…And I couldn't do nothing for her. That's 'trust,' Sayra" (Fukunaga 86, emphasis text). Sayra responds by comforting Willy, stating, "We both know loss" (Fukunaga 86). Then, in what seems

like a moment of revelation, Willy says, "What I know…I know I fucked up my life already, I fucked her life….and now maybe…maybe I fucked up your life, too" (Fukunaga 86). Sayra responds, "You didn't fuck it up. You saved me" (Fukunaga 86). In tracing his past wounds, Willy says that although he saved Sayra from rape and possible death, his life is filled with ill fate, and his proximity puts her in danger.

By suspending the belief in Willy's wretchedness, we can uncover how Willy's narration of the self comes about. In Willy's historical account of his gang scars, we see a subject dislodged in his part not only because of the psychic pain inflicted by such wounds but also because of a self-given charge of guilt. In saying, "What I know…I know I fucked up my life already, I fucked her life…and now maybe I fucked up your life, too" (Fukunaga 86). Willy narrates past events as things that did not occur "out there" because of *la Mara* but as events brought about by the "I." Willy's "I know" iterates a past account of the self that has, in effect "willed" this history into being. Willy becomes his own "unhappiness cause" by following the brutal commands of his "family" without foresight. Yet behind the self-assigned charge of guilt, we see a willing subject who describes a life of obedience. Writing on the experience of "willingness," Ahmed notes that the willing subject (the individual that wills) experiences herself paradoxically "going through events" and "willing those events" through voluntary participation.[106] Under obedience, the willing subject "depend[s] on

106. Ahmed defines the will as a matter of becoming accountable, of becoming guilty. As a force that unifies the *will* is a *name* given to a subject and the subject is held to account by being given a will. By redefining the will as "a name given to a subject that gives it unity," Ahmed converts the philosophical idea of will to a social or cultural diagnostics. She states, "The will is transformed in contemporary culture into "willpower," into something that a responsible and moral subject must develop and strengthen. When the will becomes will power, then the fate of the subject becomes 'in its

a command having already been given" (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 29). Moreover, the willing subject is out of time with itself because it is "always behind or ahead of itself." To be more precise, the willing subject is always either behind the command, as the subject who *does it*, or ahead of obedience, as the subject that *always does* and is therefore obedient (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 29).

With this question in mind, I consider the significance of Sayra's interjection, "we both know loss," in Willy's narrative of the self (Fukunaga 86). Through Sayra's utterance, we move from considering the past as a self-narrative to understanding the past as a collective experience. Sayra's response reorients Willy's account of the self towards a more extensive history of loss. "We both know" implies a *knowing* body contingent on a shared orientation towards the past premised on a collective experience of loss. Although the title of the film, "Sin Nombre," emphasizes Willy's individual experience as a subject having been emptied of meaning (a "dead" subject without love, family, name, or home), I suggest the larger politics of film points towards a collective vision of subject-making and -unmaking. The title of the scene in question, "With you" or "Contigo" in Spanish, accounts for how the film mobilizes Willy's "withoutness" alongside "withness."[107] This scene reminds us that Willy's unbecoming is not lonely:

power'" (*Willful Subjects* 7). What are the cultural consequences of this individualizing rendering of willpower? For Ahmed, "when social problems are narrated as problems of the will, they become a consequence of the failure of individuals to will themselves out of situations in which they find themselves" (*Willful Subjects* 7). When social problems rooted in structural inequities are diagnosed as a problem of the will, or "ill will," then "individuals become the problem: individuals become the case of problems deemed their own" (*Willful Subjects* 7).

107. Ahmed ruminates around the shared Latin meaning of the words "contingent" and "contact" ('tangere' or 'to touch') to think about how the sociality of being "with" others is not only contingent but also based on contact, that is, "getting close enough to touch" (103). We might add the Spanish word "contigo," with the Latin roots of 'cum' ("with") and 'tecum' ("with you") to this linguistic itineracy of shared socialities ("Contingent, Adj. and n.").

it depends on the sociality of being *with* others regardless of how that "being with" gets imagined. Willy's retracing of his *mara* tattoos affect Sayra differently in that they remind her of the hardships of loss they both endured. "Contigo" reorients Willy's narrative of the self towards a shared experience of loss that links the migrant subject with *marero*. We can understand "to be with" as *being with* the migrant body (including passing as a migrant body). In his experience of estrangement from his gang family, Willy comes to inhabit a migrant point of view. Central American migrants move through space by reinhabiting the temporality of alienation and loss. It is through an emphasis on the experience of estrangement and loss that the migrant and *marero* subjects (Sayra and Willy) become not just "traveling companions" on the level of plot but also on a social level. As metaphorical "traveling companions," they understand their affective experiences of unwillingness, desire, and loss as a shared social history.

The backward pull of the past is evident in how Willy's self-narrative carries over to the following sequence. Willy's desire to distance himself from the *mara* world manifests in his attempt to erase his *marero* tattoo. At night, an interior shot of the car shows Sayra asleep while Willy, in a moment of nostalgia, pulls out his stolen digital camera and turns on the playback. The home video depicts love scenes of him with Martha. As a prevalent 'sticky' object of the narrative, Willy's video camera has not only picked up traces of Willy's past (including his feelings of love for Martha), but in this scene, the camera animates another affective reorientation for Willy. Like the video picks up traces of Willy's past, his tattoos also have. When looking at the contents of the footage, Willy singles out one tattoo, the teardrop under his eye, as the

externalization of his loss. The script reads, "He looks at an IMAGE that he took of he and Martha Marlene together. His TEAR tattoo looks striking in the photo. He turns off the camera. Sadness leads to anger" (Fukunaga 87). Adjusting the rearview mirror so that he can look at himself, Willy feels the teardrop tattoo next to his eye and starts to rub it hard. Then, "he begins to scratch at it, until it bleeds, but he doesn't stop, he keeps scratching" (Fukunaga 87). Pretending to sleep, Sayra looks at what Willy does but does not say anything. The anger Willy experiences after feeling the sadness of loss converts into a moment of self-variance, "the experience of not obeying what has been given as a command" (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 28). If we read Willy's *marero* tattoos as traces of commands and marks of obedience of the willing subject, then we can understand how Willy wills another path in erasing his tear tattoo. The experience of *willingness* occurs through the externalization of a former will, the will of the *mara*. In erasing his tattoo, Willy disowns the inheritance of his past and distances himself from the gang on the level of the flesh. We can read this act as another *turning away* from the *marero* body.

The teardrop tattoo also serves as a stopping device in preserving Willy's gang's past. The teardrop tattoo indicates Willy's "bad" inheritance as much as it singles out Willy both in the world of migrancy and the world of *mareros*. On the one hand, Willy inherits the charge of "traitor" from his former gang brothers. On the other hand, he faces the charge of an outsider by migrants along the northward trail.[108] Here,

108. Sayra and Willy arrive in Albergue de la Divina Providencia, Reynosa, a temporary shelter for migrants journeying northward. As groups of migrants wait to be helped, one man stares hard at Willy. Once alone, Willy undresses to shower and takes stock of himself in front of the mirror. After showering, the same migrant that stared at Willy upon his arrival approaches the former *marero*. The man named

the tattoo is more than just a stopping device; the teardrop becomes an indicator of how the *marero* is dislodged in the past not by his consciousness of the self but also by the external wills of others who render Willy as willing in the wrong way. Like his other mara tattoos, the teardrop preserves Willy's distinction as an outsider, reflected in Big Lip's insistence that "we don't want you here," even after Willy declares he is no longer a *marero*. In erasing his tattoo to distance himself from *la Mara* and pass as a migrant, the teardrop comes to bear the judgment (by both migrant and *marero*) of willing or desiring in the wrong way. Whereas migrants deem Willy's actions wrong for wanting to pass as one of them, *mareros* consider Willy's actions bad for *not* wishing to pass as a *marero*. When Willy erases his teardrop tattoo to distance himself from *la Mara* and pass as a migrant, the tattoo inherits the judgment of willing in the wrong way.

Even though Willy's experience along the migrant trail has been met with suspicion, no doubt, the *marero*'s "inside" knowledge of the workings and obstacles of the migrant trail provides both he and Sayra a social advantage. The passage on the freight truck facilitated by Tía Toña and Willy's knowledge of surveilled checkpoints serve as two examples of when Willy can extend his physical motility into social motility once more. While Horacio dies under a train when *la migra* approaches and Orlando is deported back to Guatemala, Sayra and Willy make it to the US-Mexico

---

Big Lips tells Willy, "We don't want you're kind here" (Fukunaga 95). Willy responds, "You make the rules?" (Fukunaga 95) The migrant reacts, "You're a *Marero*" (Fukunaga 95, emphasis text). Willy says, "Not anymore" (Fukunaga 95). Big Lips waves his finger in the *marero*'s face, "We don't want you here" (Fukunaga 96). After the altercation ends, "Willy puts on a wife beater that shows less of his tattoos" (Fukunaga 96). After Sayra and Willy leave the shelter, a group of *mareros* arrive to look for Willy. The same man who singled out Willy for being a *marero* informs the *mareros* of Willy's whereabouts. He tells them that a *marero* with a teardrop tattoo scar under his eye had been there. The *mareros* know that the man speaks of is El Casper.

border. But something happens at the US-Mexico border. By luck or fate, Willy has to push harder than Sayra to proceed.[109] Space becomes restrictive for Willy as *mareros* begin to close in on him. As opposed to the expansive maze-like space of Tapachula, the film foregrounds here a disorientating, claustrophobic maze-like space: "The rustling footsteps increase, silhouettes, and shadows zoom by Willy. COOING and CAWING sounds from all directions. The turns and roundabouts in the maze become blurs" (Fukunaga 102).[110] The struggle of the film—the *marero*'s inability to find steady footing in the *mara*, migrant and Mexican world—finds its sorrowful resolution at the border. As the *mareros* silently watch Willy's body drift downstream, "Willy's lifeless body leaks black blood into the green water" (Fukunaga 103). Willy dies at the Rio Grande River at the vengeful hands of *mareros*. In contrast to the expansive maze of the Chiapas we saw at the beginning of the film that lent to El Casper's freedom to

109. Once they reach the Rio Grande River, Willy uses his camera to pay for an inner tube and escort to guide them across the river. Because the man can only take one at a time, Willy must separate from Sayra. Disappointed by this prospect, Willy motions for Sayra to go. As Sayra undresses, puts her clothes into a plastic bag, and slips into the water inside the inner tube, Willy tells Sayra slowly, "It'll be okay" (Fukunaga 101). As she is pulled into the river by her guide Leche, "Sayra watches Willy…there is a sadness in his eyes. Sayra understands why he's not getting ready" (Fukunaga 101). As Willy watches Sayra grow further in the distance, a *marero* ambushes him. After a "TATTOOED FACE" appears, bullets start whizzing towards Willy (Fukunaga 101). As Willy darts away, Sayra struggles to return, but her guide warns her that she will likely drown because of the whirlpools all along the riverbank.

110. Soon after, Willy comes face to face with another *marero*, "his entire face is covered in tattoos" (Fukunaga 102). Once Willy dashes away from the *marero* he finds Smiley blocking his way. Willy implores Smiley with his eyes saying, "Smiley?" (Fukunaga 102) As Smiley holds the pistol towards Willy: "The silhouettes of the pursuing *Maras*, including El Scarface, fast approach. Smiley can see them, feel the pressure of them getting closer, his eyes changed to confused sad anger. He raises the pistol" (Fukunaga 102) He implores Smiley again, saying, "Smiley…" (Fukunaga 102). Smiley responds, "*La Mara, carnal,*" and fires into Willy's stomach (Fukunaga 102, emphasis text). Willy stumbles into the river. Crying, Smiley fires at Willy again, "then again and again and again" (Fukunaga 102). More *mareros* gather, "BULLETS from their wide variety of weaponry pummeling his body" (Fukunaga 103). In what follows: "The Mareros each take turns spitting on him. Smiley is the only one not to do it. He looks at Willy's body with a mixture of hurt and nausea" (Fukunaga 103).

move, this border space, depicted as another maze, only this time the maze is restricting, comes to incapacitate Willy's motility to the point of death.

III. Willful Melancholia

Through the viewpoint of Willy/El Casper, *Sin Nombre* gives us an alternative account of the narrative of racialized violence in border spaces. Following the phenomenology of being a tattooed body, we see how Willy *cannot proceed* because of his *marero* inheritance. In delineating a conceptual model of racialization and the spatialization of race, Ahmed suggests we approach the inheritance of race as not a debate of "nature vs. nurture" or "biology vs. culture" but rather to think through race in terms of *contingency* or *contact*. The proximities of bodies *toward* or *away from* other objects or bodies is itself "an inheritance" in that those proximities are already part of our arrival into the world. Ahmed states, "To suggest that we inherit proximities is also to point to how that past that is 'behind' our arrival restricts as well as enables human action: if we are shaped by 'what' we encounter, then we are also shaped by what we inherit, which delimits the objects that we might come into contact with" (*Queer Phenomenology* 124). Here Ahmed emphasizes how our arrival depends on the inheritance of our past. If border spaces in migrant narratives are already so animated with the importance of the "end-oriented" arrival and how the arrival determines the ability of the migrant body to *proceed*, then we can take this final border scene in *Sin Nombre* as especially telling of the conditions of arrival that make up the "migrant" *marero*. If inheritance is both bodily and historical, then Willy, as a tattooed body, arrives at the border already impressed by the will of the *mara* and marked for death.

Smiley carries out the final straightening device that holds Willy accountable for his transgression against the gang.

When Willy implores his former friend for mercy Smiley vocalizes the collective will and desire of the *mara* to eliminate Willy. He stares at Willy with gun in hand saying, "*La Mara, carnal*" (Fukunaga 102; emphasis text). We witness Willy's storyline "straightened out" or bent back to the "*marero* lifeline," dying by a gang wound inflicted at the hands of another tattooed body. In the script version of the film, an interior shot of a morgue shows "Willy's lifeless face peak[ing] from a closing PINE BOX COFFIN." (Fukunaga 104, emphasis text) The script reads, "The same pine box is slid into a grave, then filled with dirt by a tractor. A wooden cross reads: "**Sin Nombre**" and is surrounded by hundreds of similar wooden crosses marked with the same '**Sin Nombre**'" (Fukunaga 105; emphasis text). Willy's lifeless body disappears behind the thousands of other lifeless bodies on the US-Mexico border, another moment that Willy's body converges with yet diverges from the historical racialization of the migrant body. As Willy's foil, Smiley brings the forces of arrival behind the tattooed body to the foreground. After the border scene, members of MS gather around Smiley as he receives an "MS" on the inside of his lower lip. Ahmed reminds us that "inheritance" includes two meanings, "to receive and to possess." She says, "In a way, we convert what we receive into possessions, a conversion that often 'hides' the conditions of having received, as if the possession is too simply 'already there'" (*Queer Phenomenology* 125). When Smiley receives his "MS" tattoo, the conditions of having received a *mara* tattoo disappear. As tattooed bodies, Smiley and Willy are possessions

of *la Mara*; that is, *mareros* are simply *already there*.

This reading has called attention to moments of extensions where Willy/El Casper exercises the capacities of a subject who *knows* and *can do* and moments of disorientation and restriction where Willy/El Casper becomes an object of means that receives and carries out the will of *la Mara.* We witness such violent shifts in consciousness and bodily capacity from subject to object and vice-versa through the affective qualities of gleefulness, aggression, confusion, disgust, and sadness. Through the point of view of the "*marero*-to-be," Smiley, we witness moments of glee where the recruited boy expands in social extension as much as bodily motility. "*Marero*-to-be" means that as a willing part, Smiley must always perform his allegiance to the whole.[111] As "tattoo parts," *marero* tattoos offer social and bodily extension points, yet only through emptying the subject. The *marero*-to-be "empties out" to receive the *will* of the gang leader. The rite of passage known as "the jump-in" is one example of this "emptying out" where gang members physically and metaphorically empty out the recruited subject of breath and willpower. The reproduction of the *mara body* as a social body hinges on the recruitment of willing parts as much as the distinction between willing and willful parts. As a *marero,* Willy goes from a willing object to one of resistance, for, as the film shows, objects of *la Mara* can and do resist. We witness the

111. She draws upon a part/whole distinction to make sense of the will/willfulness distinction. If we recall the scene of Smiley's 'jump-in,' then we can consider how part of Smiley's initiation occurs through the imposition of *la Mara*, he becomes an 'object' of the gang. Ahmed thinks back to historical moments when subjects have been thought of in terms of properties to make sense of how a subject becomes an object. She writes, "it is not that in becoming an object a subject is without a will; rather a subject becomes an object through the imposition of the will of another; objects are thus emptied of will, or treated *as if* they have no will of their own" (*Willful Subjects* 217). Smiley, as an object of will and 'part' of *la Mara*, can also be thought of as a willing object.

agency of "*mara* parts" when El Casper defies the command of El Lil' Mago and turns against the gang leader.

When an object refuses to carry out the will of the subject of imposition, then that object becomes a willful object: "Willful objects are means that demand to be ends rather than a means to an end. In other words, we attribute willfulness to objects when they are not willing to be means" (*Willful Subjects* 42). When Willy goes against El Lil' Mago he demands not only that he is not a means to an end but also that the female migrant body not be a means. Willy is an unwilling and, therefore, willful subject. We can reconceptualize the relation between *mara* subjects and objects as a "willing relation" or "relation of will." In turn, we can think of *marero* tattoos as objects of will. *Marero* tattoos become indicators of the *marero*'s *willingness* to carry out the will of the collective. Thus, Smiley's "willingness" to carry out the charge against Willy results in the incorporation of an "MS" tattoo. Once a *marero* strays from the path of *la Mara,* tattoos may inherit the attribute of willfulness, a charge also assigned to *chavalas* (gang members that are not MS-13). As tattooed bodies not part of the whole, Willy and *chavalas* come to be characterized as willful parts. Like Maggie's hair that inherits the child's willfulness in Eliot's fictive world, Willy's tattoos inherit the willfulness of the fleeing marero. In *Sin Nombre,* the will works as an idea that converts into the narrative through the *willing* and *willful* language of *marero* tattoos. The will/fulness of the tattooed *marero* is etched on the moral and affective landscape of the film.[112]

112. She posits that willfulness can become a conversion point when the potentiality of a subject to

Part of the phenomenological work of this reading has been to draw out not only the "will work" behind the conversion of subjects into objects (and vice versa) but also to draw out the "will work" behind the backgrounding and foregrounding of tattoos and tattooed bodies within the spaces inhabited in the film. During much of the film, El Casper's tattooed body recedes into the tattooed 'backdrop' of the film that, as mentioned in the first section of this reading, includes the interior furniture and walls, shots of urban and rural landscapes, and transitory landscapes like run-down bridges and the dilapidated railroad station in Tapachula. If we recall the opening interior scene of the film, the first shot of El Casper features furniture as it features El Casper's tattooed body. As *willing parts* of the whole tattoos recede into the film's background. Yet Ahmed reminds us that even the recession into the background requires work for the subject that recedes as "furniture" into the background must renounce an individual's will to become part of a "greater willing relation." Writing on the character of Maggie in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Ahmed states, "If renunciation can be thought of as will work, then you have to work to recede, or work to become part of the background. Recession…is a hard lot. You can be diagnosed as willful even when you try to escape the diagnosis" (*Willful Subjects* 90). We tend not to notice El Casper's tattooed body when he agrees with the will of *la Mara*. Only after moments of disorientation and when Willy finally turns away from the gang do his

---

will gets narrated as willing wrongfully, not following the right path, and more than that, gets read as a threat. The charge of willfulness converts a potential into a threat (see pp. 11 of *WS*). Ahmed utilizes the novels of George Eliot to theorize how it is that the will, as an idea, converts into narrative. Using the example of Maggie's hair, Ahmed describes how in Eliot's work willfulness, as an attribute, comes to belong not only to persons but also to things (see pp. 14 of *WS*).

tattoos advance to the forefront as signs of willfulness. It is not surprising then that for the longer duration of the film, Willy hides under a hooded gray sweater only to expose his tattooed body during moments of privacy. Willy's teardrop also becomes more pronounced for watchful migrants and the former *marero*. Willy's erasure of his teardrop tattoo is an attempt to recede into the background through the renunciation of the will of *la Mara,* a recession and renunciation that, in the end, fails.

The "willing relation" surrounding *marero* subjectivity slides into a particular *looking relation*. Conversing together at an immigrant rest stop, Willy and Sayra contemplate the weight of their respective predicaments. Attempting to cheer Willy up, Sayra says, "Better to be disguised with immigrants, no? If they come for you" (Fukunaga 65). When Willy responds with silence, Sayra says, "They *will* come for you. Won't they?" (Fukunaga 65; emphasis text) Willy responds, "Maybe. If not now…one day. They've got a good memory" (Fukunaga 65). Due to *la Mara*'s will to never let death go unavenged, *willfulness* defines the very consciousness of El Casper, who lives with the promise of death always nearby. Sayra asks, "Aren't you afraid?" and Willy responds with, "Of death? No. I've always lived for the day. The only hard part is not knowing where it'll come from" (Fukunaga 65). Here, Willy sheds light upon the fear that drives the vigilance of his gaze as a subject always looking around and behind. Earlier in the film (at a stop in Tierra Blanca, Veracruz), Willy notices a large "devil's hand" spray-painted on the side of a concrete building. The script describes him as "scan[ing] the horizon, looking for other signs of his former 'brothers.' Every LONE FIGURE looks like a danger to him" (Fukunaga 59, emphasis text). As

much as Willy desires to recede into the background, disguised as a migrant, the gaze of *la Mara* continues to haunt him. It is only after death that Willy recedes into the background once more. The script describes a tractor burying Willy's coffin underground. The gravesite is covered with a cross that reads "Sin Nombre" among a sea of other crosses that read the same phrase (Fukunaga 105).[113] In death, the tattooed body joins the migrant body under the vigilant gaze of border security and *la Mara.*

"Sin Nombre" names the *fleeing marero*'s subject positionality outside language, time, and space. Willy's alias "El Casper" and his ghostly portrayal in the film, as he cloaks himself under a gray hooded sweater, allude to the character's spectrality as a wandering and liminal figure. The etymology of "spectrality" uncovers the cultural parallels between the spectral figure and the *marero* tattooed body. For example, the early nineteenth-century meaning of the adjective "spectral" derives from the Latin word "spectre," which signifies "of or like a ghost" that is often associated with a "menacing face" ("Spectre, n")[114]. Menacing faces often fill the frame of this film, including the wholly tattooed face of El Lil' Mago and other members of *la Mara* and the transformation of Benito into "Smiley." Let us also consider how the earlier seventeenth-century meaning of "spectre" signified an "image, apparition," which

113. This scene of Willy's gravesite from Fukunaga's screenplay did not transfer to the final film version. When we move to consider recession as a type of 'will work,' that is, "you have to work to recede, or work to become part of the background," then we can think of Willy's death as a failure to recede even when as a *marero* Willy often receded into the tattooed background.

114. Early 17th century meaning "spectrum/specter" according to *OED*: "an object of dread imagined as an apparition" (figurative) (1774); "a horrid spectacle or sight" (1763); "an apparition, phantom, or ghost, especially one of a terrifying nature or aspect" (1605). This reading of *marero* spectrality pays special interest to the historical shift in the meaning of "spectre" from 'the act of seeing' to one that gains a form, becomes embodied, and then becomes not just characteristic of terror but the source of terror itself.

derived from the Latin word "specere" which is "to look" ("Spectre, n"). *Mareros* figure into the narrative as tattooed menaces. This historical "looking relation" defines the arrival of the tattooed *marero* figure in popular culture. Many scholars have already written on the connection between the fascination behind those that gaze *marero*'s tattooed body and the modern-day popular reading of *mareros* as spectacles of terror to frame the *marero* political figure as a spectral cultural form. Steven Osuna, Arturo Arias, and Elena Zilberg credit this relationality to the post-war logic of globalization rooted in neoliberal power structures. Kency Cornejo goes so far as to link this gaze to colonial practices and power relations that date back to colonial times.[115]

This chapter arrives at similar historical itineraries around the *marero* tattooed body, specifically through the point of view of El Casper. The spectrality that undergirds El Casper as someone or something always already *apart* from the *mara*, migrant, and sovereign collective, always already marked for and by death (recall Willy's declaration to Sayra, "I am a dead man") occurs through a gaze from "above" (be it "publics" or the subjective viewer of the film or camera eye itself) and a gaze from "below," that is, Willy's gaze who through the tendency to look behind turns the gaze upon himself, naming his will as the origin point of the *marero*'s wretched unhappiness. For Willy/El Casper, *to be without a name* means being out of alignment with the greater collective gaze, be it the gaze of the *mareros* who look to protect their territory and resources or migrants who look to arrive at the US without more burden

115. Zilberg draws upon the work of Derrida to frame the image of "gangster in guerilla face" as a form of "spectral moment" in history that is "haunted by 'displaced life'" (50).

from behind. Viewers have a different view of Willy's actions: when we bring Willy's wretchedness to the front, we have a different view of the behind. Part of the spectacularity and spectrality of the *marero* figure lies in the consciousness of the *marero* subject as *someone* and *something* that is always already apart. Even as El Casper figures into the narrative as an errant and wayward character apart from the gang collective, El Casper's ethos of apartness and estrangement undergirds the collective psyche of *marero* subjects.

In the book chapter "Central American Diasporas," Arturo Arias elaborates on the transition of criminalized labels from "specters of communism" to "specters of terrorism" that have come to be associated with young men of Central American origin (182). Arias draws the analogy of *mareros* as "tattooed aliens" to consider how this diasporic deported class is *alien* (1) on the level of non-citizenship (as both the US and the nation-states of Central America reject their belongingness and (2) aliens on the level of a seeing relation. For Arias, *mareros* are "doubly alien…in the sci-fi sense of appearing to be a different species altogether with their innumerable tattoos, postmodern space travelers of a sort" (182). We can reframe this analogy for *tattooed aliens* through Ahmed's understanding of 'affect aliens,' that is, *those who do not desire and will in the right way*. As an errant *marero,* El Casper accentuates the positionality of "stranger stranger" and lone figure that already underscores *marero* subjectivity.[116] The figure of El Casper gives a name to this collective sorrow. For this

116. The figure of the stranger appears repeatedly in Ahmed's writing, beginning with *Strange Encounters,* where she writes about how the figure of the stranger, through stranger fetishism, seems to take a 'life of its own.' In *Queer Phenomenology,* Ahmed builds upon this idea of the "stranger's genealogy" to think about how at border checkpoints, some will seem more 'at home' than others. She

spectral figure, the fantasy of *being with* (*la Mara*, migrant, and sovereign collective) gradually and abruptly dissolves. Behind the affective figuration of the melancholic *marero* is the willful work of the sovereign power, be it the nation-state or *la Mara*. The viewpoint of the wretched allows us to explore the cultural stakes behind turning towards and turning away from such histories of imposition and violence. *Marero* melancholia is an analogy for the social charge of unwillingness and desiring in the right way and the *marero*'s incapacity to renounce the MS lifeline.

Let us return to the "cultural work" that racialized figures of melancholia do or do not, will or will not. For Ahmed, melancholia emerges as a form of "false consciousness" where the migrant's consciousness of racism is counter-intuitively read as a melancholic attachment. Ahmed locates melancholia in attachments that become "death-wishes" and the relationship between those attachments and the migrant's consciousness (*The Promise of Happiness* 145). As a subject who refuses to let go of a beloved object deemed already dead by others, the melancholic serves as an affective "sore point" in the remembered history of race and empire. The repetition of the melancholic's narrative of injury poses a danger not only to the melancholic, who gets read as a willful, "could-be terrorist," but also to the larger collective that prizes another form of *false consciousness* (Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* 143). Instead of letting go, the melancholic assimilates the lost object into their body, an incorporation that could be read as a "ghostly death."[117] My reading suggests that we can draw certain

says, "The stranger's genealogy is always suspect. The stranger becomes a stranger because of some *trace* of dubious origin" (*Queer Phenomenology* 142).

117. Writing on queer forms of melancholia in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions,* Ahmed draws upon Freud's distinction of mourning (as a 'healthy' response to loss) and melancholia (as the refusal to

parallels between the figure of the melancholic migrant (as visited by both Ahmed and Camacho) and the figure of the melancholic *marero* that this reading excavates. Within the social and geopolitical imaginary of *Sin Nombre,* the melancholic *marero* accomplishes similar yet distinct cultural work in serving as an affective sore point and "open wound" in the remembered history of empire.[118] As scholars like Zilberg, Arias,

---

let go) to consider how melancholia involves a form of 'embodied' assimilation and incorporation; she writes, "the object persists, but only insofar as it is taken within the subject, as a kind of ghostly death" (159).

118. Other cultural studies scholars of migration have drawn upon the figure of the "melancholic migrant" and the analogy of the "open wound" to make sense of migrant subjectivities. When Willy meets his death at the border his personal history of injury joins the collective stream of trauma and injury that have historically impacted migrant subjectivities in this specific geopolitical space. Gloria Anzaldúa's famous analogy of the US/Mexico border as "una herida abierta" captures the collective traumatic history that has engulfed border cultures for decades, arguably even centuries. Many scholars have paralleled Anzaldúa's figuration of the border as an open wound with Freud's figure of trauma as an open wound. In *Migrant Imaginaries,* Alicia Schmidt Camacho draws such a parallel to speak of the forms of psychic violence that impacted migrants during the second half of the twenty-first century. Schmidt Camacho's work posits, how does the experience of border crossing and their lived consequences impact the migrant's claim to personhood and capacity for mourning? Drawing upon Freud's psychoanalytic work on mourning and melancholia, Schmidt Camacho theorizes the migrant subject's material and emotional loss of statehood as a melancholic wound. Migrants mourn the death of co-nationals and the violence of the passage north (including the injuries of theft, coerced labor, and sexual assault) and the loss of social belief in a protective, democratic nation-state. With the inability for circular migration, 'home' takes on the qualities of a "beloved object," a loss that, for Schmidt Camacho, "threatens the integrity of the border crosser's personhood" (299). Migrant melancholia, at once, names the "psychic burden of loss" migrants cannot overcome and challenges the dehumanizing effects of unauthorized border crossing by reclaiming the migrant's necessity to mourn for the loss of home. The migrant's *open wound* shores up in their conversion from a Latin American national into a category of statelessness, that is to say, in becoming 'undocumented' or, more pessimistically,y 'illegal.' For Schmidt Camacho, it is the migrant's inability to claim a home and mourn the loss of home that precludes the migrant subject's claim to personhood. The *border as an open wound* brings into figure this historical narrative of loss relived in border spaces and in the migrant psyche.

Although Sara Ahmed's work on the cultural reproduction of the melancholic migrant figure does not focus on border spaces or border narratives, we could consider the intergenerational and intracultural tension of her case study as types of "contact zones." In her reading of the diasporic film *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) she elucidates for us how within the Indian multigenerational family the turbaned, immigrant body becomes melancholic as a point of conversion. The film projects injury and bad feelings around race and racism onto the turbaned body, specifically the protagonist's father. Discriminated for being a turbanned Indian man wishing to play cricket in modern-day England, the Indian father stands in the way of the protagonist's dreams of playing soccer. The film locates injury and melancholia in the turbaned body in that the turbaned body preserves the historical racial scene of suffering. The father's inability to 'get over' the injury of racism provides the narrative with a 'sore point' that is not only attributed to the turbaned body but culturally diagnosed as the father's individual failure. The migrant's sore point—the turban—brings the melancholic migrant into being. As Ahmed explains, "If the melancholic's open wound draws investment, it also drains energy. To stay sore is to be drained of

and Osuna have elaborated on, part of the "spectral cultural work" of the figure of *mareros* has been the *veiling* of more extensive historical wounds of US imperialism rehashed through state strategies of militarization, securitization, and global neoliberalism that undergirded the creation of a "surplus" class. When Willy/El Casper sorrowfully declares to Sayra, "toda mi vida ha sido una mierda," we witness a critical moment of unveiling.[119] For the melancholic *marero,* tattoos preserve memories of precarity, loss, and powerlessness, even as tattoos preserve the *marero*'s willing history of murder, pillage, and violence. We can think of "*marero* melancholia" as an analogy for this form of repressed consciousness and the figure of the melancholic *marero* as the embodiment of this consciousness. Tattoos within this framework are both a form of assimilation (that is, incorporation) and a form of estrangement. The figure of the melancholic *marero* emerges and differs from the tattooed body. Tattoos are both separable and inseparable from *marero* subjectivity, even in their absence.

It is important to note that part of the way *spectrality comes to figure* in the film

---

energy. We might even say that the figure of the melancholic provides 'us' with a wound; by providing a sore point, the melancholic might allow us to keep what is sore at that point. This is how the melancholic migrant *comes to figure*: if the migrant is a sore point, then soreness can be attributed to the migrant" (*Promise of Happiness* 141; emphasis text). The figure of the melancholic migrant preserves the cultural diagnosis to get over racism as well as the cultural depositing of racialized unhappiness. The melancholic migrant figure becomes the historical origin point of racial unhappiness instead of the historically racist project of the British empire. Once the protagonist's dad does the work of *putting racism behind him*, the narrative reorients the turbaned body away from a racist past towards an imagined future of multicultural happiness. The turbaned body serves as the narration's most critical conversion point in resolving the cultural hurdle of this multicultural 'feel happy' narrative. Ahmed shows us that the turbaned body becomes a conversion point through the cultural 'diagnosing' and, therefore, depositing of melancholia in the migrant subject.

119. Like Zilberg and Osuna, Arturo Arias has also described the MS as a form of specter: "Just like the specter of communism was associated with yesterday's national liberation movements, the specter of terrorism is presently associated with Central American gang members. For young men of Central American origin, the transition from modernity to postmodernity, then globalization, might very well be just the transition of labels along a structural continuum" (181-182).

is through the "devil work" of *mareros*, including that of tattoos. In a way, we can think of the "devil horn" tattoo and hand sign as the "after-life" of *la Mara* in how "devil work" takes up a life of its own. The image of the "devil horn" tattoo always looms in the moral and affective landscape of the film. We find the devil horn figure painted on bodies, gratified and spray-painted on walls, and physically imitated in the ritual "devil hand sign" by *mareros* to demonstrate allegiance to *la Mara*. The most vicious *marero* of the story, El Lil' Mago, crowns his face with the "devil's horn" tattoo. El Casper is also characterized as a devil by close-by migrants. In a scene on top of a boxcar at night, migrants huddle (including Horacio and Orlando), soaked from the rain, and whisper to each other about Willy's unwanted presence on the train. One migrant whispers, "We are riding with the Devil. He'll curse us all" (Fukunaga 51). The film also features a scene where El Lil' Mago addresses the work of the devil to veil his murdering actions. At the graveyard, after El Lil' Mago kills Martha, Willy asks El Lil' Mago about her whereabouts. El Lil' Mago responds, "Devil took her" (Fukunaga 42). We can think of the figure of the devil as another conversion point, where the call to "devil work" shadows both the presence and absence of other affectations, such as guilt. We see this when El Lil' Mago's "words register on El Casper's face" as both an "emotion" and "vice" of "tearful rage and sorrow" (Fukunaga 42). "Vice" from the Latin "vitium" ("fault, defect, failing") alludes to both the absence and corruption of morals and a *habit* of "wicked nature" ("Vice, n1"). "Vice" (as in wrongdoing and the lack of morality) registered and expressed by El Casper alludes to both the presence and absence of sin, for in the eyes of El Lil' Mago, there is no wrongdoing. Sin, as an

idea of moral wrongdoing, emerges as a veiled shadow in the film as both the figurative and literal imagining of the devil, *la figura del diablo*.

Drawing a parallel between Ahmed's conceptualization of 'good vs. ill will' and the moral wrongdoing of *mareros* might help us uncover the significance behind *marero* encounters and characterizations that call upon the devil's work. In *Willful Subjects,* Ahmed foregrounds Augustine's *City of God* to consider moments in Christian thought when "the will is narratable as freedom (to will freely is to be one's own cause) and when that freedom gets "affectively registered as guilt" (27). For Augustine the original sin, that is, the original fall from grace is a "willing fall" (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 212). Therein lies the self-certainty of the will as the freedom to will and the self-certainty of guilt as an affective 'effect' of willing freely. Ahmed then reframes this struggle as a collective struggle between "good will" and "ill will." Like the self-certainty of the will as the freedom to will, the self-certainty of the good will (as *subjectively spontaneous)* is in its "agreement with other wills," as opposed to the ill will that is "often understood as will that is in agreement only with itself" (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 95).[120] I suggest that inside the affective and moral landscape of the film, *la Mara* functions as a "good ill will." A "good will" in that the way of *la Mara*, that is, the way of the devil, operates as a technique for "gathering a disparate population into a coherent body" like the diasporic work operating in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 96). *La Mara* also signifies a bad will, or 'ill

120. In the chapter "The Good Will" Ahmed elaborates on how the idea of a "good will" becomes a technique for gathering a disparate population into a coherent body including diasporic formations (see pp. 96 of *Willful Subjects*).

will,' in that the "goodness of will" (its steadiness and reliability as a source of 'social harmony') relies on a "narratable freedom to will" predicated on sinfulness and violence—*el diablo*. Where the *marero* attributed with "good ill will" sin "lands" as the absence of guilt and the freedom to will in accordance to the will of other *mareros*, for the *marero* attributed with "ill will" or "willfulness" sin registers as guilt. Whereas the characters of El Lil' Mago and Smiley have a "guiltless" affective response to the murder of Martha and Willy (respectively), for the character of El Casper/Willy (the film's willful subject), sin and guilt manifest as another form of haunting, that is, "bad inheritance." The "good ill will," as in the renunciation of guilt and fault, becomes central to the film's presentation of *marero* masculinity. Whereas in Ahmed's reading of migrant melancholia, the investment in good is distributed in generational terms, in this reading of *marero* melancholia, the investment in good and bad, or good will and ill will*,* is distributed in gendered terms: women inherit feminine vulnerability, and *marero* men inherit both the freedom and burden of "el diablo," that is gang masculinization and indoctrination.

Let us return to a conversation between Willy and Sayra at an immigrant rest stop to consider how the film narrates the devil's work in the end. Like Ahmed reminds us in her reading of the 2002 film *Bend it Like Beckham*, diasporic films are often filled with "technologies of flight" (including airplanes, trains, boats, and other modes of transport) that, through their "spatial promise of flight," saturate the narrative with "magical" affective meaning (*Promise of Happiness* 137). Technologies of flight shore up the diasporic subject's dream of arrival. With its depiction of *La Bestia*, cars and

trucks, and river "floatation devices" that include rafts and inner tubes, the migrant, diasporic story of *Sin Nombre* is no different. As Willy and Sayra help prepare a meal at a migrant rest stop, the two characters notice a passenger jet plane passing overhead. Willy comments on how he saw a factory in Texas where jet planes are made. Sayra, in slight disbelief, asks him, "You've been to Texas" (Fukunaga 64). Willy responds, "I've been to little of everywhere. This factory has this huge globe, like a giant ball, all lit up and bright. I wanted to climb it" (Fukunaga 64). The globe and jet plane operate as devices that deliver a spatial promise of flight. Sayra responds to Willy's comment, "I'll look for it when I get there" (Fukunaga 64). In slight belief, Willy responds to Sayra, "If you get there" (Fukunaga 64). It seems that the weight of Willy's decisions burdens his outlook and consciousness. Sayra responds with the certainty of a past reading: "I will. I know I will. Back home, my friend Clarissa made me see this crazy neighbor Doña Eleanor, you know, like witchcraft? She smoked this *puro*, then told me with her freaky voice that I'd make it to the US but not in God's hand, perhaps in the Devil's" (Fukunaga 64). In the end, it is the "devil's hand" that helps Sayra reach the US, that is, the hand of Willy/El Casper. We can see that the film's politics are reluctant to deliver a cheerful "fantasy of reconciliation" (for even Sayra's fate in the US seems precarious) where the migrant/diasporic subject realizes the dream of arrival as in the diasporic subjects of *Bend it Like Beckham*. Yet by momentarily situating Willy in Texas, in this scene and again in the opening shot where Willy stares into an open forest that we can suspect (as the script of the film references Texas), the film suggests that the *marero*'s fantasy of arrival is both incomplete and already completed. *La Mara*'s

"devil work" is this diasporic story's most wicked and magical, as in spectral, spatial promise of flight.

Yet even though on the level of the "national will," migrant characters are subjectively "out of time," the film features important moments when both migrant and *marero* come "to be with" alternative (or other) social bodies. As the film's most wayward character, Willy, at different points in the narrative, is both in and out of time with the *mara* social body and the migrant social body. We see Willy being "in time" with the *mara* at the film's beginning, where his allegiance to "tattooed objects" reflects his loyalty to the *mara*. Later, we see Willy "becoming part" and "being with" a migrant social body through the erasure of his tattoo and his allegiance to Sayra. Willy's movement towards being with other bodies that are not the social body of the *mara* parallels the opposing movement of Smiley's evolution from outsider to *becoming part* of the *mara* body. We witness these moments when Smiley kills his first *chavala and* joins El Lil' Mago and El Casper on the train raid. If "being with" a body means also feeling happiness and sadness at the right time, then we see this most poignantly in a scene that follows the murder of El Lil' Mago. Upon hearing the news, members of MS-13 sit around a table at their home in *El Destroyer,* crying as they hold up the devil horn sign in front of their faces. Even as Smiley cries alongside other members, his allegiance to the *mara* family is still scrutinized. To show his total devotion, Smiley must murder El Casper and thereby restore the collective well-being of his family. *La Mara,* as a social body that houses a specific affective directionality and moral economy, imposes onto Willy the cultural diagnosis of melancholia. *La Mara* claims

Martha is a dead object. Willy's inability to get over *it*, which manifests in the mourning and vengeance for her murder, becomes a cultural diagnosis of willfulness. Willy's affinity towards Martha and other vulnerable feminine bodies is, in effect, his "death wish." When Willy stands on the verge of the border, he contemplates the impossibility of crossing over. The potentiality of being with a social body that is not *la Mara* eludes him. Instead, Willy must confront the will of the *mara* embodied in the character of Smiley.

As much as this reading of *Sin Nombre* has been about tracing how melancholic *mareros* come to figure, it has also been about tracing a historical and social relationality between the akin yet different figures of unhappiness (otherwise affect aliens) of Central American migrants and transnational *mareros*. The figure of the melancholic *marero* emerges in historical relation to the willful and melancholic migrant. We can think of these two figures as traveling companions who are part of a melancholic and willful archive.[121] While political and common-sense discourse consolidates these distinct political subjects under figures of criminality and terrorist-to-be, through a reading of the film, we come to recognize how these two subjects—on

121. In *Willful Subjects,* Ahmed adjoins the melancholic migrant (that she first introduces in *The Promise of Happiness*) to a willfulness archive. Ahmed accomplishes this merging of archives by paying attention to the assignment of the past tense and, specifically, how the melancholic and willful subject inherit this cultural assignment. She writes, "In my account of 'melancholic migrants,' I suggested that some bodies come to be understood as lodged in the past, as backward, as insisting on staying hurt by an injury, as refusing to move forward and embrace the happiness of futurity (see Ahmed 2010, 120-59). I think willful subjects are *often given the past tense*: being willful as a way of being lodged in the past, unmoved by the willing embrace of the future" (*Willful Subjects* 215; emphasis text). The judgment of being willful often comes alongside the judgment of being melancholic. We can think of Central American migrants and *mareros* as willful orphans of the national family—as subjects that refuse to give up their allegiance to another social body and get coded as always 'looking backward' and, therefore, always already apart from the nation.

the level of embodied lived experience—share historical wounds of neoliberal exploit.[122] How have we come to acknowledge migrants and *mareros* as the willful orphans of the nation? Through the charge to stop, to recede, to go back, to passively accept death: both the willful migrant and melancholic *marero come to figure* through a phenomenology of fleeing and being stopped that transforms into a moral imperative to admit fault *and* to recede (to die or go elsewhere). As fleeing Central American migrants become stateless and criminal, the fleeing *marero* becomes doubly stateless and criminal in that the *marero* contends with the will of the *mara* as much as the will of other sovereign spaces as the nation. The figure of the willful, melancholic *marero* is saturated with affect through the inheritance of this more extensive legacy of alienation and loss.

The film traces this historical relationality through the point of view of El Casper, who, in the final scene, experiences both a *marero* and migrant death. Instead of offering a happy "fantasy of reconciliation," *Sin Nombre* ends on the note of inevitable loss. We understand the film's larger politics of loss in Sayra's fate (whose future in the US seems precarious and insecure), Smiley's fate (whose new initiation into the *mara* social body is undergirded with feelings of confusion and anxiety), and

122. William Robinson situates Central America as a site of transnational processes in *Transnational Conflicts*. While different dynamics and subprocesses undergirded the distinct regions' (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica) integration into an emergent global economy and society, Robinson also highlights the uniform dynamics that characterized the globalization of the Isthmus as a whole. For Robinson, the social conflicts of the 1980s paved the way for a neoliberal, transnational model of economics to take hold in the region, mainly through the displacement of old oligarchy with new transnational technocrat elites. These "modernizers" expanded non-traditional export-led economies, such as maquila production, tourism, and "new agricultural and agro-industrial products based on utilizing the region's 'comparative advantage' in cheap labor" (Robinson 159).

Willy/El Casper's fate (whose death reflects the willful work of the nation as much as *la Mara*). For the nation and *la Mara,* the fantasy of avenging transgressors performs a critical role in the national desire to secure its boundaries and compensates for the loss of life. The way that *la Mara* requires signs of "counter-will" to justify the elimination of wayward *mareros,* including *chavalas,* reflects the way the social body of the nation demands new arrivals to give allegiance to the whole and the way the nation requires signs of willfulness to eliminate "otherness *as* a security project" (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 29). The will of the nation is hard at work in the narrative world of this film.

IV. Conclusion

"Do not come" are the words that Vice-President Kamala Harris directed to Central Americans during a recent visit to Guatemala.[123] "Do not come" strikes a similar "hardline" anti-immigrant, pro-border security stance so often expressed by former president Donald Trump. "Do not come" follows the example of former president Barack Obama, who, in response to a surge of migrating Central American youth, declared, "Do not send your children to the border."[124] All three presidencies have witnessed a surge in migrants arriving at the US-Mexico border, and all three presidencies have taken up the paternal cloak of wanting to wield migrants into submission through the use of "tough" language and the implementation of "tough"

123. See Kanno-Youngs, Zolan. "Kamala Harris, With Blunt Language on Border, Forges Immigration Image." *The New York Times*, 8 June 2021. NYTimes.com, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/08/world/americas/kamala-harris-immigration.html.

124. See News, A. B. C. "Obama Warns Central Americans: 'Do Not Send Your Children To The Borders.'" *ABCNews*, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/obama-warns-central-americans-send-children-borders/story?id=24320063. Accessed 7 July 2021.

policies.[125] Harris' "do not come," like the "do not's" that have come before, offers another historical figuration of Central American migrants as willful subjects. US political discourse reads Central American migrants as willful insofar as the migrant child, the migrant woman, the migrant man, and the migrant family will not be kept down, as Central American migrants keep persisting and coming up, quite literally, to the US-Mexico border. The willfulness charge continues to elude us, as it continues to elude Central Americans who continue to migrate because of the unwillingness of state actors to acknowledge the complex, complicated, and unlivable realities of chronic poverty, corruption, and violence.

What I hope to have shown through this account of a neighboring willful subject is that when issues like surges in migration and gang violence get diagnosed as a problem of the will (and being too full of will), then the individual becomes the problem, as opposed to structural forms of poverty and violence that surround the individual. Even as the *marero* figure recedes into the background (with the moral panics of Donald Trump behind us), we continue to live in the *marero* figure's after-life as we witness the escalating criminalization of Central American migrant populations, the bolstering of detention and deportation regimes, and the negation of US asylum.[126] As a narrative of injury that showcases more extensive histories of

125. See Gonzalez-Barrera, Ana, and Jens Manuel Krogstad. "U.S. Deportations of Immigrants Reach Record High in 2013." *Pew Research Center*, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/10/02/u-s-deportations-of-immigrants-reach-record-high-in-2013/. Accessed 18 May 2015; Gramlich, John. "How Border Apprehensions, ICE Arrests, and Deportations Have Changed under Trump." *Pew Research Center*, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/02/how-border-apprehensions-ice-arrests-and-deportations-have-changed-under-trump/. Accessed 7 July 2021.

126. Leisy Abrego and Alejandro Villalpando's chapter "Racialization of Central Americans in the United States" draws upon Jodi Melamed's notion of "neoliberal multiculturalism" to make sense of the

cultural scarring surrounding Central American subjects that flee, the film *Sin Nombre* exposes the social forces behind the production of displaced populations impacted by the workings of war and militarization, economic precarity, crime, and extortion. The decision to flee home and embark on a dangerous and violent journey that promises to leave irreparable marks on the body derives from an inheritance of melancholia as it does from a legacy of willfulness. *Sin Nombre* shows us that we do and can learn from our traveling companions.

---

relationship between race and capitalism in the historical political and social treatment of Central Americans both inside and outside the isthmus. "Neoliberal multiculturalism" names the mechanisms in which transnational capitalist regimes demand nation-states, businesses, and social institutions to incorporate multiculturalism (that is, the cultural acceptance of racialized collectives) as an ideological, institutional goal, even as these regimes hide the ways that transnational capital expansion increase racial inequity *and* political and economic marginalization. For Abrego and Villalpando, in the case of Central America, neoliberal multiculturalism landed as a phenomenon akin to Shannon Speed's "neoliberal multicriminalism." Instilled by US political and economic actors and postwar Central American elites during the political transition, neoliberal free-market economies grew to produce widescale corruption, crime, and organized violence through the implementation of a socio-political order that upheld racialized hierarchies of labor precarity and extraction. Out of the logic of neoliberal multiculturalism/muticriminalism, migrants become individually responsible for their failures and, in turn, criminals for fleeing precarious working and living conditions. Abrego and Villalpando identify Reagan's discourse of "racial regimes" and racial disciplining, rendering Central Americans as communists and guerillas in need of discipline and cleansing, as the historical and social-political moment when Central Americans living across the US and the isthmus came to embody a racialized Other that not only posed a danger to society but also directly threaten global capitalism as defiant subjects outside the realm of capitalist wealth. We see this legacy of Central Americans as poor, criminal, and unauthorized resurface in Trump's neoliberal multicriminal discourse, where *mareros* came to represent the Central American lawless man. For Abrego and Villalpando, Central American subjects remain outside the boundaries of a "proper" racial subject. They map this evolution of Central American racializations to call for more work that contends with *race and capitalism in unraveling* global and comparative histories of racialization and marginalization (Abrego and Villalpando).

Chapter 3: The Feminized Body: Voids, Virtue, and the Evanescent in Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre* (2009) and Diego Quemada-Díez's *La Jaula de Oro* (2013)

This chapter opens with the character of Sayra from Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre* (2009). As we can recall, in the final film sequence, Sayra finds herself struggling on an inner tube. With the desire to aid Willy, she fights against the force of the current to get back to the Mexican side of the Rio Grande River. From exhaustion, she stops trying. Sayra "breathes hard as the weight of all that has happened sinks in. Her labored breathing slowly becomes a heavy, moaning cry. She has lost everyone" (Fukunaga 104). Exterior shots show Sayra wandering…she is a lonely and solitary figure. As the screenplay reads, "Sayra walks in a trance through a field of tall, green grass and flowers. Her face is both tired and peaceful. As Willy described, there is something beautiful about the Texan landscape, like a painting, especially in the early light" (Fukunaga 105). Sayra is in Willy's former dwelling in Texas. She wanders into the suburban landscape of this US border town. She ducks from the police as she walks along the street. A wide high angle shot shows Sayra walking into the large parking lot of a Sam's Club. Sayra's future appears grim. Perhaps, following Willy's earlier advice to support her dead father's family, Sayra picks up a public phone. She whispers the number she was forced to memorize, her final lifeline: "9-0-8-555-0-1-8-7" (Fukunaga 105). As the camera pulls high and away, "we lose her in the colorful mosaic of hundreds of cars" (Fukunaga 105). Unlike Willy, who meets his death at the river, Horacio, who meets his end on *La Bestia*, and Orlando, who gets deported back to Honduras, Sayra is the film's exceptional migrant. She endures the trials of the migrant

trail through Mexico and US-Mexico border crossing only to arrive at this larger social scene of illegality, precarity, and invisibility.

This chapter investigates embodied experiences of migrancy from the point of view of female migrant figures. Before delving into a cultural analysis of the migrant figures of Sayra from Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre* (2009) and Sara from Diego Quemada-Díez's *La Jaula de Oro* (2013), I introduce politicized sites of contention basing our contemporary understanding of female migrant subjects inside and outside of Central America.[127] Ethnographic and journalist work helped bring out of the shadows the "subterranean" economies of drug trafficking, human trafficking, prostitution rings, gang extortion, and police extortion that undergird the transnational phenomena of migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala) to the US.[128] Researchers of contemporary Central American migration often remark that *migrants do not migrate; they flee*. They flee political and economic insecurity brought about by neoliberal economic reforms, natural disasters, and the growing threat of gang violence. The "push factors" are no different for mothers and young women. Yet, as researchers have contended, female migrants differentially experience migration as women encounter additional social and physical barriers already embedded within lived experiences of patriarchy, gender discrimination, and pervasive sexism.[129]

---

127. In the remainder of the chapter, I refer to the film *La Jaula de Oro* as "*La Jaula"* for short.

128. See Oscar Martínez's *The Beast* and *A History of Violence.*

129. Carla Angulo-Pasel's dissertation notes that women are often caught up in cycles of domestic violence and often have children to account for either along the migrant trail or waiting for them in the US or Central America. These social circumstances become active barriers along the migrant route as migrant women encounter discrimination not only for their sex but are also discriminated against as "bad

The topic of migrant women and everyday incidents of rape, sexual assault, and other forms of gendered violence came to the forefront in 2014, when migration patterns shifted toward more women and children arriving at the US border.[130] From the Obama era to the current presidency of Biden, common-sense political discourse characterizes the phenomena of feminized migrancy as a paradoxical rendering of extreme vulnerability and active agency, where political actors cite the high probability of women experiencing rape along the migrant trail to tell women to *choose* not to migrant and *choose* not to expose their bodies to such experiences of violence.[131] Former President Trump "troped" the raping of migrant women and the lurking presence of rapists south of the border to advance the ongoing national security project

---

mothers."

130. Here, it is important to note that shifts in migration patterns that saw more women and children arriving at the border in 2014 coincided with the implementation of the *Programa Frontera Sur* (*PFS)* policy. Mexico developed its border enforcement apparatus through political pressure from the US government and US federal economic support. With the implementation of *PFS,* the "travel strategy" of migrants changed substantially as the train routes and major highways of southern Mexico became targets of border control, including police/INM raids and checkpoints. Due to increased checkpoints, migrant women were forced to travel longer through more secluded areas. *PFS* introduced new travel obstacles to migrant women even as the legislature presented policies to protect the human rights of migrant women and migrants in general. The growth of Mexican government activity focused on stopping migrants also saw a rise in reports of abuse from local, state, and federal officials. It also saw an increase in illicit criminal activity seeking to profit from the shift in migration patterns. Border militarization (in both the context of the US and Mexico) increases migrant vulnerability. As Wendy Vogt argues, "The militarisation of transit spaces funnel people—both migrants and asylum-seekers—into more clandestine routes, creating fertile ground for illicit economies to flourish. What develops is an interdependent relationship between the business of human smuggling and state enforcement" (369-70). Vogt also cites the 2007 Mexican Mérida Initiative (a US-funded "war on drugs") as a critical moment in Mexican immigration control where militarization of immigration and border control saw a rise in paramilitary groups. See Angulo-Pasel and De León for more on the complicated legacy of *PFS*.

131. The writers of the introduction of *The Border and its Bodies* comment on the common trope that undocumented migrants "choose" to put themselves in danger by choosing to cross the border without the authorization of the US government. The writers of the introduction argue that the framing of migration as a choice not only obscures centuries of institutionalized racism and exploitation but also displaces responsibility for "the immigrant crisis" from the US, Central America, and Mexico. The rhetoric of choice that anchors governmental policy of Prevention Through Deterrence renders invisible both the natural and institutionalized forms of violence the migrant trail and border crossing passage have on the lives and bodies of undocumented people. We can think of the discourse of choice as another deployment of the willfulness charge.

of border deterrence and wall reinforcement.[132] While gendered and sexualized forms of violence directed towards migrant women have become part of the mainstream dialogue around immigration, the Biden presidency continues to frame the decision to migrate as a question of choice. The political impetus to blame and criminalize migrants undercuts "active" efforts to address the root causes of migration and the systemic abuse of migrant women along the migrant trail and in US border encampments and towns.[133]

We can use the analogy of "cuerpomatico" (body-matic) as an entry point into the social and economic complexities that characterize the experience of migrant women. [134]On the one hand, research undertaken in migrant shelters, train stops, and

132. On multiple occasions, Trump cited that "one in three" women experienced sexual assault in the migrant journey through Mexico. As a *Washington Post* writer notes, widely used statistics around the sexual assault of migrant women (including the one in three, the 60% statistic from a 2010 Amnesty report, and the 80% percent statistic from a Fusion report) are not only outdated but only survey a small and localized portion of migrant populations. As researchers of this topic often remark (including Kessler, De León, and Ruiz Marrujo), the effort to bring sexual violence to light is often inconsistent, understudied outdated. As Ruiz Marrujo emphasizes in her study, statistics also do not consider that many experiences of rape and sexual assault go unreported because of women migrants' undocumented status. Moreover, Ruiz Marrujo draws attention to how the risk of rape and sexual assault can flux between different migratory sites, such as between the southern and northern parts of Mexico and the US part of the US/Mexico border.

133. In June 2021, Vice President Kamala Harris told migrants, "Do not come" to the US/Mexico border as she promised the US government would begin focusing on the "root causes" of immigration. Harris's speech evaded the topic of the US's historical involvement in Latin America's political and economic instability and, instead, endorsed increased investment in US-based corporations (including Nestle) that promise a "women's empowerment initiative." Harris's speech also evades the topic of gendered violence pervading border towns and border encampments. As a recent *New York Times* investigation notes, evidence shows that more and more migrant women experience instances of rape, coercion, and sexual assault not only along their passage in Mexico but also at the hands of US deportation and border enforcement personnel. The border towns along the US side have seen an increased number of "makeshift brothels" that house economies of forced prostitution, human smuggling, and extortion. See Manny Fernandez's *NYT* article "'You Have to Pay With Your Body'" and Kanno-Youngs' article for more information.

134. See De León's "Como Me Duele," Angulo-Pasel's "Navigating Risks," Martínez's *The Beast*, and Fernandez's "'You Have to Pay With Your Body'" for more on "cuerpomatico" and the growth of illicit economies that seek profit through the captivity and hyper-sexualization of migrant women.

other clandestine spaces such as those that host prostitution rings and human smuggling point to the severity of gendered power imbalances within these transitory spaces where women become targets of physical harassment, kidnapping, and sexual solicitation at the hands of other migrants, gangs, *polleros*, traffickers, and police/immigration personnel.[135] Through force and consent, migrant women become imbricated in informal sexual economies where women "pay" with sex and their bodies for protection and economic support.[136] These investigations not only highlight the heightened vulnerability of migrant women but also call attention to the consequential life-long effects of these experiences of violence on the mental and physical health of migrant women.[137] On the other hand, ethnographic research emphasizing the differential and embodied experience of migration points to the need to go beyond monolithic and one-dimensional understandings of feminized migrant subjects. Beyond racist stereotypes

135. Spanish colloquial term used to describe a "smuggler-guide." Wendy Vogt defines "smuggler-guides" as forms of "migrant brokers," that is, "the actors and networks who facilitate the actual movement of people" (368). *Polleros* can act interchangeably as companions, smugglers, and guides. Vogt elaborates, "Smuggler-guides have become middlemen of sorts for migrants on their journeys north. Organised criminals and authorities tightly control sections of the journey and smuggler-guides in particular understand how to navigate the appropriate fees or taxes to pay in exchange for the 'safe' passage of migrants. Quite simply, those who do not travel with a smuggler are more at risk of kidnapping. Under this framework, traveling with a smuggler-guide has become a matter of basic safety and survival for unauthorised migrants" (373-4). Vogt posits that smugglers, and even traffickers, are not the root problem (despite common-sense political rhetoric) but symptoms of a larger local and transnational economy rooted in the securitization of borders and unauthorized mobility.

136. Jason De León's ethnographic study "Como me duele" elaborates on the common occurrence of sex (consensual, forced, and transactional) on the train tracks at night between migrants and other migrants and migrants and local citizens. Migrants participate in an "informal sexual economy" on migrant routes for economic needs. He also comments on the prevalence of rape and how rape is a constant concern for women at night on the train tracks. He writes, "Because of their undocumented status and the difficulty of filing a formal complaint against a Mexican assailant, Central American women are often targeted by rapists on the migrant trail" (117-118). Also, see Oscar Martínez's *The Beast*.

137. See Kessler's "No, Amnesty International Does Not Say 60 Percent of Migrant Women in Mexico Have Been Raped" and Carla Angulo-Pasel's "Navigating Risks Across Borders."

that perpetuate the idea of migrant women as extreme victims, ethnographic studies by Carla Angulo-Pasel, Wendy Vogt, and Jason De Léon consider how feminized migrant subjects navigate the brunt of structural forces by (1) utilizing their bodies as a site for human/social capital and (2) participating in forms of "intimate labors" that fall inside and outside the category of sex work.[138] These studies undo common-sense categories of migrancy (including that of the deserving economic migrant and criminalized rapist smuggler) based on simplistic notions of hero and victim. Through a focus on the embodied experience of migration, these studies question the political basis on which the state categorizes unauthorized movements and clandestine activities. They direct us to unauthorized human mobility's complicated reality and ethical politics. The lived experience of migrancy calls for research methodologies that go beyond simple dichotomies of "good" and "bad" migrants by making space for distinct forms of migrant agency and intimacies.

In the past decade, scholarship within contemporary US Central American cultural studies has also made space for more complicated renditions of migrant subjectivities. For example, Yajaira Padilla's "The Central American Transnational

138. Angulo-Pasel and Vogt undertake their ethnographic research in Mexican migrant refuge shelters and De León undertakes his research in "clandestine spaces" that surround shelters and the popular migrant routes, including the train stops of *La Bestia*. Angulo-Pasel emphasizes how migrant women deploy their agency, albeit within constrained social roles, by taking contraceptives to avoid the risk of agency, performing as a male migrant, participating in protective pairings with male companions/smuggler/guides, and applying for Humanitarian Visas in Mexico after becoming victims of assault. Vogt considers migrant mobility as an intimate social lived process involving forms of "intimate labor." Vogt elaborates that migrant women participate in group travel, protective pairings, and care work alongside smuggler-guides for protection against deportation, exploitation, and violence. She calls for research at the intersection of migration, human smuggling, and gender/sex work to go beyond the focus on "processes of sex trafficking or debt-bondage between smugglers and clients" to consider how both migrant women and men participate in alternate forms of kinship/affective affiliations along the migrant trail (Vogt 371).

Imaginary" (2013) considers how the centering of migrant women in film and literature redefined the discursive limits of a US-Central American collective imaginary as well as the conceptual basis of US-Central American cultural studies. Writing on such works as Silvio Siria's *Bernardo and the Virgin* (2005), Evelyn Cortez-Davis' *December Sky* (2003), and Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre*, Padilla emphasizes the gendered processes and multiple subject positions of Central American migratory and diasporic experiences. She writes:

> Drawing on [José] Saldívar's theory of a 'transnational imaginary,' I propose that it is possible to speak of a Central American transnational imaginary that, likewise, 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. (Padilla 153)

Within this formulation, affect operates as a form of identificatory practice that animates a gender-conscious social imagining of Central America premised upon the mutuality of "shared experiences recounted through images and stories" and the reactivation of emotions through the aesthetic (Padilla 154). For Padilla, the affective, identificatory, and representative work of female-centered cultural productions "*make[s] discernible* the fact that gender, along with ethnicity, citizenship, and class is also a crucial aspect of the transnational imaginings, subjectivities, and emergent ethnic identities of Central American immigrants in the United States" (163-4; emphasis mine). If we understand discernability as the ability "to be perceptible" and "to be recognizable," this chapter begins by centering the question of *how* embodied experiences of gendered precarity, vulnerability, and marginality become perceptible and recognizable as such. Before we utilize the case study of *Sin Nombre* and other

related cultural works foregrounding the experience of migrant women as the premise for a "transnational imaginary" within Central American cultural studies, we need to address *how* contemporary diasporic and migrant narratives *focalize* gendered experience. Only through keen attention to the embodiment of affect and aesthetics can we draw light upon the silences, negations, relegations, and subordinations of feminized migrant subjects traversing the social and political terrains of Central America, Mexico, and the US. As opposed to approaching affect and aesthetics as the strict "relational basis" for diasporic cultural imaginings, my approach accounts for the politics of relationality and differentiation undergirding the isthmian cultural politics of emotion.

Past writing on contemporary migration films and the migration film genre as a whole compare *Sin Nombre* and *La Jaula* through a broad generic thematic of migrancy as both films unite in their focus on the migratory experience and the physical traversal of migrants departing from the Northern Triangle to the US. In tracing the migrant trajectory from the Northern Triangle to the US through the story and perspective of its migrant characters, both *Sin Nombre* and *La Jaula* unite in a similar narrative structure of an opening departure from Central America and an ending arrival in the US and their depiction of migrancy as a form of initiation. This chapter differs from past representational and thematic readings of the two films by foregrounding the feminized migrant body as the analytical platform for an intersectional and comparative discussion on race, gender, and sexuality. Where Padilla's reading of *Sin Nombre* frames the film as a "female-centered representation" and my previous chapter ("The

Tattooed Body") frames the film as a masculinized cultural analogy for *marero* subjectivities, this chapter moves towards both a comparative and intersectional understanding of gender, race, and sexuality.[139] This understanding holds implications for feminized and masculized subjects as much as for racialized subjectivities. I grate against the desire to masculinize or feminize the films of *Sin Nombre* and *La Jaula* by foregrounding points of ambivalence that focalize yet relegate the feminized migrant body. A comparative reading of *how feminized migrant bodies figure into* the filmic worlds of *Sin Nombre* and *La Jaula* sets the foundation for an intersectional and relational reading practice of differentiating histories, including gender, race, and sexuality. The term "feminized migrant" validates the notion that Central Americanness is not a gender-neutral experience and how, in the sociality and narrativization of migrancy, the feminized migrant body becomes a site and sight of sexualized violence. Within the migratory geopolitics of Central America, experiences of feminization often slide into incidents of femicide.

This chapter, "The Feminized Body: Voids, Virtue, and the Evanescent," argues that notions of virtuousness shape the visual embodiment of the feminized migrant figure. The OED defines our modern understanding of virtue as "conformity to moral law or accepted moral standards," "the position of morally good qualities," and "behavior arising from such standards, abstention on moral grounds from any wrongdoing or vice" ("Virtue, n"). A vast and diverse body of scholarship (from

139. See Richard Curry's "The Migration Genre in *La Jaula de Oro*: Voids and Virtue" for a masculinized reading of the film.

citizenship studies to legal studies) delineates the historical linkage between our understanding of the contemporary migrant subject with high moral standards and ethics of hard labor, directly in compliance with immigration laws.[140] This chapter argues that the figure of the feminized migrant inhabits this greater neoliberal "morality of migrancy." To destabilize and deconstruct the ideological apparatus of morality *stuck* to the feminized migrant body, I borrow and build upon Sara Ahmed's affective paradigm of "stickiness." If affect is what sticks, "or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects," then "stickiness" refers to the affective value that accumulates around objects through histories of contact ("Happy Objects" 29). For Ahmed, the circulation of objects and emotions is *not free* but involves forms of relationality that are bound together or not. As Ahmed writes, the contingency of affect entails understanding how some "forms of stickiness are about holding things together and "[s]ome are about blockages or stopping things from moving (*Cultural Politics* 91). This chapter argues that the messy, ambivalent yet predetermined "binding" and "blocking" around the feminized migrant figure animates an expansive moralizing apparatus of virtuousness as innocence and deservedness. By foregrounding the point of view of Sayra and Sara, the feminized migrant figures of *Sin Nombre* and *La Jaula*, we come to understand how migrancy figures into more extensive social

140. For example, in *The Moral and Political Philosophy of Immigration,* José Mendoza argues that political issues over immigration, including those circulated in public debate, can be traced back to competing moral and philosophical principles undergirding liberal thought on liberty, security, and equality. In *Social Death*, Lisa Cacho argues that the "moral grammar" that determines the worthiness and deservedness of personhood emerges out of capitalist and heteropatriarchal measures of worth that normalize the family-oriented, patriotic, productive, and law-abiding subject to devalue criminalized populations of color. For a more legal and historical rendition of this argument, tracing the "legal regime of restriction" in US immigration policy, see Mae Ngai's *Impossible Subjects*.

histories of neoliberalism through a shared yet comparative inheritance of differentiation; an inheritance we see reflected on the level of storyline, language, aesthetics, and, above all, the visuality of embodiment. Like how migrants historically figure in the US through the in/capacity to house ideas of moral goodness, the migrant *figures* into these narratives through the in/capacity to inhabit notions of virtuousness.

"Sticky Herstories" conceptualizes the feminized migrant figure as a site and sight of virtue by foregrounding a principal sticky object of the film (apart from tattoos): a digital video camera. Through the affective history of binding and blocking around this object, this chapter argues that femininity figures into *Sin Nombre* as a past-oriented and future-oriented ontology. As a utopic yet vanishing essence, femininity leaves a ghostly void in the film as a subject-turned-object already marked with the potentiality of precarity and sexualized violence. I argue that the film's "end-narration" solidifies a politics of exceptionality mobilized along the sexualized lines of "virtuous" femininity.[141] "Migrant exceptionality" names the moralizing economy of sexual innocence that surrounds the contrived yet ambivalent figuration of Sayra as she is the only migrant character of *Sin Nombre* to step foot inside the US. Sayra's exceptionality runs errant as she becomes one other of *Sin Nombre's* vanishing subjects. With the

141. I utilize the term "end-narration" to refer to the narration of a migrant's arrival in the US, which also operates as the film's ending. We can recognize this way of ending a film as part of the filmic structure of Central American migration films and the migration genre in general. I also use "end-narration" to evoke Sara Ahmed's idea of "end-orientated time." Ahmed refers to 'end-orientated time' as the instrumentality and intentionality behind the narrative and social movement toward "happy objects" and, likewise, the aversion to "unhappy objects." I draw upon this affective paradigm to consider how the endings of these Central American migratory narratives epitomize the migrant's desire to reach the idealized 'happy place' of the US, an ideal that also operates as a social promise of happiness. Both endings both evoke yet do away with the optimistic social promise of migration.

introduction of *La Jaula* in the second section, "Migrant Friendships" expands the reading of (potentially utopic) migrant friendships as seen in *Sin Nombre*'s relationship between Willy and Sayra and *La Jaula*'s friendship between Sara and Chauk. Migrant friendships offer affective openings and different forms of beingness and affiliation. They point to asexualized and alternative models of association premised on innocence, care, and a future-oriented egalitarian politics. At the same time, the migrant friendships of both films point to a politics of differentiation, singularity, and exceptionalism. *Sin Nombre* and *La Jaula* gesture to the potentiality of alternate models of relationality in overcoming the lived limitations of gendered, racial, and sexual differentiations and the physical limitations of migrancy. This section foregrounds how the utopic and egalitarian potentiality of migrant friendships falls apart in both films' endings.

The following section, "Lines of Virtuousness," moves to consider the politics behind Sara's vanishment in *La Jaula* and the subordination of Sara's symbolic role in past readings of the film. *La Jaula*'s director, Quemada-Díez, and past scholarly readings have revisited the film, in large part, through Juan and Chauk's antithetical friendship and Juan's characterization as a hero.[142] In foregrounding the story of Juan as a transformed hero, past renditions of the film relegate the narrative significance of the figures of Sara and Chauk to underscore Juan's "heroic" exceptionality as the only

142. In the UK cinema release, Quemada-Díez speaks about the significance of these counterparts through Juan's character growth and transformation. He states, "At one point it occurred to me to create a counterpoint for Juan, this character who dreams with getting to America no matter the consequences, someone who still believes in the American dream, that wishes to succeed in a materialistic society, with Chauk, who thinks in a totally different way, in more of a community mind-set, more conscious of his connection to the land, to the value of goodness" (Peccadillo Pictures 6-7); also see Richard Curry.

migrant figure to arrive in the US safely. Whereas past readings have depoliticized the heroization of Juan by labeling Juan's character a "focus" of the narrative and his lone arrival in the US as a "consequence" of the director's desire to reflect the brutal reality of migration, this section politicizes the narration of a migrant's exceptionality (that is, arrival into the US) by returning to the politics of virtuousness. Like the way we arrive at the figuration of Juan as the heroic migrant *out of* the subordination of Sara and Chauk's "less innocent" embodied subjectivities, we arrive at the figuration of *Sin Nombre*'s Sayra as the exceptional migrant *out of* the subordination of "less pure" subjectivities including that of Willy and Martha's. The notion of "migrant virtuousness" draws light on the hidden politics of virtuousness that undergird both migration films. Even though heroization operates in the language of the singular and the exceptional, heroization emerges *out of* the comparative figuration of gender, race, and sexuality. I trace the figuration of Sayra as a failed heroine and Juan as a failed hero back to the social "virtue" of gendered difference. This section argues that the gendered embodiment of virtue animates a meritocratic and moralizing affective economy. In both films, the subordination and disavowal of one historically differentiated body for the savior of another less differentiated body drives the characterizations, affective politics, and end-narration of the two films. We can understand the failed migrant hero/ine as a moral byproduct of neoliberalizations. At the center of this ideological and material phenomenon, the feminized body binds and undoes the morality of migrancy.

I. Sticky Herstories

In this section, I return to the character of Sayra from *Sin Nombre*. Born in Honduras and raised by her grandmother, Sayra enters the narrative through the notion of womanhood.[143] As we understand Sayra's "lucky" exceptionality as the only young woman among her friend group in Honduras with the option to migrate north alongside her father and uncle, we see the prospects of Sayra's migrant journey overshadowed by her social positionality as an undesirable outsider. The first shot of Sayra situates her amongst a sea of impoverished houses in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. As Sayra overlooks this precarious landscape, we soon learn that she contemplates leaving Honduras and migrating to the US. Here, by way of Sayra's dialogue with her uncle Orlando the narrative clues us into Sayra's "luck" in reuniting with her recently deported father, Horacio, which presents her with the opportunity to migrate north alongside family members and an experienced migrant.[144] In another scene, Sayra's friends comment on Sayra's "lucky" opportunity to make the journey with her father "instead of paying a pervy *pollero"* (Fukunaga 4).[145] Yet, we see Sayra's happy prospects for migrating north undercut by Sayra's feelings of ambivalence, undesirability, and uncertainty that

143. Horacio's declaration upon reuniting with Sayra, "You're all…. like a real woman," reaffirms the idea that Sayra's migration to the US that follows this reunion symbolizes Sayra's arrival into womanhood, even as Sayra arrives into her sense of self from a place of burden and not-belonging (Fukunaga 6).

144. As Sayra sits on the roof, contemplating the decision to leave or not leave Honduras, her uncle Orlando approaches her. Orlando states, "You're fifteen Sayra, you really think you could do this on you own? It's dangerous, you've heard the stories. You need a coyote; you know how much that costs?" (Fukunaga 10)

145. Even though this scene did not transfer to the film's final version, the dynamics of this friendship are telling. Clarissa and Yamila criticize Sayra for not being happy about the prospect of migrating north, calling her a "pendeja" (Fukunaga 4). Sayra reminds her friends that her father did not return for her but was, in fact, "deported" (Fukunaga 4). As Sayra and Clarrisa walk away, the script presents a sad and retreating view of Yamila, "who sadly watches them walk away" (Fukunaja 5). With no prospects for migrating, Yamila retreats into the background of Honduras.

come along with her reunion with Horacio and precarious position in Honduras. [146]Apart from feeling like an outsider to Horacio's US-based nuclear family, Sayra struggles with questions of autonomy, agency, and her sense of belonging.[147] Sayra says to her uncle Orlando, "I understand why you'd want to do this trip. I'm not sure yet if I understand why I should. I've just gone along, bad shit happens and I just go along with it…If I went, it wouldn't be for him and it wouldn't be for you neither. It would be for me. I'd make my own decisions" (Fukunaga 10-11). As opposed to just following the "bad shit," Sayra expresses a need for self-determination. Despite the reminder that Sayra's livelihood and success on the migrant trail depend on the social resources available, Sayra migrates from a desire to build a life based on agency, even as she sees herself as a burden.

Through Sayra, Horacio, and Orlando's points of view, we understand the risks and challenges of traversing the migrant trail from Honduras to the US. These migrants experience the stop and search once by immigration enforcement officials upon their entrance into Mexico and once again aboard *La Bestia*. For many reasons, this train

146. Orlando emphasizes how in Honduras, Sayra is alone: "Come with us. I know it won't be easy there either, but at least you'll have us. There's nothing for you here nothing" (Fukunaga 11). The film script signals how Sayra's grandmother does not want to take care of Sayra anymore. This fact becomes evident when Sayra's friend tells her: "Look, I don't why you're wetting your pants over this, it's not like your Grandma wants to take care of your ass anymore. And if Orlando goes? You should get the hell out of here while you can" (Fukunaga 4).

147. We get a sense of Sayra's indifference towards Horacio and his family living in the US when Sayra stares at a photo of Horacio's family with a sense of jealousy. Upon reuniting with Sayra, Horacio picks up on this sensation and tucks away a picture of his wife, Yessenia, and their children. Then, Sayra's grandmother rejoices in their reunion, stating, "You'll have lots of time together, now" (Fukunaga 6). Horacio responds, "I wish Mami, but with Yessenia alone with the kids…we'll leave tomorrow on the *congolón*" (Fukunaga 6). The visual gestures and the script's language emphasize Horacio's urgent desire to reunite with his family in the US. This desire undercuts his "happy" reunion with his estranged daughter.

sequence where El Casper, El Lil' Mago, and Smiley rob migrants on top of the train is central to the narration. First, under this heightened context of migrant vulnerability (as migrants hide under plastic bags to shield themselves from the rain, ignorant of the danger that lingers), we understand Sayra's extreme vulnerability as a sexualized body on the train. Even *with* her father and uncle at her side, Sayra must succumb to the armed *mareros.* Second, this scene shows us how we arrive at Sayra's sexualization through her feminized exceptionality; she is singled out by El Lil' Mago for her "Salma Hayek-like" looks. Third, as El Lil' Mago's second attempted rape of a woman shores up memories of Martha's attempted rape and ensuing death, this scene serves as a critical narrative conversion point, where, in effect, El Casper converts into the civilian Willy. It is not simply that the vulnerability of the feminized body and the affective value attached to that vulnerability serves as a point of conversion in the film: the centrality of attempted rape and the contrasting scenes between Martha and Sayra bring to figure Sayra's exceptionality as the "untouched" feminized subject. Not only does the vulnerable feminized body serve as the affective vehicle for El Casper's ethical and affective reorientation, but the ensuing friendship between Willy and Sayra also brings into play the characterization of Willy as a "heroic" savior and protector of the feminized migrant body. Even as Sayra finds a sense of self-determination in her decision to befriend Willy and accompany Willy (instead of her uncle and father) along the migrant trail, we see the intimacy of this newfound friendship overshadowed by the ghostly presence of Martha Marlene.

To understand how Sayra comes to figure into the narrative as a feminized

migrant body, we need first to recognize how the character of Martha Marlene, a local girl socially positioned outside the world of *la mara* and outside the world of migrancy, figures into this story as well. The appearance of Willy's stolen video camera in the scene "Contigo" clarifies the comparative feminizations that surround the figures of Sayra and Martha. "Contigo" marks Willy and Sayra's newfound friendship on the level of plot, as well as these displaced migrant subjects' shared inheritance of precarity and loss as traveling companions. As these two characters find solace in the intimacy of their new bond, the ghostly memories of Martha Marlene shore up by way of Willy's stolen digital video camera. Making an appearance nine times throughout the narrative, we can think of Willy's video camera as a principal sticky object of the film and an affective site of personal and social tension for Willy, Sayra, and Martha. From the viewpoint of Willy, the camera (stolen from *la mara*'s local allowances) sustains Willy's deviation from *la mara* as it also preserves his love for Martha. Saturated with romantic nostalgia, not only does the digital playback transport Willy back to the precious moments he shared with Martha, but the temporary playback also brings to figure Martha Marlene as the narrative's vanishing feminized subject. By examining the video camera's pervasive stickiness, we understand how Martha's feminization occurs through her vanishment and how the digital video camera (as a "meta" filmic device) coheres to a male gaze and the self-reflexive gaze of Sayra. Scenes of Martha's sexualization heighten in the narrative to the point that she becomes an object of attempted rape, as we already know, a physical violation that leads to her death. We witness the sexualization of Martha through Smiley's point of view. In an early scene

of Martha and Willy, an interior bedroom shot depicts Martha's naked body as she mounts Willy. Enticed by their moaning, Smiley tries to get a glimpse of the couple, only to fall as he reaches the top story. Later, we see Smiley looking through the content of Willy's video camera. As the script reads, "He is visibly intrigued by the pseudo-naked pictures of Martha Marlene" (Fukunaga 34). As much as the video camera preserves the nostalgic and romantic relationality between Willy and Martha, the camera also maintains the male gaze that sexualizes Martha's body.

As the film's vanishing feminized subject, Martha Marlene's retreat into the background brings into the foreground the "purity" of Sayra's feminized body. For our female protagonist Sayra, the video camera animates a different yet related affective effect. We come to understand the centrality of the scene 'Contigo' in how the digital playback of Martha brings about not only Willy's self-reflexive gaze (if we recall, right after watching the playback, he scratches off her teardrop tattoo) but also Sayra's self-reflexive gaze as a juxtaposing camera shot shows Sayra watching Willy as Willy watches the digital contents. Not only does Sayra begin to understand her de-sexualized feminized position by gazing at the camera, but Sayra also reads the camera as a potential site of intimacy and estrangement between her and Willy.[148] By foregrounding

148. Aside from the scene "Contigo," throughout the film, we catch glimpses of Sayra staring at the contents of the video camera more than once. Later, inside an abandoned theater, Willy plays back the contents of the video camera. As Martha Marlene "giggles" in the digital playback, the script reads, "We see Sayra staring at the video. It's the last night Martha Marlen and Willy were together" (Fukunaga 92). Once alone, Sayra takes the video camera out of Willy's backpack and steals it. Before attempting to cross over outside of the *Rio Bravo*, Sayra "shyly hands him the camera. He's surprised. He looks at her, only slightly angered, but more happy to have the camera back" (Fukunaga 99). The video camera makes a final appearance and disappearance when Willy uses the camera as currency to pay for Sayra's river crossing. The script states that Willy "reaches into his pocket and gives Leche the camera. Leche inspects it. Accepts. Sayra is bitter-sweetly amazed" (Fukunaga 100).

the stickiness of the video camera, we come to understand how the gaze that sexualizes (and, at times, fetishizes) Martha brings into perspective Sayra's desexualization; through the sexualization of Martha's feminized body, we arrive at the "virgining" of Sayra's feminized body. We witness the narrative resistance to Sayra's sexualization not only through the platonic friendship between Willy and Sayra but also in Orlando and Horacio's protective treatment of Sayra, Tía Toña's protective treatment of Sayra (as she directs Sayra to change clothes away from the window), and in the final sequence of the film when Willy asks El Balsero to turn away from Sayra's half-naked body. The social history of contact between Willy and Sayra is very different from Willy and Martha's social history of contact. Like the more significant politics of the film, Willy resists the sexualization of Sayra's body even in light of El Lil' Mago's attempted rape of "mini Salmita" (Fukunaga 48). With these insights in mind, we can revisit an iconic film shot that features Sayra and Willy sitting inside a church. As both characters silently face the front church altar, Sayra rests her head on Willy's shoulder. As Willy directs his attention to feelings of guilt and loss and thoughts of possible redemption, Sayra directs her attention and desires toward Willy.

Beyond the coherence of a male gaze, we can locate the significance of the digital video camera in *how* this object figures Martha's vanishment into the narrative through intangible and transitory aesthetics. The previous chapter offers a "queer" reading of Martha's vanishment. From the point of view of a *marero* subject, I argue that "even though Willy's desire for Martha might not be queer (in the sexual sense of the word), the *marero*'s affinity is a queer one in that Martha—a local Mexican girl

socially positioned outside of the world of *la mara*—sets into motion a different set of lines of connection, association, and exchange within the narrative world of the film." Understood in this way, we turn to consider how the *queering* of Martha as a "retreating object, threatening to become out of reach" occurs through the *retreating* audiovisual projection of the video camera. This "queer-like" modality *extends out* to other spatialities of the film including that of a dilapidated, abandoned movie theater where Willy and Sayra take momentary refuge. One scene depicts Willy replaying the camera's contents, the night Martha and Willy shared before Martha's murder. As the script reads, "We hear the digitally recorded sound of Martha Marlene and Willy echoing over the expanse of the theater. As we hear the conversation, we see more details of the decaying space, and evidence of the past immigrants who have gone through it" (Fukunaga 92). As the digital camera playbacks, a record of Willy's *queer* history of contact with Martha, another form and history of contact unfolds—a history of migrants who have met the crumbling, abandoned, yet precious space of migrant refuge. Perhaps what is queer about these juxtaposing realities is how we encounter this past and passing moments of deep intimacy and safety within the brutal reality of an ever-threatening present.

These queer intimacies and vanishing aesthetics of *Sin Nombre* come to extend out to the figuration of Sayra as well. Within the script's language, we find small details around Sayra's wanderings in the same dilapidated theater that point to larger comparative figurations. From Sayra's point of view, the theater is "like something out of the apocalypse. Blown out windows, crumbling floors, and ceilings, grandiose

stairways and terraces" (Fukunaga 89). As Sayra explores the theater inside, she encounters written traces of passing migrants who sought refuge inside the cinema. As the script reads, Sayra sees, "Hundreds of names…scribbled around…One marking: **"Oriana Carbajal-Hernandez, septiembre 2001**"" (Fukunaga 89; emphasis text). With a piece of concrete, Sayra scribbles in her name, "**Sayra Miranda Guzman**," next to the others. (Fukunaga 89; emphasis text) Then, she "stares at her second to the last name, 'Miranda'" (Fukunaga 89). Already familiar with Sayra's history of estrangement with her father and his family, we can assume that Sayra's stare has to do with feelings of outsiderness and ambivalence over the decision to migrate prevalent at the onset of the narrative. Sayra's recorded name and, in turn, her social identity seems to belong and not belong to this record of passing migrants. Right after, Sayra sits down on a theater bench and pulls out Willy's camera. The script notes, "She turns it on and flips through the pictures, the sound of Martha Marlene's voice fills her with a rising sense of jealousy" (Fukunaga 89). For Sayra, this object provokes unhappiness; it reminds Sayra how Willy feels differently towards her. In effect, Sayra remains an outsider to this not-so-distant romantic past. These feelings of not belonging cohere around the digital record of Martha as much as they coalesce around the written record of migrants on the theater wall. Through the projection of the contents of the digital camera onto this transitory space and Sayra's encounter with this etched migrant archive, the narration constitutes Sayra's figuration as a feminized migrant subject through the impressions left by bodies that have already passed; that is, those bodies that have already vanished including that of Martha Marlene and past migrants.

Similar to the way the internal frame of the digital video camera sustains an intangible and impermanent world of pleasure and desire that fades out of sight, this reading suggests that we understand the feminized body as another sticky object that sustains retreating realities.[149] Much like the video camera binds and blocks histories of contact (between Willy, Martha, Sayra, and a more extensive history of migrant contact), the feminized body binds and blocks social histories of contact between migrants, *mareros*, and non-migrants. As feminized subjects, both Martha and Sayra present Willy with precarious and impossible relationalities. Femininity becomes the grounds on which El Casper arrives at his humanness, as in that human potential for alternate forms of affective and collective affiliations, and inevitably loses it. The comparative figurations of Sayra, Martha, and Willy lead us to an understanding of femininity as a site of relational and affective potentiality, for it is through Willy's relationality with feminized subjects that we arrive at El Casper's "human side." We also understand femininity as a retreating site and sight of vanishment, for, in the end, both Sayra and Martha present Willy with impossible relationalities. The impressions of voids in the narrative that come to figure through the death of Martha, Horacio, and Willy, along with the foregrounding of a "passing migrant's archive," all point to the historical intimacy of the feminized migrant body with affective economies of desire and loss—economies that come to figure through moralizing lines of sexuality.

The film's primary sticky object, Willy's stolen video camera, plays a vital role

149. Not only does the video camera sustain a reality that fades out of sight, but the actual video camera also fades out of the story's sight, including when (1) the actual playback ends, (2) Sayra takes the video camera from Willy, and (3) Willy gives away the camera to El Balsero as payment for Sayra's inner-tube crossing. We can think of the camera itself as a retreating object.

in animating these gendered and sexualized relations. The digital video camera becomes sticky through layered histories of contact between Willy, Martha, and Saya. Understood as a site of personal and social tension, the video camera coalesces a male gaze that sexualizes and nostalgically romanticizes as it also shores up feelings of undesirability and outsiderness from the point of view of Sayra. The camera's visual and affective economy, as much as the narrative structuring around the attempted rapes of Martha and Sayra, shape Sayra's figuration as a "virgin-like" and "untouched" feminized body, Willy's figuration as a "heroic" male protector, and Martha's figuration as a sexualized body. Returning to Ahmed's formulation of "stickiness," the contingency of affect entails understanding how some "forms of stickiness are about holding things together and "[s]ome are about blockages or stopping things from moving (*Cultural Politics* 91). In the case of the video camera, the affect of desire and love binds Willy and Martha as the affect of caring for feminized bodies binds Willy and Sayra. On the flip side, the affectations of grief, guilt, and loss block Willy and Martha, as jealousy and outsiderness block Willy and Sayra. The video camera animates the "virgining" of Sayra's body via Martha's sexualization and encapsulates a friendship of "innocence" between Willy and Sayra. The messiness of this sticky object elucidates the contingency of affect. Forms of relationality are *not free* but contingent on a prearranged social structure based on more extensive histories of differentiation, including sexualization.

Moreover, in the case of *Sin Nombre*, the affective and spatial messiness of the video camera points to the palimpsest *and* tangible yet intangible nature of stickiness.

The video camera mobilizes the "sticky herstories" of Martha and Sayra through a digital record as it also shores up liminal and transitory spaces of vanished subjectivities, including past and passing migrants as seen in Sayra's encounter with a written record of migrants in the dilapidated theater. My point here is that the stickiness of "herstories" is as much about the palimpsest and in/tangible as it is about the mobilization of affect along the visual and material embodiment of comparative feminizations. Through *Sin Nombre's* figuration of Sayra, we understand the intimacy between feminized migrant subjects with more extensive social histories of racialization and sexualization and affective economies of innocence, desire, violence, and loss. Sayra's arrival in the US shores up these histories. As the only migrant character to survive the northward trail and border crossing, the narrative foregrounds Sayra as the exceptional migrant subject. Through the deportation and death of the other migrants in the film, we read Sayra as the exceptional, necessarily feminized migrant subject. Sayra's inheritance of an "innocent" feminine vulnerability and untouched body results converts into exceptionality as she becomes the only migrant subject the narration delivers to the US.

Yet as the visual details from the ending show us, in the end, Sayra is exceptional but also not. The last sequence's visual and scripted language depicts our exceptional migrant fade into the background. Sayra enters the undocumented social scene as the camera eye loses her in a capitalist sea of American objects and bodies.[150]

150. The script describes how, on the bank of the Rio Grande River how Sayra dresses and "then disappears into the shrubs towards the U.S." (Fukunaga 105). At the commencement of the chapter, I describe Sayra's arrival in Texas: "She wanders into the suburban landscape of this US border town. She ducks from the police as she walks along the street. A wide high-angle shot shows Sayra walking into

Sayra recedes into the background. Sayra's desire for another form of belonging that transcends the conventional line of familial obligations dies away with her arrival in the US: the moment she picks up the phone and dials "9-0-8-555-0-1-8-7."[151] Beyond the aestheticization of the feminized body as a retreating object, we arrive at the figure of Sayra as a feminized migrant subject through her encounters with spatialities, modalities, and subjectivities that have retreated or already passed. This history of loss shores up when Sayra reaches the river's US side. Sayra's "labored breathing" from the crossing turns into a "heavy, moaning cry" as the script emphasizes that Sayra "has lost everyone" (Fukunaga 104). The shot of Sayra "fades out" as a montage sequence of all those left behind in Mexico fades in and out, including an image of "Willy's lifeless face peeks from a closing PINE BOX COFFIN. A WORKER staple guns the lid shut" (Fukunaga 104). Like the way the script describes the fading in and out of visual shots and music that "ties one character to the next,'' Sayra ties one "history of vanishment" to the next (Fukunaga 104).[152] Sayra's recession into the background

---

the large parking lot of a Sam's Club. As viewers, we can deduce that Sayra's future appears grim. Perhaps, heading Willy's earlier advice to support her dead father's family, Sayra picks up a public phone. She whispers the number she was forced to memorize, her final lifeline: "9-0-8-555-0-1-8-7" (Fukunaga 105). As the camera pulls high and away, "we lose her in the colorful mosaic of hundreds of cars" (Fukunaga 105).

151. Before the actual crossing, Willy and Sayra sit on the edge of the river to contemplate an imagined life in the US. Here Willy makes Sayra promise that no matter the outcome of their attempted crossing, Sayra will try to find her family. Sayra resists Willy's wish by reaffirming, "They're not my family" and "I'd just be a burden like I am to everyone else" (Fukunaga 99). Willy rejects Sayra's insistence on her undesirability and non-belonging by saying, "To me no…And you could help them. You could work or something" (Fukunaga 99). For Sayra, the idea of being part of a family and working for that family is not enough; she asks Willy, "You'd be with me?" (Fukunaga 99) Willy responds, "Of course" (Fukunaga 99). In this scene, we see Sayra's imagined life in the US already constrained to "social ties" outside of Sayra's desire and sense of freedom. We also see Sayra's insistence on making her traveling companion Willy part of her future.

152. The montage sequence includes a visual of Smiley sitting in El Lil' Mago's house as "[o]ther Maras mingle around him, but he doesn't look at them. He stares past us absently, as if he were looking at something 1000 yards away;" a visual of Orlando on the bank of Rio Suchiate in Guatemala as "[h]is

leaves us with an ambivalent and diminished future of undocumented living.

Ultimately, the film does away with Sayra's desired imagined life in the US next to Willy. Yet, even before the ending, the narrative hints at Sayra's inheritance of loss. Responding to Willy's uncertain outlook on her chances of arriving safely in the US, Sayra declares: "I will. I know I will. Back home, my friend Clarissa made me see this crazy neighbor, Doña Eleanor, you know, like witchcraft? She smoked this puro, then told me with her freaky voice that I'd make it to the US but not in God's hands, perhaps in the Devils" (Fukunaga 64). If we take this statement as an analogy for Sayra's story of arrival, we see how Sayra's safe arrival becomes truncated over time. What begins as an affirmative declaration about the future ("I will) turns into a future predicated on the knowledge of the present ("I know I will") and, finally, truncates into an outcome conditioned on the outside knowledge of Doña Eleanor and outside help of "the Devil's hand." These rhetorical gestures, or sliding of the tense, promise us and (inevitably) deliver a diminished vision of Sayra's imagined life in the US.

We can understand femininity as an intangible and sticky essence that victimizes and provokes, extends out through the promise of friendship or love, and diminishes in moments of violence, sorrow, and loss. These sticky herstories stick and vanish along historical lines of virtuousness and deservedness. When something vanishes, not only does it "die away" and "fade out of sight" ("Vanish, v"). As the Latin origin of the word "evanescere" reminds us, "to vanish" also means to derive "out of

face shows the fatigue from the journey, but there is nothing in his face that shows he's going to give up. Around him, other immigrants, individuals, and families make their first steps on a journey he knows all too well;" a visual of Sayra on the bank of the Rio Grande; and a visual of Willy in the interior of a morgue (Fukunaga 104).

empty" or "out of the insubstantial" ("Evanesce, v"). The idea of *migrant exceptionality* makes sense of the film's figuration of Sayra as the exceptional migrant subject. Migrant exceptionality names the film's acts of spatial and audiovisual relegation and more significant politics of vanishment of "less pure" subjects (including that of El Casper's racialized subjectivity and Martha Marlene's sexualized subjectivity) that deliver the narrative's exceptional migrant subject as an "untouched" feminized subject. We can also understand "*migrant* exceptionality" as to how exceptionality—as a social ideal and promise narrativized through the migrant's arrival—shifts, vanishes, or runs errant depending on textual forms of embodied orientation. As *Sin Nombre's* end-narration and final montage sequence show us, the exceptional arrival of migrant subjects runs errant depending on the sexual, gendered, and racial orientation of displaced subjectivities. Migrant exceptionality names the inherent ideological weight of the end-narration of Central American migrant narratives.

III. Migrant Friendships

In 2014, Spanish Mexican director Diego Quemada-Díez released his first feature film *La Jaula de Oro* ("The Golden Dream"). Drawing inspiration from the 1983 *corrido* "La jaula de oro" by the *norteño* group Los Tigres del Norte, the film chronicles the migrant journey through Mexico from the viewpoint of four Guatemalan youths. Through this creative vision of *human* cinema, *La Jaula* presents us with a migrant story from another angle. *La Jaula de Oro* garnered acclaim for "Best Cast Ensemble" and "Le Prix un Certain Regard" at the Cannes film festival for its unusual style and non-traditional storytelling techniques, including the casting of non-

professional actors.[153] Characterized by the director as "true realism" and a "fiction based on reality," the film approximates documentary narrative and aesthetics through such techniques as filming in continuity, utilizing "indirect direction," including more than 600 actual migrants, and filming in locations where migrants daily make their journey northward including on *La Bestia*.[154] Taking as inspiration the working-class conscious-oriented techniques and modalities of Italian neorealism, Quemada-Díez attempts to "co-create" a human cinema that "produce[s] the illusion that the viewer is there, watching something real, inside the flesh of the hero in the story" (Peccadillo Pictures 5).[155] Auditioning youth throughout the poorest regions of Guatemala and the rural villages of Chiapas, the director shapes the storyline around the characters of Juan, Chauk, and Sara. The film carves out each character from hundreds of migrant testimonies from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador and the experience of the actors, filmmakers, and collaborators.[156]

In contrast to *Sin Nombre's* focus on *mareros* and Honduran migrants, Diego Quemada-Díez imagines the world of *La Jaula* through the experience of four Guatemalan migrant youth: Juan, Samuel, Sara (who passes as a male migrant named Osvaldo) and Chauk (a non-Spanish speaking Tzotzil Maya character). Through a

153. Other non-conventional film techniques that the director relied upon include dependence on natural light and refraining from using dollies, zooms, or cranes (See "The Golden Dream: UK Cinema Release" for more).

154. Indirect direction entails that the actors improvise the script without reading it. Quemada-Díez would explain the scene to actors before shooting (See "The Golden Dream"). As the film states at the end, migrants participated in the making of the movie during their actual journey to the US.

155. He states, "Fues gracias a él, al neorealismo italiano y a otros cineastas, que mi vino la idea de buscar a los actores en las comunidades, de escribir a partir de eschuchar: el cine como un espejo donde observarnos y reflexionar sobre la realidad co-creada" (Quemada-Díez vi).

156. Quemada-Díez explains in the screenplay that research for the film took place in the US, Mexico, and Central America.

language of voids, the film aestheticizes the migration journey as a form of silent initiation for its young migrants. The beginning sequences of the film and the larger narrative operate through aesthetics of *lack*.[157] As opposed to introducing the migrant characters through dialogue, the film focuses on the inaudible gestures of the characters and a "mise-en-scéne of poverty" (Rosa 13). Early on, the narrative renders Juan as a protagonist, as the film's first shot shows Juan walking through narrow alleys of metal sheet and cardboard houses. The character's countenance shows a sense of urgency and determination. Inside a small bedroom, Juan sews money into his jean pant pocket. The camera follows Juan as he treks through the city, lingering on a poster of missing Guatemalans. Juan encounters his friend Samuel in a trash dump, exchanging no words; Samuel gives Juan a knowing look as he drops his task and follows Juan. The two youths commence their journey. Soon Sara, dressed in men's clothing, joins the two youths. This early sequence contrasts the silent trek of these youths in backpacks with the background noise and visual landscape of buses, wooden bridges, rivers, and a metal sign indicating the territorial limits of Mexico. As the youth traverse through these distinct landscapes, the order of their walking depicts Juan first in line, Sara second in line, and Samuel third. The many forms of silence that pervade the beginning of this film (including the lack of dialogue, a city shot of a poster of missing Guatemalans, and the lack of explanation for the youth's departure as well as their desired destination) all lend to the filmmaker's vision of migrancy as an "invisible

157. For a discussion of the film's "voids," see Richard Curry's "The Migration Genre in *La Jaula de Oro*: Voids and Virtues."

current" engulfing these youth.[158]

From the character Sara's point of view, we come to recognize the gendered undercurrents of these "migratory initiations" as they play out on the level of the camera gaze and the body. During the opening sequence, the camera directs us to a shot of a young girl walking through wooden doors spray-painted with the word "dama." A tight interior shot shows Sara, in a teal tank top and revealing pink bra straps, staring at her reflection with a glazed look. As the script reads, "Se mira el espejo, triste" (Quemada-Díez 6). Sara feels this loss. The camera lingers on Sara as she slowly and almost ritualistically takes the necessary steps to pass as a male. Sara cuts her hair to boy-length and stares silently into the ground as she undresses. We see Sara's exposed breast. The camera eye lingers on Sara's binding of her breast with a bandage. She puts on an oversized gray t-shirt and dark gray baseball, the "male" outfit we come to recognize Sara for Osvaldo during the remainder of the film. Sara opens a carton of contraceptives, swallowing the first tablet. Sara, as Osvaldo, is ready for the journey. In this early sequence, this gaze that coheres around Sara foreshadows Sara's heightened precarity as a female migrant. As Alessandro Rocco notes, "[l]a cercanía y la intimidad de la mirada fílmica son inseperables de la violencia potencial que se evoca: la necesidad de la joven de negar su identidad feminina y de tomar precauciones ante el riesgo concreto de ser violada" (133). Visually, we understand these feelings of

158. In a director's statement, Quemada-Díez describes the migrant journey for Central American youth as a form of "initiation." He says, "In many poor villages in Central America and in Mexico it seems that to embark on the adventure of risking your life going to the United States is like an initiation. For a lot of kids it's like being pulled out with the tide, like a current drags you northward. They simply imitate what they have seen with their parents and relatives" (Peccadillo Pictures 6).

loss, as Sara silently stares into the ground (averting the camera's gaze) as she binds her breast.[159] Through this "close" filmic gaze that centers Sara's masculinized, yet always feminized, body the potential for violence surrounding the feminized figure of Sara shores up at multiple points in the film.[160]

As viewers, we understand the "masculine vigor" necessitated by the migrant journey through Sara's gender reorientation and the narrative's visual, audio, and aesthetic foregrounding of Juan's character and point of view. The film's showcasing of this masculine necessity aligns with the narrative's repeated focus on Juan's point of view.[161] We see this centering in the film's opening sequence, the spatial depiction of Juan as the group's leader (as Sara and Samuel always follow behind him), and when Juan (as the first character to speak in the film) tells their boat escort their site of destination of "El Norte."[162] Juan comes to embody a masculine vigor through the film's foregrounding of a "cowboy aesthetic" cohering around the figure of Juan. Through the depiction of Juan in cowboy boots (a visual trademark of the character), we begin to recognize not only the character's personification of a stoic-like masculinity like that of a cowboy but also Juan's idealization of North American culture, including that of

159. The language of the script also emphasizes Sara's loss. The script reads, "Se ve distinta, ha perdido su feminidad" (Quemada-Díez 7).

160. The film foreshadows Sara's gendered vulnerability when, after the entire group is deported from Mexico to Guatemala, the character Samuel cautions Sara to stay back in Guatemala with him.

161. When Sara displays herself to Juan and Samuel as Osvaldo, we see her momentarily embody the vigorous quality associated with the character of Juan. Sara "[l]lega hasta ellos que la miran boquiabiertos, sin darle importancia, les hace una seña de que avancen, los chicos la siguen aún en shock" (Quemada-Díez 7). No longer lamenting her loss, Sara as Osvaldo forges ahead towards the migrant trail.

162. We also see the film set Juan apart in a short sequence when the group attempts to board *La Bestia*. Here, Juan tells Sara and Samuel, "Right now, just do whatever I do," and, later, disappointed by Sara and Samuel's earlier failure to board the fast train, he shouts, "Run! Now with balls!" (*La Jaula*)

Westerns.[163] After Mexican officials confiscate his cowboy boots, Juan steals a new pair from a storefront, flaunting his new pair of boots to Sara and the newcomer Chauk. At the same time, Chauk remains barefooted from their deportation experience. Not only does a Western cowboy aesthetic cohere around the figure of Juan, but we also begin to understand how Juan's reverence of North American culture aligns with the character's materialistic and individualistic worldview that, in turn, propels his desire to migrate.

Through the portrayal of "close encounters" between Sara and Juan, we recognize the figure Sara as Juan's love interest. Not only do we see the pair's growing intimacy through visual shots of the pair sleeping close to one another, but we also understand their attachment through a visual and affective economy of desire that coheres around Sara. At the Providencia Tonalá River, the director's script describes Sara as "se quita sus vendas" and undresses to her "ropa interior y camiseta," submerging into the water (Quemada-Díez 7). As Sara approximates Juan in the water, Juan responds anxiously to Sara's almost bare body.[164] The script underscores the exposure of Sara's breasts and her self-awareness as she attempts to cover them.[165]

163. The opening scene of the script not only foregrounds the character of Juan, but the script also opens with an outdoor sequence in the city where Juan watches the Western film *Shane* in an outdoor, makeshift theater: "La carátula de una película en la que vemos a 'Shane', vaquero rubio de mediana edad con aura heroica, unas manos la sostienen" (Quemada-Díez 2). We see the majestic "aura" that surrounds the filmic depiction of Shame (as the script details "música clásica de orquesta, emotiva," "un bello paisaje," and the cowboy figure of "'Shane', vaquero a caballo, desciende hacia un valle..sin rastro de seres humanos") translate into Juan's romanticization and "dreaming" of American cowboy culture. As two friends approach Juan, one says, "¿Qué tal vaquero, otra vez soñando?" (Quemado-Díez 2)

164. The script reads, "Juan se sorprende, apenas le sonríe. Sara salpica algo de agua. Juan se lo devuelve sin mucho enthusiasmo" (Quemada-Díez 7).

165. The script reads, "La camiseta mojada de Sara se pega a su cuerpo, evidenciando su senos de forma sugestiva. Ella se da cuenta y trata de separarla de su cuerpo" (Quemada-Díez 10).

Through attention to Sara's exposed breasts and Juan's gaze, this scene of "jugueteo" becomes saturated with erotic desire.[166] Even as Sara loses her feminine traces, the gazing of and performativity around Sara's concealed yet exposed breasts direct us to a visual and affective economy of desire cohering around the figure of Sara.[167] The filmic gaze that lingers on Sara's feminized body slides into a sexualizing and male-centered gaze, as experienced through Juan's point of view.

Through the "affective arrangement" of jealousy and desire accompanying Juan's gaze, Sara's sexualization slides into the racialization and outsiderness of the indigenous newcomer Chauk. From Chauk's moment of arrival, Juan resists the group befriending Chauk, often glaring at Chauk with traces of suspicion and jealousy. When Sara befriends Chauk, not only does she openly oppose Juan's growing aversion to and hostility towards Chauk, Sara, in effect, becomes the triangulating "feminine buffer" that binds yet blocks the friendship between Juan and Chauk.[168] The affective arrangement guiding these early encounters, where Juan reads Chauk's attention towards Sara as sexually malicious, becomes central to Chauk's characterization as racial *other*.[169] Preceding the entire group's deportation from Mexico back to

166. The script states, "Por el jugueteo sus rostros quedan muy cerca del otro, podrían besarse, pero Sara nerviosa un poco hacía atrás y esboza una sonrisa pícara…Juan, aún dentro del agua, la mira con deseo" (Quemada-Díez 10).

167. Even though the film excludes this scene from the final version, or perhaps never improvises it, the traces of this scene can be felt in other scenes that direct our attention to the concealment and exposure of Sara's breasts.

168. Teasing Juan, Samuel comments on Sara and Chauk's friendship: "Look, she's going with your friend. I think she likes him. He already stole her from you, bro" (*La Jaula*). Here, as Sara and Chauk interact through physical gestures and sparse verbal exchanges, Chauk points to Sara's chest, communicating "ta'iv" (*La Jaula*). Juan reads this attention to Sara's chest as a sexual gesture. He tells Samuel, "That son of a bitch wants to grab her tits, bro" (*La Jaula*). Samuel reassures Juan of Chauk's innocence and ignorance of Sara's true gender.

169. Spatially, we see Chauk's positionality as both outsider and stranger in Chauk's physical

Guatemala, Mexican officials ask the group if Chauk travels with them. Here, Juan attempts to distance the group from Chauk by foregrounding Chauk's Indian-ness and Guatemalan-ness, declaring to the officials, "That Indian is Guatemalan," as opposed to the trio who are from "Sueños De Oros" (*La Jaula*). After the unconvinced officials deport the entire group back to Guatemala and Samuel decides to stay behind, the narrative cements Sara's positionality as the feminine intermediary between Juan and Chauk. Here, she responds to Juan's physical attack on Chauk and his declaration," I no longer want to travel with that Indian, "declaring back, "Both with me or none at all" (*La Jaula*). In cementing Sara's (feminized positionality) as Juan and Chauk's intermediary, the film animates opposing attitudes and worldviews around the experience of migrancy. By siding with Chauk, Sara advocates for a migrant journey predicated on the collective opposing Juan's singular, material, and sexual interests.

Even as we see Sara advocate for group-centered interests, the triangulating relationship cohering around the figure of Sara animates a politics of comparative racializations that, in effect, brings the racial and racist rendering of Chauk to center stage. Before the migrant youth's deportation back to Guatemala, a short montage sequence, occurring in a plaza of a small Mexican town, brings into juxtaposition the "Guatemalan-ness" and aspiring "American-ness" of Juan, Sara, and Samuel with

---

distance from the other characters. Even after Chauk befriends the group, we see his character relegated to the background, always following the group from a distance, always apart. Chauk's outsiderness also manifests in the character's pervasive silence and the "knowledge gap" surrounding Chauk's Tzotzil Mayan dialect. The director's script and the film translate selected parts of Chauk's Tzotzil speech. We see Chauk's otherness reflected in the audio landscape of the movie in other moments, including when the film juxtaposes the character's Spanish with the "noise" of an indigenous speaker on the radio (*La Jaula*).

Chauk's "Indian-ness." The snapshots of a camera mobilize a voyeuristic tourist gaze that, in turn, aestheticizes these migrant figures' bodies as each character poses in front of a distinct background. Accentuating their "Guatemalan desires" to attain the "American dream," we see Samuel and Sara smile in front of a large American flag as the pair hold small Guatemalan flags in hand. Bringing to the forefront Chauk's "Indian-ness," we see Chauk posing in front of a snowy forest backdrop as he wears a North American indigenous headdress. Finally, we see Juan dressed in cowboy gear and mounted on a horse, with a plastic gun in hand, as he poses in front of a small "Western" town. Through these distinct but adjoining visions of the "American dream" and the evocation of a "Far West" aesthetic contrasting cowboy with Indian, the film cements Chauk's outsiderness (we have seen thus far through the character's spatial relegation, linguistic gap, and Juan's verbal and physical hostility) as racialized other. As the group flips through their souvenir photo, Juan looks at Chauk's photo, he says, "Look! This guy is really an Indian, whichever way you look at him, bro" (*La Jaula*). Not only does this "meta" statement describe how Chauk's Indianization comes to figure through multiple, intersecting, and comparative points of view (be it the "tourist gaze" of the viewer or the point of view of the migrant youth), but through this ironic rendering of Chauk as a North American Indian (that arguably approximates the work of parody) the narrative *racially* figures Chauk as the unknowable, yet already knowable Indianized body. Just as the visual evocation of a "Western aesthetic" shores up historical moments of racism, *La Jaula* foregrounds historically racist discourse surrounding Chauk's Indianized body.

We can locate the significance of this larger racializing scene not only in the "Indianization" of Chauk as a racialized other but more complexly in the comparative and, hence, subordinated ways of figuring into the world of migrancy that this montage brings to focus. In fulfilling Quemada-Díez's symbolic vision of Juan as a rational and thinking "Westernized subject" and Chauk as a feeling and heart-centered "Indianized subject," the film's racial aestheticizing of "cowboys vs. Indian" delivers us a politics of comparative racializations that subordinate Chauk as "feeling" under the paradigm of Juan as "thought." This subordination occurs, first, through the protagonizing of Juan as a masculinized and "Westernized" subject and, second, through the *othering* of Chauk, which precludes his positionality as the protagonist.[170] The subordination of feeling under thought not only holds consequences for these migrant figures' distinct visions of migrancy and the "American dream" undergirding the desires of each figure but also impacts how we understand the racial and sexual economies of intimacy and desire that bind and block these migrant friendships. From the onset of the film, *La Jaula* presents us with the "metaphoric markers" of the Western movie *Shane* (1953) and a "cowboy aesthetic" (including Juan's cowboy boots) to clue us into the character's internal desires and worldview. We see Juan's materialist and individualist way of thinking reflected in the character's motives for migration (vocalized as "sueños de oro") and, in turn, the affective and figurative arrangement of these migrant friendships.[171] Rational thought, as seen in Juan's point of view and individualism,

170. Alessandro Rocco draws a similiar conclusion from Chauk's othering when he writes: "Chauk es presentado en el film desde la otredad, lo cuál no le permite ocupar una posición claramente protagónica" (133).

171. We also come to understand Juan's materialist aspirations for migrating through the character's

grates against Chauk and Sara's communal-oriented friendship of "feeling."[172]

Through the momentary centering of Chauk and Sara's friendship, *La Jaula* undermines the racializing gaze surrounding the figure of Chauk and the sexualizing gaze surrounding Sara. In one short intimate scene between Sara and Chauk, during which the migrant youth find temporary shelter among the trees, the film presents us with a shared moment of curiosity and wonder. In contrast to other moments in the film where racializing and, at times, racist discourse fill the gaps in language, knowledge, and experience between Chauk and the Spanish-speaking characters of the film, this scene foregrounds the experience of touching as an alternate modality of knowing the world and the characters. Through the experience of touch, we learn Chauk's most intimate desire. The figure of Sara is central to this narrative opening, as she prompts Chauk by pointing to different objects in nature. Each character labels the object to one other in their respective language. When Chauk points to Sara and says, "Osvaldo," Sara corrects Chauk, "Osvaldo, no. Sara, yes, Sara" (*La Jaula*). Here, Sara takes off her baseball cap and situates her hair around her face as if bringing the traces of femininity back to the foreground. Chauk responds to Sara by pointing to her heart as if understanding this feminizing gesture as a portal into Sara's heart. Sara replies, "My heart is fine. I like this. I like it here," as she points to and touches the leaf of a tree.

repeated idealization of American culture and imagined idealized life in the US. First, the character proclaims, "Everything is better in the North" (*La Jaula*). Later, he declares, "I feel everything we'll see over there will be really awesome…Everything will be fine, and we'll get to where we want" (*La Jaula*).

172. Sara and Chauk repeated Tzotzil exchange of "¿K'uxi elan avo'onton?" (translated into Spanish as "¿Cómo está tu corazón?") becomes another symbolic marker of Chauk (and Sara) as representative of *feeling* (Quemada-Díez 17).

[173]As opposed to Juan's understanding of Chauk's repetitive pointing to Sara's chest as a perverted, sexualizing gesture, this scene's foregrounding of the experience of touching vis-à-vis the primacy of the heart directs us to another form of intimacy and politics of desire.[174] Off to the side and outside of the frame, Juan watches the pair, visibly upset by Sara and Chauk's growing closeness.

By centering Sara and Chauk's "friendship of the heart," *La Jaula* directs us to a modality of consciousness not premised on the difference in language, sexuality, gender, and race but instead based on the importance of the heart and experience. Here, the importance of gender and racial differentiation (so heavy in symbolic meaning for the characters of Sara and Chauk) takes a backseat to another way of orienting oneself to the world. Yet, even as the film momentarily "backgrounds" Sara's gender and the racist discourse surrounding the character of Chauk, it is telling how the film locates an asexual mode of intimacy in Sara and Chauk's friendship and, more specifically, in Chauk's indigenous and therefore "purer" way of knowing. Similar to the short "hunting of the chicken" sequence where Chauk demonstrates a more conscious connection to the natural world by communing with the chicken before killing it (in contrast to Juan, who ridicules Chauk), we arrive at the figuration of Chauk as representative of "heart" and "feeling" through an underlying politics of innocence.[175]

---

173. Sara then asks, "How about yours?" Chauk responds with, "ta'iv." Sara replies, "I don't understand, ta'iv" (*La Jaula*). At this point in the narrative, Sara nor the viewer has yet to grasp the full significance of the word "ta'iv," even as the phrase comes up multiple times in the film. Even in not knowing the importance of "ta'iv," we can recognize how this scene points to an intimacy that goes beyond sharing a mutual language of attraction.

174. At one point in the film, Juan reprimands Chauk for gesturing towards Sara's chest by hitting him, declaring, "You damn Indian, mamón" (*La Jaula*).

175. Juan reads Chauk's humane treatment of the chicken as ignorance: "This Indian is an idiot, he

We see Chauk's "innocence" shore up again during his "Indian" photoshoot, where Chauk foolishly and innocently smiles while Sara calls out, "Oh, my little doggy." By situating this more "innocent" form of intimacy in Sara and Chauk's friendship and sexualizing Sara and Juan's friendship, where touch and seeing become saturated with erotic desire, the narrative seems to suggest that sexual desire and sexualized forms of intimacy fall outside the realm of emotions and the heart. Sexuality and sexual forms of intimacy "land" instead of within Juan's figurative "ideological terrain" of individualist and materialist forms of rational thinking. This point becomes more evident in the scenes that follow when (by way of Sara's gender reveal to Chauk) the narrative reverts to forms of intimacies and relationalities predicated on the encounter of sexualized bodies and sexualized ways of thinking.

In the scenes that follow, we see the communal potentiality of Sara and Chauk's friendship undercut by the sexualized, affective economy of desire cohering around Sara's body. From Chauk's point of view, the film narrates feelings of jealousy, lust, betrayal, and heartbreak, as the narrative also hints at the diminishment of Chauk's dream of "ta'iv." As the trio takes up temporary labor and shelter with rural farmers, we see these sequences become saturated with feelings of desire and a sexualizing gaze that foregrounds a visual interplay around the concealment and exposure of the flesh.[176] These erotic sequences erupt in an "orgy of feelings" in the sequential dance scene;

---

thinks he'll kill it by talking to it" (*La Jaula*).

176. A farming scene shows Chauk sweaty and shirtless from toiling on the field. Later, as the group rests, Chauk playfully touches Sara, telling her in Tzotzil, "Eres muy guapa" (Quemada-Díez 35). Juan reacts by physically reprimanding Chauk. Later, as Juan and Chauk take a bath, Chauk chuckles to himself as he gets a glimpse of Sara's breasts as she closes the curtain to conceal her body.

Juan and Chauk's competing attentions toward Sara climaxes in Juan and Sara's sexual encounter.[177] We can locate the significance of Juan and Sara's sexual encounter not only in the accumulating sexualization of Sara's feminized body (that culminates in Sara's abduction and presumed rape) but also in *how* this encounter lands as a masculine triumph for Juan and as a pollution of the mind for Chauk. In the "orgy of feelings" aftermath, the narrative frames Sara and Juan's encounter as a "triumph" for Juan and a "heartbreak" for Chauk.[178] Juan's "happy triumph," in contrast to Chauk's feelings of betrayal, gestures to the "winning out" of a Western form of masculinity and, in turn, a "material-driven" economy of desire that the character of Juan comes to embody.

Whereas we see Juan's intimacy with Sara stand apart from his greater desires around migrating and living in the US, through Chauk's literal and metaphoric "heartbreak," we come to recognize Chauk's affinity towards Sara as part of a more significant dream and desire epitomized in the visual motif of snow.[179] *La Jaula*

177. After Juan and Chauk compete for Sara's attention on the dance floor, Chauk momentarily loses himself in an ecstasy of dance as Juan and Sara steal kisses amidst the crowd. Eventually, they walk away from the dance and out of the camera's frame. Although the film never shows Sara and Juan's sexual encounter, we can infer from the character's demeanor the day after and from the director's script (explicitly showcasing their sexual encounter) that Sara and Juan have sex following the outdoor dance scene. Again, the script's language accentuates the exposure of Sara's breasts. The script reads, "SARA y JUAN dentro de una cama con mosquitera. Se besan y abrazan apasionadamente. Juan le quita su camiseta, aparecen las vendas que quita descubriendo sus pechos" (Quemada-Díez 57).

178. In the aftermath, Sara searches throughout the farm for Chauk, finally finding him lying high on a tree branch. Visibly upset with Sara, Chauk stirs, begins shouting in Tzotzil, and, once upon the ground, pushes Sara as he walks away. As viewers, we recognize Chauk's heartbreak through the character's tone and physical gestures. We feel his loss in the silences around Chauk's speech, for even his grievances remain lost in translation to both Sara and the viewer. Here, the script highlights Juan's gestures of triumph. The script reads, "Sara trata de tocarlo. Chauk, agresivo, le quita, le quita la mano, ignorándola. Sara queda parada, Chauk se aleja. Juan llega a su lado y le sonríe coqueto, triunfante" (Quemada-Díez 42).

179. In Quemada-Díez's script some parts of Chauk's speech are translated while other parts of his dialogue remain untranslated in Tzotzil. Selected translations show Chauk declaring to Sara, "Perra de

repeatedly foregrounds Chauk's gesturing to the heart and the repeated phrasing of the word "ta'iv," in conjunction with a short visual of particles of falling snow always experienced from Chauk's point of view (presumably as he is asleep dreaming). The dream of snow symbolizes Chauk's greatest desire to reach the US. The underlying motivation for Chauk's migration is to see snow.[180] When Chauk parallels his broken heart with his broken dream, the narrative converges Chauk's deepest desire to migrate north with his romantic and sexual desire for Sara. The figure of Sara comes to embody Chauk's most intimate dream. The romantic loss of Sara disorientates Chauk, "polluting" his head with crazing thoughts. More than losing his footing, Chauk's loss of innocence, which goes along with the dissipation of his dream, foreshadows the film's central void: the abduction and loss of Sara.

La Jaula'*s* aestheticizing of voids comes to full fruition with the figuration of Sara as a vanishing subject. A group of male train robbers singles out Sara for having the disguised feminine features of an "hembrita" and Sara's likelihood of being a virgin due to her young age and innocence.[181] As viewers, we feel the void left behind by Sara's abduction through the scene's prevailing silence, where Sara's cries for Juan and

---

la calle, haces que mi cabeza se eloque, destruiste mi sueño" and "Mi corazón está mal" (Quemada-Díez 41). These translations not only confirm Chauk's feelings of betrayal but also frame Chauk's heartbreak as the "destruction" of Chauk's dream.

180. See Rosa and Rosa's "Chasing Falling Snow: Traveling Through the Borders in *La Jaula de Oro*" for an extended reading of Chauk's "dream of snow."

181. The robbers also single out Sara for having tried to fool them by passing as a male migrant. Instead of placing Sara in the back of a delivery truck with the rest of the abducted migrant women, the robbers drag her to their vehicle, stating, "Welcome with the real males, you bitch. Let's go" (*La Jaula*). As their black SUVs vanish from the frame, Sara's desperate cries for Juan and Chauk's help fade into silence. Afterward, Chauk stirs from the ground and aids Juan, both wounded from trying to save Sara. Silence prevails in this sequence as Chauk carries Juan to an abandoned structure. Once Juan recovers, he tells Chauk, "I didn't even see which way they took her" (*La Jaula*).

Chauk's help fade into silence as the robbers' black SUVs vanish from the frame. We also feel the loss of Sara in the mourning sequences that follow her abduction. As narrated from Chauk's point of view, the film directs us to a phenomenology of vanishing objects. First, we see Chauk's dream sequence of snow, shortly followed by Chauk's imagining of Sara's ghostly reappearance. Here, whereas Juan directs his attention to a map on the wall as he shows excitement about their pending arrival in Los Angeles, Sara, dressed in her oversized gray t-shirt and blue baseball hat, reappears for Chauk and then vanishes—Chauk mistakes the ghost of Sara for a male migrant. By interweaving Chauk's fleeting dream of snow with Sara's ghostly vanishment, *La Jaula* draws an aesthetic and symbolic link between Sara and Chauk. Later, with the abrupt death of Chauk in the US desert borderland region at the hand of an American military sniper, we see this linkage cemented through the film's history of vanished bodies.[182] In highlighting the figurative connection between the feminized and Indianized body, epitomized in Sara and Chauk's narrative departure as vanished subject, I challenge past readings of *La Jaula* that foreground a "heroic" reading of Juan's figurative trajectory.[183] As Juan and Chauk confront the brutal reality of migration after Sara's

182. Writing on the significance of Sara and Chauk's death, Alessandro Rocco draws a similiar conclusion. He writes, "la muerte de Chauk es coherente con la estética del film, constituida por la alternancia dialéctica entre modelos narrativos distintos, como el del viaje de aventuras, el del protagonista-héroe que vence los obstáculos y consique alcanzar su objetivo, o el de la dura realidad que se impone sobre los personajes. Como el el caso de Sara, también en el de Chauk puede detectarse una estructura predictiva en la trayectoria del personaje, ya que en la primera aparición de la policía migratoria mexicana un agente le había apuntado la pistola a cabeza, evocando su muerte violenta" (Rocco 139).

183. These past readings include the director's reading of the film where he describes "human cinema" as "the illusion that the viewer is actually there, watching something real, inside the flesh of the hero in the story" (Peccadillo Pictures 5). Quemada-Díez imagined the character of Juan as the film's protagonistic hero, as we, the viewers, see and experience the world from Juan's point of view (Peccadillo Pictures 5).

vanishment, the film directs us again to the tensions and pressure points undergirding Juan and Chauk's relationship. Feelings of fraternal solidarity prevail in the scenes following Sara's abduction, as Chauk aids Juan from the train robbers' beating and the pair find refuge in a migrant shelter led by priests.[184]

As past readings of the film observe, Juan overcomes this internal hostility towards Chauk as, shortly after, he saves Chauk from a group of extortionists, expressing to the extortionist leader Vitamina that he feels indebted to Chauk.[185] Alessandro Rocco's and Richard Curry's readings emphasize this figurative rebirth of Juan as Chauk's unlikely savior to center Juan's symbolic "rite of passage" from adolescence to a heroic maker of his destiny.[186] Curry takes this "heroic" reading of Juan one step further by equivalating Juan's arrival into manhood via a politics of solidarity and fraternal brotherhood with the migrant figure's physical arrival in the US.[187] In Curry's masculinized reading, the figure of Juan becomes representative of

184. Here, after the father blesses the communal mean, Chauk vocalizes his first Spanish phrase as he turns to Juan and says, "hermano" (*La Jaula*). Juan's animosity towards Chauk reemerges as Juan responds, "Damn Chauk, you've already learned how to speak Spanish? But I'm not your brother" (*La Jaula*).

185. Yet, the film undermines Juan and Chauk's newfound friendship by foregrounding Juan's naivety around the crossing and Chauk's abrupt and senseless death, where a stunned Juan chooses his safety and flees the scene.

186. While both Curry and Rocco acknowledge the Sara's role in unifying Juan and Chauk, both writers succumb to a heroic romanticization of the figure of Juan. For example, Rocco writes: "La herida que sufre el joven por mano de los mafiosos que secuestra a Sara podría verse como el momento en el que empieza a darse el cambio; como si, al ser atendido y curado por Chauk, Juan volviera a nacer con un nuevo carácter. No solo abandona su actitud agresiva contra su vida para salvar la del amigo. Se trata de otro momento fundamental del relato, en el que por un lado se profundiza en la representación de la violencia que sufren los migrantes, pero al mismo tiempo se activa un modelo narrativo basado en la consagración heroica del personaje, capaz ahora de contrastar la adversidad y superar los peligros, no sin la ayuda de la fortuna…La prueba que debe superar el personaje para alcanzar su estatura heroica pone en juego su propia vida, pues el mafioso lo obliga a elegir entre morir él o dejar que muera su amigo…De esta manera, revelando un valor y una solidaridad hasta ahora insospechadas, Juan toma directamente en sus manos el rol de protagonista del relato, además de su destino" (136-7).

187. Here, Curry writes: "Along the journey, Juan experiences and he learns: he feels attraction,

the physical migrant journey and the "psychological passage" from "an adolescent to a man" (Curry 62). Moreover, Curry arrives at a vision of "migrant friendship" through a discourse of "tolerance" and the "virtuous" figuration of the migrant subject as a masculinized hero (57). The heroization of Juan, in effect, backgrounds the figures of Sara and Chauk. In Curry's reading, we arrive at the heroization of Juan through an underlying discourse around the ideal and virtuous masculine migrant subject. Utilizing a semantic-, semiotic- and genre-based methodology, Curry offers the paradigm of "voids and virtue" to make sense of *La Jaula's* narrative and visual silences. For Curry, the film's absence of dialogue, lack of explanatory "pull and push factors" behind the youth's migration, and cultural and linguistic gaps around the character of Chauk and Sara's abduction/ghostly reappearance *make present through absence* the film's "virtues," what Curry calls a "filmic discourse-turned-virtue" (63). For Curry, the voids of the film focalize other dimensions, including the power of visual imagery, intertextual referencing to the Central American/Mexican migratory film genre (including that of *Sin Nombre*), and the narrative thematics of friendship and tolerance evoked by the trials of the migrant journey.[188] Curry locates the film's prevailing virtue in its "lack of pretense" around questions of politics and morality. For Curry, the film's lack of explicit ethical and political critique of migration nevertheless leads the viewer

emotion, desire, and he learns to be sexual; he experiences jealousy and xenophobia, and he learns to be tolerant; he experiences rejection, and he learns to be accepting; he experiences pride, and he learns to be humble; he allows himself to be carried away by stinginess, and he learns to be generous; he feels empty, and he learns to be a friend" (62).

188. Curry also refers to these "virtues" as "genre virtuosity" and "cinematographic technical virtuosity."

to question the nature of migration.[189]

While Curry aptly recognizes how voids shape the narration of the film on the level of imagery and aesthetics, storyline and characterization, Curry's reading succumbs to a romanticization of the film's character, "friendship" thematics, and of the film genre of contemporary Central American/Mexican migrant narratives. Through neutralizing terms such as "friendship and tolerance," "moving human dimension," and "rite of passage," Curry delivers us a vision of *La Jaula* where the embodied (that is, racialized, sexualized. and gendered) experience of the migrant characters only go so far to "fill the void" left behind by the film's silences.[190] While we can agree with Curry's desire to politicize and moralize a larger commentary around immigration, labor, and human rights *La Jaula* animates through its narration, characterization, and visual/aesthetic qualities, we can disagree with the way Curry arrives at this formulation of "filmic virtuosity." Curry's "filmic virtuosity" hinges on (1) the social identification with the generic or political thematics of the film through the privileged position of the "scholar-viewer" and (2) the neutralizing of embodied

189. Here, Curry states, "Perhaps, *La jaula*'s most obvious void is its lack of pretense; despite its surroundings, it pretends to be neither political nor moral. In this quality lies the film's overarching infrapolitical 'virtue,' because it is both. Although the film does not pretend to address issues of politics or morality, having viewed it, the scholar-viewer cannot avoid pondering matters of political or moral import. It is in this sense, then, that terms *voids* and *virtues* are used in the title and the structure of this article" (48).

190. Curry anchors his semantic, semiotic, and generic reading of the film in a deconstructionist analytical framework. For example, he describes Sara's abduction and reappearance as the "indexing" of another narrative void and a "metonymical indication" of how Sara has probably not survived the abduction and, therefore, one of the film's "narrative virtues" (63-64). Curry then reads Chauk's death as another film void where "the absence of dialogue and privileged image combine…in the filmic narrative" to "fill[…] the void and put […] an end to the dream of ta'iv, nieve, snow" (61). Ultimately, for Curry, *La Jaula de Oro* offers up a "filmic virtuosity" around the migratory genre through the presence of images juxtaposed with the film's general absences.

forms of differentiation through a reading of "friendships as tolerance" that, inadvertently, centers the film's most "tolerant" and therefore "heroic" migrant figure. Under Curry's "voids and virtue" formulation, the heroic figure of Juan takes precedence as the character who overcomes the arduous trials and tribulations of the migrant journey. Ultimately, Juan is the only character to arrive in the US.

As a film already so conscious of its artistic politics (seen in the director's careful treatment of casting, acting, filming techniques, and even imagery/sensory depiction), I suggest that we can find a more profound argument in the already politicized and moralized lines of virtuousness the film traverses through the narrativized (1) making and un-making of migrant friendships and (2) the departure and arrival of migrant figures epitomized in Sara and Chauk's death as well as in film's end-narration. As opposed to reading the heroization of Juan (and his coming into a politics of solidarity and friendship) as a "virtue" of the film, this chapter argues that we arrive at the figuration of Juan as the rational, heroic, and exceptional migrant subject through an underlying politics of virtuousness that comparatively mobilizes the figures and friendships of *La Jaula*. The film foregrounds a *comparative* and *shared* history of heightened vulnerability around Sara's sexualized migrant body and Chauk's racialized migrant body through the coherence of a differential gaze that foreshadows the character's trajectory into vanishment. In the following section, I argue that the differential gaze that sets Sara and Chauk apart in the film's scenes of violence, like the relationality that binds Sara and Chauk in their friendship of the heart and aesthetics of vanishment, mobilizes along the lines of virtuousness.

III. Lines of Virtuousness

From the onset of *La Jaula de Oro,* both on-screen and in the director's script, we find aesthetic and discursive traces of a heroic masculinization that centralizes Juan's thoughts, actions, and feelings in the narrative.[191] In foreshadowing Juan's exceptionality as the most light-skinned, rational, Westernized (as in individualist and materialist), and courageous subject, Juan "earns" his spatial arrival in the US and his figurative arrival into manhood.[192] The story of Juan's arrival in the US hinges on the arrival and departure of other migrant subjectivities. Ultimately, we arrive at Juan's migrant exceptionality through a masculinized discourse of virtuousness as much as through a phenomenology of vanishing subjects-turned-objects. I propose we redirect this discourse on genre virtuousness and the virtuousness of the "migrant's human condition" toward an understanding of virtuousness as a social good (or lack of) that is always already tethered to the historical migrant body. By returning to the social notion of virtuousness, that is, the social capacity to embody qualities of virtue back to the migrant body, we treat ideas around virtuousness as something already saturated with

191. We see the centering of Juan's storyline in Juan's early characterization as the group leader, which goes hand in hand with the film's vocal privileging of Juan's more significant dreams and aspirations. Juan is the only character to state the group's destination to travel guides and Mexican authorities. He is the only character to explicitly state his reason for departing North and offer a vision of life in the US. The centering of Juan's storyline parallels the "Shane-inspired" cowboy aesthetic surrounding Juan.

192. Yet, even as the film privileges Juan's storyline as an exceptional migrant, the ending of the film undercuts Juan's "sueño de oro" through the brutal reality and dehumanizing experience of undocumented labor in the US. The ending "labor" sequence puts together shots of Juan (who is always alone) in front of cold and sterile "images of American progress," including freeway overpasses and an industrial factory with two American flags (*La Jaula*). In an interior shot of the beef factory, we see images of Juan mopping up beef remnants, with a sad melody in the background (*La Jaula*). Quemada-Diéz found a note of irony in Juan's dream, based on an ethos of materialist individualism, converting from a "golden dream" to a "golden cage."

a predetermined social and affective arrangement as opposed to "imbuing" the migrant subject with notions of virtuousness. Otherwise, I argue, we run the danger of taking for granted the stability of "virtuosity" (as Curry does) and how it is that certain gendered, racialized, and sexualized bodies become stuck to more extensive social histories of being virtuous, or not quite. Only by coupling attention to semiotics, semantics, and other generic qualities of the film, including the aesthetics of voids, with attention to affective and phenomenological (and therefore necessarily embodied) sites of differentiation and conversion can we arrive at this more significant cultural commentary on the social role that notions of virtuousness play in making migrants matter and un-matter.

In my reading of *Sin Nombre,* the notion of "migrant exceptionality" makes sense of how Sayra's conversion into the film's exceptional migrant parallels the migratory narrative's fulfillment (and eventual undoing) of the social promise of arrival. If *Sin Nombre*'s ending shows us how migrant exceptionality "runs errant depending on the spatial, gendered and racial orientation of displaced migrant subjectivities," a comparative reading of *Sin Nombre* and *La Jaula's* exceptional migrant subjects points to how we can locate the predetermined yet contingent basis of migrant exceptionality within the shifting ideological landscape of virtuousness. In *Sin Nombre,* ideas of virtuousness cohere around the feminized figure of Sayra, given the entrenched history of racialized vice and melancholia surrounding *marero* masculinity and the history of sexualization surrounding the non-migrant character of Martha. In *La Jaula,* ideas of virtuousness cohere around the figure of Juan, given the

foregrounding of heterosexualized intimacies that, in turn, shore up entrenched histories of sexual and racial vulnerability surrounding the figures of Sara and Chauk. The idea of "migrant virtuousness" makes sense of these different yet related iterations of migrant exceptionality. Migrant virtuousness points to the shifting embodied history of meanings of "virtue." Our modern understanding of 'virtue,' as a form of "moral goodness" and "moral grounding," derives from a personification of "Virtue" (with a capital 'V') in the "sexually pure," "chaste," and "virgin" female body. This definition of 'virtue' stands opposite to "vice" and "wrongdoing" and, in effect, opposite of man. Yet, behind this gendered and sexualized iteration of "virtue," there lies a history of "virtuous" meaning attached to the masculinized body. The Latin "virtus" derives its sense of "valour, worth, merit, excellence of character or ability, goodness" from the Latin "*vir*" (man), made evident in the adjective and noun "virile" that signifies that "of belonging to, or characteristic of a man, marked by strength or force" ("Virile, adj. (and n.)"). These ideals of moral goodness organize along gendered and sexualized lines as much as they organize along the materiality of embodiment.

Even as ideas of virtue cohere around feminized or masculinized embodiments, virtuousness also "migrates" in the sense that eventually, through the character's death or jaded arrival in the US, those ideals slip away. Virtuousness shifts between distinct migrant subjects even as the films' endings privilege the arrival of one exceptional migrant. For example, In *La Jaula,* the different iterations of virtuousness include 1) virtuousness understood along sexualized lines in which tensions around agency and the concealment and provocation of "virgin," feminine flesh become tethered to the

figure of Sara; 2) virtuousness understood along racialized lines in which the figure and body of Chauk cohere an "Indian virtue" through the interplay of knowability and unknowability and the casting of "feelings" as both ignorance and innocence; 3) virtuousness understood along masculinized lines in which notions of ardor, tolerance, merit, and individual self-actualization become attached to the figure and body of Juan. Just as an aesthetic and affective quality of innocence undergirds each figure's iteration of virtuousness, we see the innocence of each migrant figure fade away in their respective endings. Virtuousness becomes both the figurative and embodied instrument in which we measure the desirability of moral principles of "goodness" and "badness." Ultimately, Juan's naive optimism about the crossing and imagined ideal life in the US slips away as *La Jaula* delivers its final message.

In the film's last scene, the lone figure of Juan walks along a dark, snowy backdrop. From Juan's point of view, we see a large factory in the distance and then a low angle shot of snow as Juan looks up into the snowy night sky. Decentering Juan's gaze, the camera elevates to the sky as the viewer observes the last visual of falling snow, the darkness of Chauk's dreamscape converting into the night sky's darkness. Where we may interpret this final shot of falling snow (as past readings have done) as the dissipation of Juan's American "Sueño de Oro," this dreamy visual of snow—where the camera lingers on a blurry image of a snowflake coming in and out of focus—harkens us back to the dissipation of Chauk's dream of snow and to the memory of that those that have already vanished. In the sequence that follows Sara's vanishment, as in the last scene, the film lingers within a fleeting and vanishing dream. In the mourning

scene that follows Sara's abduction, we observe the same dark visual of Chauk's falling snow as the film situates us on top of *La Bestia*. Here, the camera imitates the migrant's gaze as the camera eye lingers on a tunnel opening—the void grows smaller and smaller. The hole of the tunnel opening gives way to a shot of Juan and Chauk emerging from the tunnel. As the tunnel grows smaller in the distance, fading into the background, a sad melody gives way to the lyrics of a melancholic migrant riding the train. Talking, crooning, crying, and laughing, the migrant sings:

> Brothers, in this world, no one is better than anyone else. We come from nothingness, and we return to nothingness. Don't cry for the dead, who are gone forever. Take care of those who stay, and help them if you can. When you bid me your farewell, let no one weep, no one is eternal, no one comes back from the deep sleep. (*La Jaula*)

Based on the insubstantial, this communal and egalitarian politics of "care" points to the utopic possibility of migrant hopes and dreams. Even as the film's prevailing spatial landscape operates within this concrete materiality of aluminum houses, concrete tunnels, metal fences, trains, and steel tracks and factories, through the memory of Sara experienced through Chauk's dream of snow, the film undermines the permanence of cages to invite us (if only momentarily) to dwell in the impermanence of dreams and the intangible world of the evanescent.[193]

In the end, a comparative reading of the feminized migrant bodies of *Sin Nombre* and *La Jaula* allows us to understand how the migrant trail and Central American migrant narratives produce a history of shared yet subordinated migrant

193. See Rosa and Rosa's "Chasing Falling Snow" for more on the visuality of "territorial delimitations" featured in the film.

socialities. These film narratives offer up the promise of love and friendship even as that promise fades away from our horizons. Through the point of view of the feminized migrant body, we witness both the limitations and potentialities of these migrant friendships. We see the limits of heterosexual relationalities in Willy and Martha's relationship, where Willy's loss of his beloved becomes a nostalgic form of entrapment. We see these limitations also in Willy and Sayra's relationship, where the aversion to sexual desire and blood sacrifice of the unredeemed hero becomes an inherited byproduct of a more extensive history of systemic violence and exploitation directed towards local and migrant women. We see this in Juan and Sara's relationship, where feelings of jealousy and desire amount to the making of inferior subjectivities. In Chauk and Sara's relationship, the world of emotion becomes an impurity of the mind. These narratives tell us that migrant women require the protection of masculine heroes, even as the story undoes these heroic figurations, as seen in the figures of both Willy and Juan. These narratives also locate the potentialities of migrant friendships within the realm of feeling that goes hand in hand with the subjective world of femininity. We witness this potentiality in Willy and Sayra's friendship, where Willy and Sayra find solace in a shared history of loss and non-belonging. We also see this potentiality in Chauk and Sara's friendship, where the pair find refuge in another way of encountering the world.

Sin Nombre and *La Jaula* move toward egalitarian, collective-orientated, and utopic relational politics by aligning friendship with asexual heterosexuality and positioning the potentiality of migrant affective politics within the dream of femininity.

In both these films, femininity becomes a past-orientated and future-orientated dream, where the feminine world of feeling points towards an alternative future, even as feminized bodies leave their ghostly imprint as frozen and relegated objects. The feminized migrant figure animates an expansive moralizing politics of virtuousness as innocence. Virtue shapes migrant figures through the visual embodiment of innocence and deservedness undergirding these figurations of hero and heroine. The depiction of heroic-yet-not-quite migrant figures points to the meritocratic sociality undergirding contemporary migration narratives and border spatialities. The subordination and disavowal of one historically racialized, gendered, and sexualized body for the savior of another drive the characterization, affective economy, and narrative politics of the two films. On a more superficial level, the heterosexualized language of heroes and feminized dreamscapes point to the fact that both films are migrant stories imagined by male filmmakers. On a deeper level of culture and society, these social limitations and imagined potentialities around race, gender, and sexuality point to how migrants historically figure into the US through policed lines of "ideal virtues" and the bodily capacity (or incapacity) to house ideological moral goodness. Either way, the feminized migrant figure remains a cultural analogy for the exposed precarity and vulnerability of migrancy. Sexuality and the potentiality of sexual moral perversion epitomize the fall of migrants traversing this contemporary social history. The failed migrant hero/ine persists as the cultural and material byproduct of neoliberalism's political and ideological apparatus.

Chapter 4: The Data Body: Desert Necroviolence and Racializing Assemblages in Marc Silver's *Who is Dayani Crystal?* (2014)

> In the absence of kin, family, gender, belonging, language, personhood, property, and official records, among many other factors, what remains is the flesh, the living, speaking, thinking, feeling, and imagining flesh: the ether that holds together the world of Man while at the same time forming the condition of possibility for this world's demise. It's the end of the world—don't you know yet?
>
> —Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*

The beginning of Marc Silver's documentary *Who is Dayani Cristal?* (2014) presents us with the mystery of an unidentified corpse lying in the Arizona Sonoran Desert. Arriving at the scene, the Search and Rescue Unit from Pima County Sheriff's Department speculates, "Most likely a U.D.A. crosser" (Silver). Featuring ariel shots of this arid landscape, the documentary presents close-ups of a decomposing body as flies fester. Graphic images of the corpse are intermingled with close-up shots of desert animals, plant life, abandoned rags of clothing, empty water bottles, pieces of skeletons, and other migrant remains. The visuality around the unidentified corpse, in tandem with the visuality of everyday desert life and the sterile candor of state officials, clue us in to the quotidian way of life that comprises this desert borderland. This body is yet another dead migrant found just north of the US-Mexico border. The procedural efforts to classify the body begin. The officers capture digital pictures of the corpses as they search for an ID and collect all belongings. Speculating on the significance of the tattoo "Dayani Cristal" found on the chest of the corpse, the officer mistakenly reads, "Doyomi Cristal?" (Silver). Once this initial procedural investigation is over, the officers wrap the corpse in white sheets and transport the body to the local forensic and

medical examiner. The officers' sterilized language, the discursive slip-up of "Doyomi Cristal," and the visual imagery of a corpse amid everyday desert life lay bare the disposability, illegality, and illegibility of the unidentified postmortem migrant.

This everyday scene in the Sonoran Desert constitutes the modern border industrial complex that Jason De León labels "desert necroviolence."[194] In *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (2015), De León combines ethnography, archaeology, linguistics, and forensic science to chronicle the material and psychological suffering and postmortem violence unauthorized border crossers experience in this "deathscape." As De León narrates, this border enforcement apparatus began with the implementation of NAFTA, where the deflation of Mexican corn pushed peasant farmers out of Mexico and into the US labor market. Before 1993, the policy now known as "Prevention Through Deterrence" (PTD) was an "off-the-cuff homegrown preventive measure against the unsightliness of brown-skinned illegal fence jumpers" (De León 5). Under the Clinton administration, PTD evolved into a robust federal policy that displaced people into the borderland deserts and mountains, where migrants began dying.[195] "Dying in the desert has become routinized enough to

194. Drawing upon Mbembe's "necropolitics" and Agamben's "bare life" and "states of exception," De León moves to conceptualize the inhospitable terrain of the Arizona Sonoran Desert as a "deathscape," a politicized landscape that in effect operationalizes American necropower through the suspension of human and constitutional rights. A critical political feature of PTD, for De León, is only how undocumented people become "killable in the eyes of the state" but how PTD kills and destroys the migrant body to point of erasure (68). De León's term "necroviolence" moves to understand how modern political power engages with the migrant postmortem body. He defines "necroviolence" as "violence performed and produced through the specific treatment of corpses that are perceived to be offensive, sacrilegious, or inhumane by the perpetrator, the victim (and her or his cultural group), or both" (De León 69).

195. As De León explains: "The basic premise was, and continues to be, that if they can't stop the huddled masses, at least they can funnel them into remote areas where the punishment handed out by difficult terrain will save money (or so some foolishly thought) and get this unsightly mess out of public

now warrant labeling it," De León writes (83). As a form of postmortem violence that manifested out of the logic of PTD, desert necroviolence refers to "the unique deaths that border crossers experience and the ways nature affects their bodies" (De León 72). PTD outsources violence to animals, mountains, extreme temperatures, and uninhabited terrain, allowing the federal government (including the Border Patrol) to absolve themselves of migrant injuries and loss of life by naming the inhospitable terrain of the desert, including the threat of animals and other nonhumans, as the cause of death. As De León affirms, "This (mis)treatment of bodies is an ethical concern, but the physical destruction by the environment has other implications…. [It] undercounts the number of people who die out there. The hybrid collectif destroys evidence and there are few witnesses to this act. Flesh is shredded by beaks, bone is cracked by mammalian canines, and ants carry off what is left. Nature sanitizes the killing floor" (83). The hidden productive value of this federal policy becomes "naturalized" through sterilized discourse that frames destructive environmental processes of the desert as "natural." The violence of PTD is both cyclical and out of sight in that migrants continue to be enticed by the pull of the US economy while also bearing the weight and trauma of immigration enforcement policies.

"What can one unidentified skull reveal to you about the world?" (Raftree) This question and a photo of a Search and Rescue agent standing next to a skull in the middle of an arid desert landscape inspired the creation of *Who is Dayani Cristal?* (Raftree) The film foregrounds two clues found on the yet-to-be-identified body of Dilcy Yohan

---

view, which it did" (6).

Sandres Martínez: the first a prayer and the second a cursive tattoo of "Dayani Cristal." These two clues come to shape the narrative world of the film. Winner of the Sundance Cinematography Award and Amnesty International Best Documentary Award, the documentary *Who is Dayani Cristal?* focalizes the experience of migrating northward from Central America through this treacherous arid landscape. The film integrates first-person testimonial accounts and the factual after-life of Yohan, a Honduran migrant whose decomposed body is found in the Sonoran Desert by a Search and Rescue Unit. In this documentary-drama, Marc Silver and co-producer Gael García Bernal combine the facts of a forensic procedural with a staged dramatization of Yohan's migration experience. As a type of "forensic memorial" and "road movie," the documentary typifies a greater humanitarian desire to return the lost identity to unrecognized post-mortem migrants through the recovery and forensic investigation of migrant corpses.[196] As the documentary informs us, in the most successful cases, these investigations result in post-mortem repatriation and a funeral memorialization for deceased migrants. Apart from international dissemination, this documentary film has an extensive virtual afterlife with a streaming option on the popular media platforms Youtube, a corresponding documentary mini-series called "Los Invisibles" (2010), and a comprehensive home website where visitors read about "border stories" and can "take action" through an array of donor and volunteer options (Pulse Films).

This chapter argues that through an unstable and contradictory process of equivalence, transcendence, and differentiation, the unidentified postmortem migrant

196. See Buiza and Solano for this labeling of the documentary.

comes to figure. We can think of Yohan's postmortem repatriation narrative, García Bernal's dramatization of Yohan's journey, and forensic subnarrative as distinct parts that attempt to make "whole again" the material and symbolic body of Yohan. This chapter reveals entrenched logics found in everyday language that humanizes migrancy through a social desire to make parts into whole again. Even as the documentary delivers a "symbolic" narrative closure to the life of Yohan by narrating the clues of the "Migrant's Prayer" and the tattoo "Dayani Cristal," the film humanizes the unidentified postmortem migrant through the simultaneous recognition and effacement of racial difference. Where the clue of the prayer "humanizes" Yohan through a transcendent and sentimental religious language, the clue of the tattoo works "humanizes" Yohan through a deracialized visual language. In the subsection "Pathos as Virtue," I demonstrate the documentary and a larger body of secondary discourse around the migration film genre conflate the figure of the migrant with ideas of "migrant virtuousness" through a discursive process of equivalence and transcendence. Here, I argue that critical discourse around *Who is Dayani Cristal?* fails to engage with the reality of PTD-driven violence conceptually and politically by not contending with the question of race and processes of racialization as they relate to our modern understanding of human/ness. The following section, "Genre/s of Human," argues that drawing out the distinct "genres of human" deployed within *Who is Dayani Cristal?* allows us to revisit the epistemological role of the documentary and other genres of this larger migration filmscape situated within the larger humanities project of humanizing the migrant subject.

Behind the humanizing impulse of PTD migration literature are the veiled and convoluted ways PTD-driven violence manifests. The following section, entitled "Visualities of Scale," draws attention to the visual mechanisms in which the documentary dis/articulates naturalizing hierarchies between whiteness and brownness, citizen, and noncitizen, and legible and illegible. Here, I argue that like how a logic of captivity and scale undergird the politics of PTD, a racialized and visualized logic of confinement and categorization undergirds the racialized figure of the unidentified postmortem migrant. By conceptualizing the postmortem as a "data body," I call attention to a visual differentiation process where data and racial excess reveal a de/racialized logic of scale—situated in the nexus of data-driven, science-driven, and ethnographic-driven technologies and methods of categorization, including that of documentation, classification, quantification, and digitalization. As a racializing assemblage, the data body combines fact and fiction, the personal and collective, the quotidian and spectacular, and the embodied and disembodied. This chapter then moves to argue that *Who is Dayani Cristal?* is as much about the racialized history of political violence directed at the brown migrant body as it is about the veiled positioning of the deracialized universal white subject as the rigid dis/embodiment of what is human and how is human human. Within the world of the film, racializing assemblages come to bear on the migrant's postmortem present, yet absent postmortem flesh, an abstracted material that precedes and succeeds the migrant body. The central figure of the film, Dayani Cristal, arguably more human in death than he is in life, demarcates the relational and ontological limits of the migrant subject in the theorization and

narrativization of political violence and/as the social inheritance of PTD. The figure of the unidentified post-mortem body serves as an ontological mirror for the epistemological project of studies on migrancy, disarticulating the liberal human migrant subject from the precarious reality of the flesh. "Imagining Flesh" cites the visual artwork of Beatriz Cortez to point toward an imagining of migrant flesh that goes beyond the logic of separation to invite another Latinx mode of being in the world.

I. Pathos as Virtue

The work of pathos becomes the ethos of *Who is Dayani Cristal?* through the documentary's dramatization of the clue of the prayer. The "Migrant's Prayer" takes up a life of its own as it discursively and stylistically inspires García Bernal's voiceover and sets the stage for a religious, sentimental, and romantic rendering of migrancy in the film. In the opening line of the film, García Bernal declares, "The Migrant's Prayer. The journey towards you, Lord, is life. To set off is to die a little. To arrive is to never to arrive until one is at rest with you. You, Lord, experienced migration" (Silver). By presenting migration as a religious odyssey, the narration elicits the viewer's sympathy and identification with a "migrant" point of view. Apart from the foregrounding of religion, the documentary also elicits the sympathy of viewers through emotive-driven testimonial accounts from Yohan's family, the compassionate testimonials of an array of US government workers aiding in the recovery of Yohan's unidentified body, and through the impoverished, yet idyllic, scenes of everyday life across Honduras and the border towns of Mexico.

On top of eliciting viewer sympathy and identification, the film's pathos

presents us with a narrative of migrant solidarity. This "solidarity" narrative emerges by depicting migration as a human origin story. In the spiritual depiction of the "Lord's journey" as a migrant journey, García Bernal's voiceover oscillates between different points of view, from a second-person "you, Lord" to a first-person "we" to a third-person "they." By alternating between these different points of view and distinct spatial references (on "earth" and in "heaven"), García Bernal's discourse engenders a transcendent effect where "we all play the main characters" (Sliver). The film's romantic, sentimental, and spiritual modalities work in tandem with the migrant solidarity narrative to deliver a universal vision and transcendent rendering of migrancy that amounts to a human journey of leaving home. Religious undertones prevail just as the sentimental background music and García Bernal's idealistic voiceover contemplates a future-oriented egalitarian and utopic border space without boundaries where "we are all on the same team" (Silver). The prevailing voiceover of the "Migrant's Prayer" and multiple "transcendent" modalities of storytelling conveys an overall sense of solidarity and collective affinity.[197]

In addition to the universalizing and utopic vision of migrancy, the film's

197. An example of these modalities working together includes an early border crossing sequence where García Bernal arrives by bus to Guatemala, which happens early in the documentary. In these scenes, sentimental music plays in the background as García Bernal contemplates his journey ahead. Scenes of everyday market life in Coatepeque, Guatemala, where melancholic guitar sings a religious melody: "Where are you going, man of little faith? Where are you going if there is no way out? You'll say to him, I'm looking for God. I need him, because I can't take it anymore. Pity me. Pity me. Pity on the world" (Silver). In the following scene where García Bernal reaches the Guatemalan/Mexico border, with a new migrant friend by his side, we see García Bernal reach a group of rafts at the bank of the river. Here, as people bustle around, sending and picking up supplies, a man standing next to a large wooden cross with a portable speaker in hand preaches the word of god. Here, García Bernal contemplates a utopic border space "where you don't need a passport" as he speaks of his new migrant friends (Silver).

transcendent modalities do the discursive and symbolic work of converting the migrant subject into a migrant hero. We see this heroic conversion in explicit terms through the first-person testimonial account of a local priest. Here, the priest testifies to migrants' working-class ethics and human value as the "spiritual reserve of the world" (Silver). Migrants adopt a historical and mythical significance within the world of the film through the priest's declaration: "Migrants are heroes. They are like rays of light shining on the things we must change. They are heroes who fight not only for their families…they are fighting to change the story of the US and Mexico" (Silver). Here, migrants become archetypes for human suffering and the ideal for human virtuousness. Through a language of equivalence and the collective embodiment of "human virtue," *Who is Dayani Cristal?* delivers the figure of the migrant hero who transcends national distinctions in his modeling of virtuousness.[198] This discourse of migrant virtue and heroism spills into the majestic nature of García Bernal's voiceover as he declares, "Migrant heroes. In the end, they are considered illegal. Criminal" (Silver). This mythic interpretation of migrancy renders the virtuousness of the migrant subject and, in turn, the virtuousness of the migrant journey.

In the last chapter, I elaborated on the conversion of an "aesthetic-based virtuousness" into a "genre virtuousness." I describe the tendency to valorize the migration film genre through the film's capacity to humanize the migrant subject. My analysis of the feminized bodies of *Sin Nombre* and *La Jaula de Oro* argues that behind

198. For example, García Bernal's voiceover narration elaborates: "This is one of over 50 shelters on the railway lines through Mexico. Like a kind of secret train station. A hot meal, the chance to relax, to rest, and reenergize for what remains of the journey. Hondurans, Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, Mexicans. Here we are all on the same team. The other team" (Silver).

the labeling of a "genre virtuousness," we can locate "heroic" forms of virtuousness endowed to migrant subjects along gendered and racialized lines. Here, I expand this previous argument to suggest that similar to how *Sin Nombre* and *La Jaula de Oro* grant migrant subjects a heroic virtuousness through end-narration, aesthetics, and characterization, *Who is Dayani Cristal?* endows migrants with notions of "human virtuousness" through the work of pathos. As much as the "heroic" and "virtue" work of pathos reflects the inner world of this documentary, it also reflects a greater discursive tendency to endow the migrant subject with notions of "human virtuousness" and, in turn, the documentary film with ideas of "genre virtuousness." I refer to the way scholarship on *Who is Dayani Cristal?* locates the social power of the film in the way it humanizes the migrants through the depiction of a "fuller human dimension" and the capacity to grant migrants a "human countenance."[199] Employing distinct reading practices to foreground different attributes of the film, this array of secondary work locates the film's capacity to humanize the migrant subject as the apex of the film's social potential and, in turn, as the apex of the film's generic potential as a migration film.[200] Even as writers identify a major stylistic weakness in García Bernal's brutally awkward reenactment, a significant part of the film's critical reception frames the

199. See Gomez, Buiza, Shaw's "Serving the Master Text," and Soto for different iterations of the film's capacity to humanize migrants.

200. These readings locate the social power of the documentary in how the film makes visible the marginal experiences of migrants through the excavation of personal memory (Gomez), establishes a collective space where migrant voices are centered (Gomez and Soto), counters hegemonic political discourse of crisis and threat (Buiza and Gomez), privileges the subjective realm of memory and affect over an objective gaze (Buiza and Soto), and expands the conditions of public grievability and moral responsibility through the testimonials of US forensic investigators and forensic investigation subnarrative (Demo).

reenactment and emotive work of pathos as an important "virtue" of the film.[201] Within the discursive reception of *Sin Nombre, La Jaula de Oro*, *and Who is Dayani Cristal?* we can locate a more significant social impulse to translate the heroic and virtuous rendering of migrant subjectivities into the social "virtue" of the migration film genre.[202]

For example, similar to the paradox we find in the critical reception of *La Jaula de Oro,* where the discursive and aesthetic voids of the film amount to a "filmic virtuousness," we see a "void and virtue" paradigm manifest in the scholarship surrounding *Who is Dayani Cristal?* This paradigm manifests in Nanci Buiza's "Crossing Mexico on *La Bestia*" (2018). Offering (arguably) one of the most complex readings of the documentary's usage of pathos, Buiza locates the film's formal strength in navigating the objective truth and subjective experience of migration through the register of tragedy. Buiza offers a reading much more attentive to the socio- and geopolitical complexities that undergird the reality of migration. However, similar to Richard Curry's writing on *La Jaula de Oro,* Buiza converts a weakness and void of the film into a "virtue" of the film.[203] For Buiza, even as the documentary understates

201. Solano, for example, states that "the pathos of the immigrant's family coupled with the empathy of various doctors and investigators in Arizona are more than enough to carry a dramatic documentary" (2). Solano contends that even as the film "stylistically…fails" because of García Bernal's problematic reenactment, it "succeeds in giving a human face and back story to the hundreds of unidentified migrants who die each year in the desert" (2). See Rapoid for a critique of García Bernal's impersonation, characterized is the article as a "gruesome body swap" (Rapoid).

202. Some examples of this discourse include Shaw's "Migrant Identities in Film" which focuses on *Sin Nombre* and Curry's "The Migration Genre in *La Jaula de Oro"* which includes a discussion on both *La Jaula de Oro* and *Sin Nombre*.

203. See Curry's "The Migration Genre in *La Jaula de Oro*: Voids and Virtues." In her article Buiza states: "Although these films are highly accomplished, their focus on the human dramas and immediate hazards of the journey gives little weight to the broader geopolitical issues and structural violence that have created the urgency to migrate. I contend that this is not a fault. For ultimately what these films aim

the broader geopolitical history of structural violence, the film's exploration of human tragedy through the tragic mode recovers the complexity of migration issues and undoes the reductionism of political and legal language that separates the economic from the reality of "human suffering." Buiza writes:

> It is true that *Who is Dayani Cristal?* dwells on the geopolitical and the forensic, but as a whole it aims at humanizing the figure of the migrant. More than just allude to a clue or a lead in the search for the identity of the body, the title of the film suggests a mystery, a question probing into the life of a human being, with all his hopes and struggles, and joys and distresses. This film is less the account of a victim of an unjust socioeconomic order than it is the story of a husband and father who was fully and courageously devoted to his family, and of man on a journey filled with human warmth and resilience. (Buiza 425)

Even in this more complex reading of *Who is Dayani Cristal?* that rightly argues for the political and ethical necessity to center geopolitical contexts and histories of structural violence that create the urgency to migrate in the first place, we see a tendency to fill the reality of migration and the tragic migrant genre with notions of man's "human virtuousness."

It is not that I take issue with Buiza's elaboration on the tragic element of the film per se. Buiza's emphasis on the tragic modes illuminates the complexity of the "affective politics" around migration and how it is that they can work in tandem with the formal aspects of narrative and film.[204] It is more that I take issue with the totalizing

---

to highlight is not so much the political as the tragic, that inscrutable and murky reality of human yearning and suffering. In doing so, these films help to recover aspects of the migrant experience that have been lost amid the cacophony of our present political culture" (415).

204. For example, Buiza locates the haunting element of the film in Susan Sontag's explication of tragedy, where the intentionality of subjectivity comes into conflict with the fatedness of objectivity. " In her reading of *Who Is Dayani Cristal?* and other migration films, Buiza builds upon this binary to

form of humanness that gets projected here in this analytical leap from "migrant tragedy" to "human tragedy" that, many times, goes hand in hand with the categorical jump from migrant subjectivity to human subjectivity. Without due diligence, the endowment of migrants and the migration film genre with "virtue" (via pathos, heroism, and the tragedy of human suffering) slides into a superficial treatment of "migrant affects" and the rendering of migrants as beautiful yet tragic human heroes.[205] Behind the language of migrant and genre virtuousness, always already directed towards a social and collective desire to humanize the migrant figure through the "fullness," "wholeness," and "coherence" of a human dimension, we can locate a generalizing assumption about what is human and how is human human. While these virtuous renderings of migrant subjects may reflect the documentary's desire to humanize migrants, the discursive conversion of migrant subjects into heroes and the migration film genre into a virtue takes for granted the type of personhood, and political subject a "virtuous" (albeit humanizing) rendering of migrancy delivers. *Who is Dayani Cristal?* is more than about giving name to the migrant nameless: this film brings into tension the very parameters of humanness.

---

situate the objective truth of data in conflict with the subjective experience of human tragedy: "In a context where it has become difficult to know what objective truth means—our so-called 'post-truth era—one thing that cannot be denied, as these films make clear, is the ongoing existence of human tragedy. By making human tragedy, as opposed to socio-political 'crisis,' their deeper focus, these films 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" (427).

205. Here Buiza slides into a heroic and virtuous depiction of the film: "As a kind of 'documentary road movie,' the film shows images that are teeming with life—images of the rush of buses and cars, of streets full of vendors, of people moving across the Suchiate River, and of the camaraderie forged among the migrants on the journey north. The scenes of Yohan's hometown are almost idyllic lush green fields of agriculture, children playing in rivers and waterfalls; a close-knit community of friends and family. Together, these hometown scenes evoke a sense of peace amid the haunting reality of economic precarity" (425).

II. Genre/s of Human

This chapter complicates the Western liberalist notion of "human," undergirding the humanizing discourse of studies on migrancy in contemporary film. To do the conceptual work of disentangling the "virtuousness" of the migratory film genre from the "virtuousness" of the migrant subject turned figure, I move to foreground competing notions of humanness that underpins *Who is Dayani Cristal?* This chapter recognizes the special positionality of the documentary form—in its distinctive hybrid character that oscillates between objective and subjective, fact and fiction, and personal and collective forms of witnessing—to draw out the parameters of humanness.[206] As opposed to overemphasizing the emotive modality and subjective functionality of the documentary film, as past readings have done, I move to uncover the veiled positioning of the universal white subject as the rigid embodiment of what is human and how is human *human*. I foreground moments of rupture and excess meaning in the interplay between fact and fiction, personal and collective, and objective and subjective, to reveal a particular treatment of the unidentifed postmortem migrant body and, in turn, the racially embodied history of violence that this subject houses. By foregrounding competing "genres" of human found within the film and conceptualizing *Who is Dayani Cristal?* as one (among many) "genres" of human, this chapter draws a new light on the documentary's larger narrative of postmortem repatriation through

206. As scholars of documentary studies have established, an ethical tension between fact and fiction is part and parcel of the documentary tradition. (See Nichols) Past readings of *Who is Dayani Cristal?* foreground the emotive modality of the film in tandem with a subjective reading of the film. (See Soto and Gomez)

forensic science practices.[207] Moreover, as opposed to locating the tension of the film within the conflict between the rational logic of objectivity and the emotional experience of subjectivity as Buiza, this chapter finds the ambivalent and haunting element of the film in the everydayness of PTD violence and in the habitual forms of thinking that surround data and the informational.

To restate an earlier point, even as *Who is Dayani Cristal?* anchors the narrative around the identity recovery and experience of the migrant Yohan, co-producer Gael García Bernal assumes the cinematic role of principal storyteller through discursive, spatial, and audiovisual narrative devices. He presents us with a speculative migrant narrative that is an origin story, an "open-ended adventure," a utopic rendering of migration, and a contemplation of Yohan's physical journey.[208] García Bernal's retracing of Yohan's journey and incorporation of exact duration and distance moves the narration towards a phenomenology of migration grounded in the specifically embodied and experienced.[209] This movement toward the phenomenological occurs even as the narration moves (simultaneously and paradoxically) toward transcendent

207. I borrow the phrase "genres of human" from Jamaican writer and theorist Sylvia Wynter. In her foundational collection of writing *On Being Human as Praxis* (2015), Wynter reconceptualizes humanness as a form of praxis by "decolonizing" ideas of being, power, freedom, and truth. Wynter combines Black studies, science studies, cultural and literary histories of the Caribbean, and migratory politics to frame understandings of human/ness as political practices.

208. In this example of García Bernal's voiceover we are presented with a utopic rendering of migration: "This is the oldest story, the very first book, the one that begins with an adventure. In it we all play the main characters. We carry our hopes and virtues as our baggage whilst never forgetting what we left behind, always longing for the place we came from….And they sometimes let me play the part…My new friends take me to the border of my country, Mexico. They then explain how to cross it. There are no guards, no checkpoints. You don't need a passport here. Perhaps all borders should be like this. I wonder if he crossed here on these rafts among friends" (Silver).

209. García Bernal's voiceover narration includes factual details such as the time and duration of Yohan's journey: "58 days" and "3,200 kilometers (Silver).

modalities and modes of storytelling, including romance, sentimentalism, the speculative, the mystic, and the mythical. Through a rendition of death as a spiritual arrival, García Bernal recreates a human origin story that not only conflates the universal experience of human life but also presents death as symbolic and immaterial, as opposed to an actual material end as it is for so many migrants. To make sense of this contradictory double-movement, where the film plays upon both the materially embodied and immaterially transcendent, disembodied, this chapter moves to identify deracialization (the removal of racial characteristics) as the controlling element of the film. Even as the documentary acknowledges on the level of legal discourse the reality of race, racism, and processes of racialization, the film inhabits a veiled contradictory logic that recognizes yet effaces racial difference.[210]

A veiled politics of racial differentiation cohere around García Bernal's impersonation, implicating the migrant subjects surrounding him. García Bernal's impersonation begins with the act of reading over a prayer. Responding to a person's solicitation for Yohan, García Bernal stands, revealing the tattoo of "Dayani Cristal" across his chest (Silver). [211]In a bus ride sequence that follows, García Bernal prompts a fellow migrant about the nature behind his desire to reach *El Norte*. This "impromptu"

210. In this example, one medical examiner elaborates on the massive gravesite accompanying their facility since Arizona law passed a law restricting the cremation of an unidentified body: "The dehumanization of migrants has allowed this to happen. We see a law, and we see a lawbreaker. Illegality comes first before someone's life or someone's health or someone's little kids. I think we would want to human before we want to see people as legal or illegal. These people, as much as they are invisible in life, they're invisible in death in many ways" (Silver).

211. These visual and audio cues clue us into the commencement of García Bernal's reenactment of Yohan's migrant journey as these are presumably the same prayer and tattoo found on the unidentified migrant body. We can presume that this prayer is the same prayer García Bernal is given later in the film, where he is given a copy of the prayer from a priest who runs a migrant refuge shelter.

encounter juxtaposes García Bernal, a light-skinned, upper-class Mexican national who is arguably "white" within the pigmented racial landscape of Latin America, with a brown-skinned migrant[212]. As this encounter unfolds, the discontinuities between these distinctly racialized "migrant bodies" manifest on the level of accent and language, class, skin pigmentation, and experimental knowledge. Moments of disrupture between jarring racialized experiences shore up multiple times in the film, including when a raft guide shouts to García Bernal, "vente güero," and when a migrant riding *La Bestia* shouts at García Bernal and another migrant's playful singing, "dejanos dormir cabrones" (Silver). The documentary's protagonization of García Bernal veils a racial politics of differentiation and difference and the protagonization of whiteness. Behind this whitening of migrancy, we can locate the precarious realities that envelop the flesh of the migrant experience.

Situated within the study of rhetorical literature on grievability, Anne Demo's "Documenting Death by Policy" (2019) points to the different ways *Who is Dayani Cristal?* articulates notions of whiteness even as Demo utilizes a deracialized methodology. Demo situates *Who is Dayani Cristal?* within a larger trend of PTD-driven documentaries that narrate the humanitarian recovery of postmortem migrant bodies through the "show and tell" of forensic science, the "visual proofs" of "migrant death maps," the enumerative rhetoric of data and statistics, and the protagonization of forensic scientists and other government personnel. Demo conceptualizes these

212. See Edward Telles' *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America* (2014) for more on the racializing function of skin color in Latin America.

rhetorical devices as "strategies of refutation" that challenge common-sense immigration discourse that evades the culpability of the US state.[213] Understood in this way, strategies of refutation shore up "the repertoire of official and cultural denials" that not only bolster immigration discourse but also demarcate whose lives are worth protecting and grieving (618). Demo argues that by investing in a "narrative connection" between humanitarian forensic science and the data around PTD-related deaths, documentaries like *Who is Dayani Cristal?* foreground and challenge the "denial structures" undergirding migrants' "conditions of un/representability" (630). Arguing in favor of the human rights potential of humanitarian science-oriented documentaries, Demo argues that documentaries such as *Who is Dayani Cristal?* expand the parameters of "public grievability" around the immigration debate. Demo references testimony from a white forensic medical examiner to affirm this point. In utilizing language that "signifies personhood," this testimonial scene denaturalizes the hierarchy between citizens and noncitizens through the "moral commitment" to identification and repatriation recovery and the insistence on migrant personhood and

213. Anne Demo's "Documenting Death by Policy: Public Grievability, Migrant Lives, and Commonplace Denials" studies the connection between denial and precarity (and the differential distribution of precarity) by studying patterns of refutation. Demo notes how this film represents a larger humanitarian trend to recover and identify postmortem migrant bodies through forensic science. For Demo, the film's protagonization of forensic scientists and government personnel represents a larger trend in migration documentaries (specific to the geopolitical context of PTD) to expand the boundaries of public grievability. The film utilizes the opinions and sentiments of the authorized forensic scientists to question the truth conditions encoded in the immigration legal system and the larger political rationality that upholds that system. Here, the data-driven treatment of the migrant subject becomes another way to humanize migrant subjects. Demo notes the PTD-related documentary trend to show migrant fatality maps, forensic lab footage, and the labor and opinions of forensic scientists. These strategies foreground and challenge the "patterns of refutation" that constitute modern-day US immigration policy.

care (639).[214]

Even as Demo acknowledges the rhetorical authority granted to forensic scientists because of their status as citizens and medical authorities, her reading evades a discussion on how the rhetorical power of forensic examiners also emerges out of their racialized status as white Americans. We can reframe this scene of moral questioning as another example of the film's protagonization of whiteness by drawing attention to the racializing undertones involved in signaling personhood. Here, I suggest that like García Bernal's voiceover that transcends differential positionalities through a language of equivalence, the forensic investigator's oscillating point of view slides from a "you" to "we" to "I" evoke a similar "whitened" or "whitening" transcendent authority that amounts to a totalizing and liberal rendering of America as "all Americans" always already differentiated from the "brown skin" and "blue-collar labor force" of "Hispanics" (Silver). This fantasy of a free, propertied, coherent, and cohesive white America—possessing the inherent capacity to authorize others' claims to personhood—derives from a Western, liberal notion of nation and/as selfhood. I suggest a similar whitened fantasy of freedom animates García Bernal's rendering of migrancy as a quest of the self. For instance, we see this fantasy of freedom in García Bernal's introspection of *La Bestia*:

214. In this scene, the white medical examiner states: "First you have to admit there's a problem. And the problem isn't people sneaking across the border. To my mind, the problem is all economic. We need, the American capitalist economy needs a blue-collar labor. And if Americans won't do it, then we can't bitch that another country will send people over to do it. We're dangling the carrot in grocery stores, in hotels, and in the service industry. You know, from the north slope of Alaska to Florida, there are Hispanics, migrants, they're doing jobs in every state. I think as an American, I would like all Americans to acknowledge that they benefit from a blue-collar labor force that has brown skin" (Demo 638).

> Two hundred kilometers north of the Guatemalan border, we catch the train in Arriaga. The migrants call it "The Beast." At first, it is loud and powerful. But then you fall into its rhythm like riding the horse for the first time. You're not fully in control. In reality, you have no control at all…. I have rarely felt as alive as when I was on top of that train. It wasn't because the fear of death was there along the way but the feeling of fraternity we shared on that endless trip…. They worry about me because now we tame 'The Beast' together. (Silver)

This narrative of *La Bestia* as freedom of movement and fraternal collectivity coheres around a fantasy of the white liberal subject, again through the transcendent authority of oscillating positionalities. Behind the universalizing protagonization of whiteness that goes hand in hand with the story of freedom of movement, we find a veiled reality of differentiating hierarchies.

To disarticulate this fantasy of whiteness undergirding discourses on migrant suffering, I suggest revisiting the "conditions of un/representability" that animate Demo's rhetorical denial structures. Demo bases her reading of migrant precarity on Judith Butler's formulation of precarity and un/representability. She cites Butler's *Precarious Life* (2006) and *Frames of War* (2009) to elaborate on the distinction between representation and representability and demonstrate how that distinction, within the context and critique of violence, determines the very parameters of what is and what is not worth grieving. For Butler, as opposed to the content inside, what is excluded from the frame of violence creates the parameters of un/representability. As Butler writes, the delineation of these parameters is as much about "effacement through occlusion" as it is about "effacement through representation itself" (Butler 47). Understanding the parameters of public consciousness as such—where the convergence of perception and state policy renders some humans less deserving—

Demo imports Butler's conceptualization to the specific context of PTD. Demo writes, "For immigrant enforcement policy, that challenge [of un/representability] includes a repertoire of denials that provide moral cover for indifference to suffering. Given that the desert consumes human remains in ways that conceal the full scale of death, any analysis of PTD policies must address conditions of un/representability" (622). My analysis agrees with Demo's proclamation on the "unrepresentable" nature of violence undergirding PTD and immigration discourse. However, this chapter arrives at another conceptualization of un/representability altogether. This chapter argues that the conditions of un/representability that uphold the figure of the PTD-postmortem migrant have less to do with an effacement through occlusion or effacement through representation and more to do with an effacement through scale. As opposed to conceptually privileging the content outside "frames of violence" (as Demo and Butler), this chapter moves towards questioning the nature of the frame itself. To arrive at the heart of PTD-driven conditions of un/representability, we require a conceptual lens that (while attentive to the contours of rhetoric and public discourse) moves beyond the parameters of discourse and/as language to address the veiled and myriad ways race and racialization become sidelined (inside, outside, and across the frame of the documentary) even as processes of racialization sit at the center of PTD-driven histories of violence.

III. Visualities of Scale

This section turns to Mary Pat Brady's *Scales of Captivity* to situate PTD within a more extensive hemispheric history of racial capitalism targeting non-white

populations. Brady foregrounds racial modes of captivity that emerged out of European desires for freedom of movement and development. She cites Hobbes and Locke's writing on the locomotive's power as a critical moment that constituted the liberal subject and, in turn, economies of captivity.[215] Brady places the figure of the captive child at the center of the liberal self-development narrative and, in turn, at the center of a history of multiple forms of captivity and racializing practices of containment.[216] For Brady, the liberal narrative of self-hood organizes the materiality of space and the social relations undergirding modernity and/as coloniality.[217] She argues that "scalar epistemologies" operationalized the coloniality of power that organized the Americas' spatial and material imaginary. Citing Jesuit theologian Juan Maldonado's imagining of the earth from the vantage point of the moon, Brady writes:

> Scale, like its workhorse the border, claims its power in part because it functions as a metaphor made material, as a rhetorical device and economic practice, as a register for the selling of stocks and ordering of zoning laws, as

215. Brady writes: "For both [Hobbes and Locke], freedom pivots around movement even as, or perhaps especially because, the maintenance of sovereignty increasingly more and more modalities to manage, constrain, encourage, and contour movement. The concept freedom is materialized through mobility, and power is materialized through the ways in which it can regulate and constrain movement…. The centrality of movement to liberal subjectivity compels the economies of captivity into the quotidian logics of all subjected to sovereign practices such that…[t]he constraint and bracketing of those denied adulthood, those perpetually deemed the unruly, dependent child, orders movement for everyone else. Ordered movement, configured as liberal freedom corporealized, requires ballast. Private property came to be understood as one of the crucial stabilizers of freedom. For those without property, captivity does the trick" (12-13).

216. Brady begins her book by situating the practice of dismembering kin affective relations within a larger racialized history of captivity that implicates multiple non-white populations. Brady writes: "The children held in cages along the US-Mexico border, like their grandparents and cousins, must survive not just the 'legal violence' of the deportation machine but an economy and history wedded to captivity…So, too, life without papers in the twenty-first century must be also understood as form of captivity, as a flexible enclosure that constrains and delimits socialities just as forced removal and mass deportation have broadened the geometry of captivity seemingly everywhere. Determined to ruthlessly mangle the affective networks that enable social lives to flourish, the US migration system has become the new Virginia Company" (2-3).

217. For an explication of how coloniality represents the "darker side" of modernity see Walter Mignolo's *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*.

> the linguistic reservoir for racism and racializing conventions and, ultimately, as both an epistemological and ontological formation. In other words, built into scale is an assumption that the view from the moon offers truth, that the world is one and can be homogenized as such, and that, indeed, the density of the nearby has no transcendent meaning, and certainly no meaning that can't be scaled. Scale underpins the coloniality of power and, as a habit of thought, helps establish and maintain a global order of racialized peoples. (Brady 19)

Scale, as both form and heuristic, animates a set of already organized hierarchized spatial and social practices and, in turn, forms of captivity and "bracketing" practices from the Americas' inception to the contemporary moment structure and confine Latinx lives. Building upon Brady's formulation of "scales of captivity," this chapter locates the figure of the unidentified postmortem migrant at the center of multiple forms of captivity and racializing practices of bracketing. I argue that situating the figure of the postmortem migrant at the center of "visualities of scales" allows us to recognize the visual and de/racialized politics of differentiation and hierarchization that historically bases the political and social violence that is PTD.

Throughout the forensic investigation subnarrative, the documentary inundates the viewer with visuals of scale. We see systems of classification, quantification, cataloging, filing, mapping, and digitizing cohering around unidentified postmortem bodies.[218] These visuals of physical and virtual modes of bracketing slide into an excessive modality through the documentary's visual emphasis on stacked materials, including libraries stacked with books and binders, stacked bodies in morgues, and

218. Examples of these visuals include taped whiteboards, physical ID tags, digital photos, virtual maps, collapsing computer files, shots of binders and labeled manilla folders, and shots of technology like printers, computers, and cameras (Silver).

stacked and cramped offices overwhelmed with paper files. Demo understands this footage of accumulated objects as a way the film articulates gravity and the "scale of death over time," which serves as another way to refute denials about the state's moral obligation and culpability (637). While recognizing that this visual form of narrativization does work toward implicating the viewer and the state, given the inherent veiled nature of violence undergirding PTD and Brady's intervention on the racialized politics of scale, this chapter invites a more pessimistic reading of these visuals of excessive materials and modes of bracketing. As opposed to reimagining the relationality between the state, citizens, and non-citizens (as Demo sees it), these intimate yet sterile encounters with visualities of scale reify an understanding of the postmortem migrant as an abstracted and homogenized figure of scale at the center of a more extensive racial and capitalist history of captivity, differentiation, and hierarchization.

To elucidate this point, I draw attention to a moment in the documentary where the camera lingers on a virtual map of the Sonoran Desert with digitalized bodies labeled under generic names such as "John Doe," "Jane Doe," "Gene," and "Dave" (Silver). The camera lingers on this visual as the investigator zooms out of the virtual map of the desert to showcase the scale of death that reigns over this territory. While we could understand the documentary's visual zooming in and out of computer data files and virtual migrant "death maps" as cultivating "moral obligation by creating an appetite for intervention," as Demo frames it, I suggest we connect the postmortem migrant figure to the seductive quality of scalar thinking (626). That is, the scalar and

spatial abstraction of migrant deaths further satiate a neo-colonial appetite for situating migrants within an already hierarchized set of spatial relations in which the frame and the visual manipulation of the frame determine content.[219] Even as the scalar-driven treatment of postmortem migrant body can be understood as another way of humanizing the migrant subject, racialized excesses steep through the sterilized language of medical and state discourse (including the deracialized language of generic names such as "John Doe") and, most importantly, the subterranean visual politics of the film.

These racializing excesses become most apparent in the drive to profile the migrant's body. A close-up shot of an office poster situates each stage of corpse decomposition in a listed hierarchy (Silver). At face value, we can understand these biological distinctions as containing their own medical "truth-value," in how these categories distinguish the migrant body's duration of time in the desert and the nature behind their exposure. Yet, we see this imperative to classify and profile migrant flesh and migrant belongings slide into a racial, or already racialized, mode of profiling at many points in the documentary. For example, we see this slippage from a medical-based form of profiling to a racialized profiling when forensic investigators speculate on the association between the tattoos of different postmortem migrant bodies to gang

219. Here, I recall my first introduction to the sterilized discourse of the Border industrial complex and the strange investment in visualities of scale. As an undergrad, I participated in a Border immersion program called the "Border Awareness Experience." During this trip, we visited migrant shelters, maquiladoras, and community centers in Cuidad Juarez and El Paso. In El Paso, we visited the Border Patrol headquarters, where an officer gave us a PowerPoint presentation on US immigration policy. On the following tour, I encountered a diorama of the border with miniature white fencing. A trail of tortillas and a tiny alien figure was spread across this mini model of the desert border.

affiliation, including the tattoo of "Dayani Cristal." As I elaborate in "The Tattooed Body" chapter, the speculation around gang affiliation invokes a more extensive and convoluted hemispheric history of illegality and criminalization that shadows migrant populations regardless of a migrant's history of gang affiliation. Building upon Jasbir Puar's "data body" formulation in *Terrorist Assemblages*, I consider how this racialized speculation functions as a "shadow body" that follows and precedes the migrant and *marero*-to-be.[220] As opposed to understanding visuality as merely an act of direct perception, I reframe visuality as a racial production and an interplay of working racial constructs. Here, I situate the post-mortem migrant body at the intersection of informational, data-driven, and scientific technologies, a body that is "machined together" through data, narrative, and information. The postmortem migrant's data body stands at the nexus of data-driven, science-driven, and ethnographic technologies

220. Jasbir Puar deploys the term "data body" within the post-9/11 context of "surveillant assemblages" that monitor the mobility of potential terrorists through biometric data, transactional (as in monetary) data, and other identity recognition technologies both at US points of entry and before travelers' departure. Within this context, "data body" refers to the "shadow body" that follows and precedes the terrorist-to-be. Puar's assemblage theory of "data body" moves beyond visibility politics, which relies on war-related and biopolitical "tactics" of surveillance that fetishizes objects of deviancy and difference, including the turban. While Puar's case study is distinct in that she looks at the turbaned body within the (de)racialized politics of profiling, I borrow from Puar's formulation the reframing of seeing from an act of direct perception to a seeing that understands visibility as a racial production and an interplay of working racial constructs. She asks, "What is the concept of race in profiling if we are not to privilege the visible, the knowable, the epistemological? Is the informational body, the data-body that precedes and follow us racial, or racist, and if so, how is it articulated within profiling" (175). In short, data bodies refer to "bodies materialized through information and statistics" and "the data they assemblage" (199). For Puar, the informational data-body temporally precedes and follows the racialized Sikh body in that "[t]urbans function in multiple power sites of perpetual monitoring linked together to stimulate a continuous circuitry and regime of control, interconnnected pathways of surveillance and discipline. The turban exists not as a closed site of differentiation, but among proliferating vectors of capture" (200). The racialized turbaned body is embedded in multiple forms of signification based on visuality even as the visual gets coopted by the ocular (as in surveillance technology), the affective (in this case, affect understood as the racialized body's capacity to contaminate as a form of contagion) and the informational (as in biometrics and statistics). For Puar, the representational power of the visual becomes suspect.

that utilize documentation, classification, extraction, quantification, and digitalization technologies to uncover the humanness (I.e., name, identity, funeral rites, and life experiences) of the dead migrant. The racialized data body is situated in multiple forms of "visualities of scale" that go hand in hand with already criminalized structures of bracketing and profiling. The representative capacity of the visual becomes suspect when we see the postmortem migrant tattoo take up a life of its own as it does in the *Who is Dayani Cristal?* The narrative moves into the excessive points to how the film's visual attention to Yohan's tattoo (and tattoos in general) is entrenched, procedural, and culturally imagined, packaged together into something new.[221]

In the documentary, we see the tattoo "Dayani Cristal" take on a visual language of its own. On the one hand, the tattoo "Dayani Cristal" represents something necessarily embodied; a materiality specific to Yohan's life experience and identity and the finite story of his flesh.[222] On the other hand, "Dayani Cristal" points to a visuality of disembodiment and the racialized surplus of meaning that surrounds the postmortem migrant body. We witness these excess meanings and ruptures between body and flesh, first, with the sheriff's mispronounciation of "Doyomi Cristal" and, second, with the disorienting visual of the tattoo "Dayani Cristal" across García Bernal's bare chest. The visual attention to the tattoos intensifies in the film's opening credits, which feature

221. This elaboration on visual excess also has implications for the tattoos of *Sin Nombre,* where we have a different yet related rendition of tattooed bodies. In a way, we can think of the racial excess that surrounds tattoos as the tattooed body's social afterlife.

222. A Honduran government worker elaborates on the personal significance of the tattoo: "But when we actually told them about the tattoos, they broke. They broke out and they said, Yes, it's him. Because a tattoo is something that is so personal, that no one else could have it. It was like proof to them that it was really him" (Silver).

a ritualized tattooing of "Dayani Cristal" on an anonymous and bracketed body with no head. Against the music of Calle 13's "Latinoamérica," we see an arrangement of distinct tattoos, a visual of latex gloves, and the background graphic of an American flag. This "ritualizing" introduction to the documentary not only works in a visual modality of excess, but the visual of a tattooed body also animates a language of abstraction and homogenization like the visuality of scale that pervades migrant death maps. Visual excess, like scale, is deracialization materialized. We see the postmortem migrant body co-opted by a de/racialized imagination and visualities of disembodiment. Just like the opening credits visually cohere around an abstracted, ritualized tattooing, the subterranean visual landscape of the film coalesces in the articulation of the migrant as an already racialized yet deracialized body of data. That is to say, like how we see the visuality of migrant death maps co-opted by the seductive quality of scale; the tattooed data body becomes co-opted by the seductive quality of abstraction and disembodiment. As such, I move to argue for the conceptual need to disarticulate the deracialized workings of the body from the racialized workings of the flesh.

To draw a body/flesh distinction, I turn to Alexander Weheliye's conceptualization of "racializing assemblages" in *Habeas Viscus* (2014). Here, Weheliye understands the distinction between body and flesh as the antidote to European-derived theorizations of political violence and racialized practices of dehumanization. As Weheliye posits, conceiving race as a series of racializing assemblages moves to "conceive humanity as a relational ontological totality" as

opposed to conflating Western Man with a real object such as "people," "humanity," or "human" (32). For Weheliye, to uncover the deeply entwined relationship between race and our modern understanding of what is human, we must acknowledge how race, as a technological assemblage, becomes bound to human physiology through the politicization of the biological, the administration of knowledge to the practical aims of human life, and the alteration of the human environment. Where the body implies legal personhood via self-possession (and Brady would add here the narrative of freedom of mobility and self-development), the flesh complicates the category of embodiment as it has been historically and theoretically entwined with a Western liberal humanist understanding of the human individual as a coherent, legible, and self-possessed white body.[223] As a critical site for the theorization of political violence and racialization, the flesh undoes the epistemic violence of liberal humanism by complicating the visual-truth value granted to quasi-biological distinctions. Liberal humanism converts the oppressed subject into flesh before creating the false impression the oppressed possesses a body. Building upon Hortense Spiller's theorization of the flesh, Weheliye writes: "Flesh, while representing both a temporal and conceptual antecedent to the body, is not a biological occurrence seeing that its creation requires an elaborate apparatus of 'the calculated work of iron, whips, chain, knives, the canine

223. Weheliye aims to draw attention to how deeply affixed racialization is to the somatic parameters of human. In Weheliye's formulation, racializing assemblages (1) foreground race as a constitutive category in thinking about the boundaries of humanity and what/who is human, (2) signify the visual modalities in which dehumanization is exercised, (3) constitute race as not something given or natural or a cultural phenomenon but rather "an assemblage of forces that must continuously articulate nonwhite subjects as-not-quite human," and (4) foreground racialization as an object of knowledge and/as a history of political violence that racially hierarchizes bodies into the category of human, not-quite-human, and non-human (19).

patrol, the bullet" (39).[224] In the case of the postmortem migrant, that "elaborate apparatus" extends to the veiled scalar and sterilized logic of the immigration policy of PTD and the forensic classification that occurs after the Sonoran Desert enacts its "calculated work" of extreme environmental exposure, what forensic scientists and ethnographers call a "bad death."[225]

In conceptualizing the postmortem migrant as a data body, I build upon the language of racial assemblages as Puar and Weheliye have conceptualized it.[226]

---

224. Here, Weheliye cites Spiller's famous essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." (See pp. 67)

225. See De León and Demo for a forensic elaboration on "bad death."

226. Whereas Puar's formulation of "homonationalism" and the racialized terrorist assemblage critiques homo-normative notions of queerness in post-9/11 everyday and bio/political life, Weheliye's formulation of "habeas viscus" and racializing assemblages explores the role of liberal humanist thinking in dictating de/racialized theorizations of political violence and dehumanization. As opposed to offering a critique of queer life and the biopolitical management of "queer" life as Puar's homonationalism does, Weheliye's racializing assemblages animates broader methodological questions about the production of racialization as an object of knowledge both inside and outside minority discourses. Weheliye notes Puar's major role in putting Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's idea of assemblages (introduced in their text A thousand plateaus) in dialogue with queer and race studies specifically through questions of racial and sexual identity. For Weheliye, Puar's approach to assemblages emphasizes the territorialization of assemblage theory (the ordering of material content and forms of expressions) while de-emphasizing deterritorialization, that is, the social processes by which material and expressive forms become disarticulated or undone. For Weheliye, Puar's conceptualization of identity "as wholly in flux" while providing the basis of Puar's more extensive critique of fixed and singular racialized, sexualized, and nationalized identities found in intersectionality, disregards deterritorial processes of disarticulation, disconnection, and disfigurement (155). While my formulation of racializing assemblages conceptually derives more from Weheliye's formulation, it is essential to note that Puar's article "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess": Becoming-Intersectional Assemblage Theory" (published in 2012 as a response to critics' anxiety around Puar's call to "leave intersectionality behind") provides (in my opinion) an analytical bridge between Puar's earlier formulation of racial assemblage theory (as foregrounded in *Terrorist Assemblage*) and Weheliye's formulation. Here, Puar builds upon Rey Chow's critique of how poststructuralism's self-referentiality, where "intersectionality functions as a problematic reinvestment in the humanist subject, in particular, the 'subject X'" (55). Puar locates the fruitfulness of "thinking through the intertwined relations of intersectionality and assemblage" in how assemblage theory (1) foregrounds matter as an actor, (2) deprivileges universal and rights-bearing subjecthood (the western Man or subject X), (3) de-centralizes the formulation of bodies as human, "nor as residing within a human animal/nonhuman animal binary", and (4) places the idea of "agency" in crisis, as it is applied both to matter and subjectivity (57). Puar goes on to state: "There are different conceptual problems posed by each; intersectionality attempts to comprehend political institutions and their attendant forms of social normativity and disciplinary administration, while assemblages, in an effort to reintroduce politics into the political, ask what is prior to and beyond what gets established" (63). We can think of *Habeas Viscus* as a roadmap for the ever-evolving project of inquiry into the relations between discipline

Assemblage theory offers us an ontological paradigm and reading practice that makes sense of these contradictory impulses of the documentary to articulate a coherent, legible, and human subject who has a name, a family, a home-town, and a story and, paradoxically, differentiate the postmortem migrant as *something* already racialized and not-quite-human. In line with Weheliye's theorization of political violence as a violent political apparatus PTD "activates a fleshy surplus that simultaneously sustains and disfigures said brutality" (2). When we move to understand the postmortem data body as a form of racializing assemblage, we "reclaim the atrocity of the flesh" by centering the flesh in the contemplation of PTD-driven spatial, temporal, and social experiences[227] (2). As a form of racializing assemblage, the postmortem data body (1) refers to both the temporal and spatial antecedent and afterlife of the migrant body, (2) understands flesh as not a biological occurrence but as a machined substance, (3) names the migrant subject's social inheritance of desert necroviolence, and (4) foregrounds the category of human to question the wholeness, coherence, legibility, and self-possession of the migrant body as it is ontologically projected in this world of PTD-driven violence. Understood as a form of reading practice, racializing assemblages re-racialize the deracialized by giving language to the contradictory movements and

---

and control and the allusive project of "agency." Following Wehelife's critique of liberal humanism, Puar posits, "Agency, as it has historically been deployed, refers to the capacities of the liberal humanist subject, an anthropocentric conceptualization of movement" (65).

227. Assemblage theory has been used to understand the cultural and spatial terms of social bodies and the fluidity and exchangeability of human subjectivity within the ontological branch of philosophy. This theoretical tradition foregrounds the question: how are entities grouped into basic categories? (See Manuel DeLanda) Within materialist interpretations of assemblage theory, flesh and tissue take on special meaning as it becomes the site where forms of expressions and forms of content re/reorder, enter, and exit our spatial, temporal, and social experience. (See Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages*)

modalities that make up the data body. Through the co-opting of the migrant body, *Who is Dayani Cristal?* coheres around Yohan's present yet absent body. Through a language of transcendence that grates against yet run parallel to visualities of excess, scale, abstraction, and hierarchization, the postmortem migrant appears as a conglomerate of different racializing assemblages. By disfiguring and reordering the flesh, the data body comes to life within this projected screen of migrancy.



Fig. 1.3. Poster for the film *Who is Dayani Cristal?* (Influence Film Club)

The data body's racial slippages and excesses culminate in this film poster that projects the digitalized face of García Bernal (see fig. 1.3). As a series of arranged assemblages, we see García Bernal's face divided into dozens of digitalized boxes. Each box details an everyday image of PTD-driven violence in the Sonoran Desert. Within the frame of the boxes, we see desert cacti, photos of forensic and state

investigators, and a corpse's decaying hand, all assembled to articulate the coherent yet incoherent face of García Bernal. Not only is this image the culmination of visualities of scale, excess, and extraction, extracting the very migrant materiality of bones, belongings, and the flesh, we can think of this image as a modern-day, neocolonial manifestation of "castagorization."[228] Similar to the way castas instructed European audiences to comprehend race through a scaled and singular world also based on the intimacy of the everyday, this film poster teaches Western audiences and (white) Americans, in particular, to understand race and to find satisfaction in the "everydayness" of PTD and the expression of the postmortem migrant as a singular, coherent, and legible whitened human. As opposed to understanding this poster of García Bernal as merely a collection of images that imbricate the PTD postmortem migrant, we can think of this poster as a collection of parts, as a series of differentiated skin tones and migrant materialities, that when yielded into a whole point to the ontological irreducibility and decomposability of the white liberal subject and, at once, the historical atrocity of migrant flesh. As a racializing assemblage, the data body points to the disposability and decomposability of migrant flesh, as well as the sterile rigidity and non-decomposability of the white, universal subject as the modern

228. Brady elaborates on the power of castas to present a singular yet intimate world: "Linking the exoticism of intimacy to difference, casta paintings produce race as knowable; they instruct by making race a quotidian materiality, an outcome of the everyday. By scaling cultural difference through the multitude of differentiated garbs and skin tones, castas paintings taught racial difference as cultural difference (marked by clothes, activities, locations) and, through these multiply circulated syllabi, taught Europe to understand race and to find satisfaction in a particularly useful apparatus (scale) that helped solidify the idea of a single world, one that could be characterized as having a singly, underlying nature or reality but with many cultures. This representational move, according to Arturo Escobar, promoted 'the West's ability to arrogate for itself the right to be 'the world,' and to subject all other worlds to its rules'" (22).

prototype of humanness. The data body combines the everydayness of PTD-violence to present us with this whitened agglomeration of migrant materialities.

This racializing assemblage points to the irreducibility and decomposability of the white liberal subject as much as it offers a deeper insight into how matter organizes around the migrant's physical and social body. As Brady affirms in her reading of impersonation across Latinx literary texts centering on the figure of the child, impersonation "showcases the constructed qualities of personhood but also undermines a logic of transcendent authenticity" (242). García Bernal's impersonation shores up the problematic effacement of racial difference, yet witnessing this impersonation is also productive. As I have stated before, the liberal logic of transcendent authority undergirds the discourse of pathos of this film as much as it has come to encompass a more significant trend in the humanities- and humanitarian-oriented work of making migrants matter. By moving to understand this documentary as an ontological screen for the epistemological instruction of migrancy, I call for the messy work of disentangling migrant epistemologies from migrant ontologies from migrant materialities. Instead of assuming studies on migrancy reflect an already existing series of real and natural objects, we need to draw attention to the complex ways this (broadly defined) field of inquiry contributes to or articulates the creation of objects of knowledge such as the migrant figure, the migrant community, and migrant culture.

Moreover, for studies of PTD-related migrancy to engage ethically with migrant subjectivity, they must contend with the structural and social imagination that propels PTD-driven violence. Towards the end of *Who is Dayani Cristal?,* Yohan's

friend who resides in Honduras testifies: "As I understand, the United States is investing billions of dollars on that wall. Why invest in something that is inanimate? It's a dead investment. Why not invest in human beings?" (Silver) By framing capitalism's investment in the "inanimate," Yohan's friend foregrounds the historical and social genesis of PTD-driven violence—the human manipulation of the environment to do America's bidding. PTD ushered a distinct era of political and social violence where the dead migrant subject emerges as both an object of scale and de/racialized articulated byproduct in the quest to differentiate full human, not-quite-human, and non-human. Deracialization, structurally and imaginatively, lies at the center of the PTD apparatus. As such, deracialization needs to be a central concern when we theorize PTD-constructed migrant subjectivities. It is not coincidental that processes of deracialization spill into the discursive study and cultural imagining of contemporary migrants of PTD violence. This "spilling over" occurs out of dated presumptions that constitute human as race. Even as PTD constitutes a distinct moment of social and political violence, we require conceptual tools and reading practices that not only contend with race and racialization but also situate racialization within a larger relational paradigm of oppressive practices. Otherwise, when addressing histories of violence, we risk transposing one geopolitical and theoretical tradition onto another.

One such critique can be extended to De León's formulation of desert necroviolence. When theorizing the borderspace as a "remote deathscape," De León relies on Giorgio Agamben's theorization of bare life and states of exception to contextualize postmortem violence and PTD's operationalization of violence that

occurs out of sight. De León states:

> Like Agamben's characterization of the concentration camp, the spatial arrangement of borders often allows a space to exist outside the bounds of normal state or moral law. Border zones become spaces of exception—physical and political locations where an individual's rights and protections under law can be stripped away upon entrance. Having your body consumed by wild animals is but one of many 'exceptional' things that happen in the Sonoran Desert as a result of federal immigration policies. (De León 27-28)

Here, I do not take issue with De León's formulation of PTD as the desert necroviolence per se. However, given the critique of liberal forms of transcendent authority and the practices of deracialization and disembodiment that undergird PTD I foreground in this chapter, I propose we revisit the stakes behind De León's conceptualization of postmortem violence. Here, I turn to Weheliye's critique of the universalization of the concentration camp in *Habeas Viscus*. Weheliye writes:

> Instead of advancing an ethos of historical determinism… I am interested in the crosscurrents and discontinuities of the irreducible relation at the heart of state of exception and the zone of indistinction. In other words, the sociohistorical texture of relation that establishes the camp as a locus centralis of modern terror qua politics languishes in Agamben's universalization of the concentration camp. To be clear, I am not taking issue with the figuration of concentration camps in Agamben's argument per se, as much as I am questioning the projection of death camps onto an exceptional ontological screen (both as an end point and as a site of origin) rather than emphasizing their constitutive relationality in the modern world as well as the resultant displacement of racial slavery, colonialism, and indigenous genocide as nomoi of modern politics. (Weheliye 36)

Weheliye goes on to locate the central problem with bare life in the disembodiment of the homo sacer figure, and Agamben's envisioning an indivisible and absolute

biological matter that transcends racialization.[229] While De León's treatment of racialization significantly differs from Agamben's, it is worth noting the discontinuities in importing European theorizations of dehumanization and political violence to the hemispheric context of the Americas and this particular geosphere's engagement with racial capitalism. [230]Unlike Agamben's historical reference to the concentration camp, PTD is an ongoing articulation of political violence. In establishing the importance of PTD desert necroviolence to the making of dead migrant subjects, we need not lose sight of the multiple ways distinct categories of undocumented migrants stand in relation to other contemporary racial groups and subjugated subject positions, including gendered and sexualized subjectivities and nonhumans. Perhaps, we have

229. In *Habeas Viscus,* Weheliye critiques the exceptionality and universality of deracialized political violence and moves towards the claim that suffering has become more a norm than an exception in this stage of modernity. Weheliye argues that Agamben's bare life, Foucault's biopolitics, and Mbembe's necropolitics (to some extent) supersede race and negate the presence of other modes of life emerging in tandem with the violence, subjection, exploitation, and racialization that define the modern human. These formulations of political violence as dehumanization understand race as a "real object" or "primitive notion" by situating racial difference in a field that predates or is at a distance from conceptual contemplation. Weheliye locates this misunderstanding in how Agamben envisions an indivisible and absolute biological matter that comes before racialization. He takes issue with the Agamben's founding of a biological sphere beyond the reach of racial hierarchies that represents the "final frontier of biopolitics" (55). The disembodiment of the homo sacer figure fails to incorporate in any significant manner "the messy corporeality of bare life" where morality and sociality are both curtailed or disfigured (38). Bare life aspires to transcend racialization by drawing on an "absolute biological matter" or "an indivisible biological substance anterior to racialization" that negates the existence of other forms of humanity through an anti-identity politics and, therefore, misconstrues race as a biological or cultural classification ("real object") as opposed to a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into the category of full human, not-quite-human, and nonhuman (4).

230. De León's greater ethnographic work has attended to the materiality, corporeality, and phenomenology of migrant suffering. In his article "Undocumented Migration, Use Wear, and the Materiality of Habitual Suffering in the Sonoran Desert," for example, he challenges the superficial treatment of "migrant artifacts" to demonstrate how the mundane things left in the desert are critical to understanding the forms of suffering and shared system of crossing techniques migrants adapt to in their border-crossing experience. Overall, De León's work demonstrates a deep commitment to understanding the materiality and embodiment of migrancy. To be clear, I situate my critique of De León's formulation of desert necroviolence in the analytical leap from the phenomenological and specifically embodied experience of migrancy to the broadly conceptualized. I call for the necessity to retain the specificity of racialized violence in the theoretical formulation of political violence.

reached an intellectual moment when it is time to leave bare life behind and look instead to relational formulations of the oppressed within a racialized minority discourse that complicates the ways liberal individualism narrates agency, resistance, and suffering. By revisiting desert necroviolence, I propose taking the phenomenology of migrant flesh as the point of departure and the point of return.

IV. Imagining Flesh

In 2018, news reports of "lost migrant children" emerged in the US. These headlines highlighted the federal government's inability to locate approximately 1,500 migrant children who had been placed with sponsors upon arriving at the border alone.[231]The "lost children" shored up criticism about the US government's separation of migrant children from their parents and also pointed to the structural inadequacies of the federal immigration system.[232] I turn to this contemporary example of "captivity" politics to address another iteration of the migrant data body. Just as Brady situates the figure of the captive child at the center of a history of racializing practices that break up kin-affective relations, the separated, missing child shores up a more extensive history of competing ideas of who has access to childhood so that "when young twenty-first-century refugees approach the US-Mexico border as generations before they have, their horizon of possibilities is already split—a path to childhood lies open at the same time that their access to such childhood is limited by the matrices and land mines of

231. One example of this headline: "US Lost Track of 1,500 Immigrant Children, but Says It's Not 'legally Responsible'" (Andone).

232. For more on how transnational families become victims of immigration structural practices and the traumatic effect of family separation on affective kinship bonds, see Leisy J. Abrego's *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders*.

racialization" (11). Given how the child stands at the center of the imaginary work of racial capitalism, it is not surprising that at the end of *Who is Dayani Cristal?* we find that the tattoo on Yohan's decomposing body refers to Yohan's daughter, Dayani Cristal. A family member testifies to the significance of the tattoo, "It was his dream to get the tattoo, he'd wanted it for a while. I asked if it hurt. He said that it hurt but it was worth it for his daughter. The pain didn't bother him, he said that he didn't care" (Silver). In a strange and haunting way, Dayani Cristal links the violence of the postmortem migrant with the hemispheric violence imposed upon children whose "horizon of possibilities is already split." As *Who is Dayani Cristal?* brings to light towards the end of the narrative Yohan migrated to create another pathway for his child, yet upon migrating, his course is already determined and already split.



Fig. 1.4. "No Cages No Jaulas" (Cortez)

In light of this hemispheric history of racializing violence, we can think of Beatriz Cortez's "No Cages No Jaulas" as a manifesto on the generative capacity of "reparative witnessing" (see fig. 1.4).[233] In her manifesto, Cortez declares:

> I chose the phrase "NO CAGES NO JAULAS" because our communities have suffered one of the most despicable acts: the separation of children from their families, our children are being held in refrigerated cages surrounded by chain link, covering their bodies with mylar blankets, growing up alone, feeling abandoned, without being able to satisfy their most basic needs physically and spiritually. They need to be released to their families who love them and miss them, and to their communities so that we can be made whole again and so that they may heal.
> #DefundICE #NoCages #NoJaulas #InPlainSight #LookUp #XMap (Cortez)

Here, Cortez challenges the logic of separability, distinctions, and comparison by acknowledging a collective history of shared vulnerabilities and the potentiality of connection premised on a shared sense of obligation. "#InPlainSight" calls to bring the hidden mechanisms of violence and hidden histories of captivity into plain sight as "#LookUp" emphasizes the spatial act of looking up instead of looking down upon subjugated bodies. Cortez reimagines spatial imaginary and the basis of material and affective relationalities by juxtaposing the horizontal density of the "No Cages No Jaulas" clouds with the vertical rigidity of the downtown skyscrapers. To look up to a world that is one and many means to look at materiality with a new sense of curiosity. The density of the clouds juxtaposed with the openness of the sky offers us another way to think about the politics of invisibility and un/representability that ensnare

233. Drawing upon José Esteban Muñoz's writing on feeling and thinking brown, Brady introduces the idea of a "reparative witnessing" that does "not prettify cages or brackets, but as a part of a repertoire of resistance…enables ruptures and refusals that go unmarked as resistance precisely because scalar logic insists on a simplistic idea of transformation" as the advancement of liberal rationalism (246).

migrant lives. The impermanence of the clouds challenges the vision afforded by a scaled imaginary even as it mourns scale's` violence. By reimaging the flesh of migrancy as something in motion and always becoming, this image invites another way of imagining Latinx modes of belonging and being in the world.[234] Coming to terms with the intensified forms of violence directed towards migrants and people of color means taking relationality seriously and studying different ways of being in the world. Cortez's reimaging of downtown LA—the historic business center of a vast metropolis—iterates freedom as something imagined but not yet described- a world animated by our interconnected existence as material beings. When the logic of separation does not determine relations, we allow materiality to unfold in front of us.

234. Here, I invoke Muñoz's understanding of a critical utopia where queerness and queer ways of being in the world invoke an ever-unfolding future horizon in *Cruising Utopia*.

Bibliography

Abrego, Leisy J. *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders*. Stanford University Press, 2014.

Abrego, Leisy J, and Alejandro Villalpando. "Racialization of Central Americans in the United States." *Precarity and Belonging: Labor, Migration, and Noncitizenship*, edited by Ramírez Catherine S. et al., Rutgers University Press, Piscataway, 2021, pp. 51–66.

Adisa, Opal Palmer. "Up Close and Personal: Edwidge Danticat on Haitian Identity and the Writer's Life." *African American Review*, vol. 43, no. 2/3, 2009, pp. 345–55. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41328611.

Aguirre, Robert D. *Mobility and Modernity: Panama in the Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Imagination*. 1st edition, Ohio State University Press, 2017.

Ahmed, Sara. "Happy Objects." *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010, pp. 29–51.

---. "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, Jan. 2006, pp. 543–74. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.1215/10642684-2006-002.

---. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press, 2006.

---. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Second edition, Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

---. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press, 2010.

---.*Willful Subjects*. Duke University Press Books, 2014.

Ahmed, Sara, and Jackie Stacey, editors. *Thinking Through the Skin*. Routledge, 2001.

Alcoff, Linda Martín. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. Oxford

University Press, 2006.

Alvarado, Karina Oliva, et al., editors. *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance*. 1st edition, University of Arizona Press, 2017.

Andone, Dakin. "US Lost Track of 1,500 Immigrant Children, but Says It's Not 'legally Responsible.'" *CNN*, 26 May 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/26/politics/hhs-lost-track-1500-immigrant-children/index.html.

Angulo-Pasel, Carla. "Navigating Risks Across Borders: The Lived Experiences of Central American Women Migrants." *Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive)*, Jan. 2018, https://scholars.wlu.ca/etd/2019.

Arias, Arturo. "Central American- Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World." *Latino Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2003, pp. 168–87.

---."Central American Diasporas: Transnational Gangs the Transformation of Latino Identity in the United States." *Technofuturos: Critical Interventions in Latina/o Studies*. Eds. Nancy Raquel Mirabel and Agustín Laó-Montes. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007, pp. 173-189.

Arias, Arturo, and Claudia Milian. "US Central Americans: Representations, Agency and Communities." *Latino Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, June 2013, pp. 131–49. *researchers.dellmed.utexas.edu*, https://doi.org/10.1057/lst.2013.1.

Baker-Cristales, Beth. *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California: Redefining El Hermano Lejano*. 1st edition, University Press of Florida, 2004.

BBC News. "Kamala Harris Tells Guatemala Migrants: 'Do Not Come to US.'" *BBC News*, 8 June 2021, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57387350.

Beverley, John. *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*. University of Texas Press, 1990.

Birmingham-Pokorny, Elba D., editor. *Denouncement and Reaffirmation of the Afro-*

Hispanic Identity in Carlos Guillermo Wilson's Works/ Reafirmacion y denuncia de la Afro-Hispanic Identidad. Bilingual edition, Ediciones Universal, 1993.

Bonobo1990. "Lil' Mago and Willy 'El Casper.'" *Deviant Art*, digital sketch, 15 July 2012, https://www.deviantart.com/bonobo1990/art/Sin-Nombre-314856228. Accessed January 2016.

Brady, Mary Pat. *Scales of Captivity: Racial Capitalism and the Latinx Child*. Duke University Press Books, 2022.

Browitt, Jeffrey. *Contemporary Central American Fiction: Gender, Subjectivity and Affect*. Sussex Academic Press, 2018.

Brown, A. B., et al. *Queer and Trans Migrations: Dynamics of Illegalization, Detention, and Deportation*. Edited by Eithne Luibheid and Karma R. Chavez, 1st edition, University of Illinois Press, 2020.

Buiza, Nanci. "Crossing Mexico on La Bestia: The Central American Migrant Experience in the Documentary Films Which Way Home and Who Is Dayani Cristal?" *Hispanic Research Journal*, vol. 19, no. 4, Aug. 2018, pp. 415–29. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.1080/14682737.2018.1492674.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2006.

Cacho, Lisa Marie. *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*. NYU Press, 2012.

Cárdenas, Maritza E. *Constituting Central American–Americans: Transnational Identities and the Politics of Dislocation*. None edition, Rutgers University Press, 2018.

Chacon, Justin Akers, and Mike Davis. *No One Is Illegal: Fighting Racism and State Violence on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. 59662nd edition, Haymarket Books, 2006.

Chomsky, Aviva. *Central America's Forgotten History: Revolution, Violence, and the Roots of Migration*. Beacon Press, 2022.

Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Harvard University Press, 1997.

Connolly, William E. "Materialities of Experience." *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Duke University Press Books, 2010, 178-200.

"Contingent, Adj. and n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press. *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/40248. Accessed 9 Dec. 2022.

Coole, Diana, and Samantha Frost, editors. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Duke University Press Books, 2010.

Cornejo, Kency. "Visual Counter-Narratives: Central American Art on Migration and Criminality." *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 63-82.

Cortez, Beatriz. "No Cages No Jaulas." *BEATRIZ CORTEZ*, 4 Sept. 2020, https://beatrizcortez.com/no-cages-no-jaulas/.

Coutin, Susan Bibler. *Exiled Home: Salvadoran Transnational Youth in the Aftermath of Violence*. Duke University Press Books, 2016.

Curry, Richard. "The Migration Genre in *La Jaula de Oro* : Voids and Virtues." *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, vol. 36, June 2018, pp. 47–68. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.7560/SLAPC3604.

Danticat, Edwidge. "Black Bodies in Motion and in Pain." *The New Yorker*, 22 June 2015. *www.newyorker.com*, http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/black-bodies-in-motion-and-in-pain.

---. *Brother, I'm Dying.* Alfred A. Knoph, 2007.

---. "Children of the Sea." *Krik? Krak!* 1. Vintage contemporaries ed, Vintage Books, 1996, pp. 3-29.

---. *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*. 1st edition, Vintage, 2011.

Debusmann Jr, Bernd. "Grim Echoes of History in Images of Haitians at US-Mexico Border." *BBC News*, 23 Sept. 2021. *www.bbc.com*, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58654351.

De Genova, Nicolas. "Citizenship." *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, NYU Press, 2017, pp. 36–39.

DeLanda, Manuel. *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. Continuum, 2006.

---. *Assemblage Theory.* Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

De León, Jason. "'Como Me Duele': Undocumented Central American Bodies in Motion." *The Border and Its Bodies: The Embodiment of Risk along the U.S.-México Line*, edited by Thomas Sheridan and Randall McGuire, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, AZ, 2019, pp. 99–123.

---. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. University of California Press, 2015.

---. "Undocumented Migration, Use Wear, and the Materiality of Habitual Suffering in the Sonoran Desert." *Journal of Material Culture,* vol. 18, no. 4, Dec. 2013, pp. 321–45. *SAGE Journals*, https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183513496489.

Demo, Anne. "Documenting Death by Policy: Public Grievability, Migrant Lives, and Commonplace Denials." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2019, pp. 615–49. *Project MUSE*, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/748022.

De Nadie. Directed by Tin Dirdamal, Producciones Tranvía. 2005.

Dwyer, Devin. "Obama Warns Central Americans: 'Do Not Send Your Children to the Borders.'" *ABC News*, 27 June 2014, abcnews.go.com/Politics/obama-warns-central-americans-send-children-borders/story?id=24320063.

"Evanesce, v." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press. *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/65184? Accessed 8 Dec. 2022.

Feldman, Gregory. *We Are All Migrants: Political Action and the Ubiquitous Condition of Migrant-Hood*. 1st edition, Stanford Briefs, 2015.

Fernandez, Manny. "'You Have to Pay With Your Body': The Hidden Nightmare of Sexual Violence on the Border." *The New York Times*, 3 Mar. 2019. NYTimes.com, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/03/us/border-rapes-migrant-women.html.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

Foucault, Michel, and Alan Sheridan. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books, 1995.

Fregoso, Rosa Linda. *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Fukunaga, Cary Joji. Screenplay of *Sin nombre*. *The Screenplay Database*. http://www.screenplaydb.com/film/scripts/sinnombre20071025/, 2007.

Hagan, Jacqueline Maria, et al. "Social Effects of Mass Deportations by the United States Government, 2000–10." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 34, no. 8, Informa UK Limited, Aug. 2011, pp. 1374–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.575233.

Kanno-Youngs, Zolan. "Kamala Harris, With Blunt Language on Border, Forges Immigration Image." *The New York Times*, 8 June 2021. NYTimes.com, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/08/world/americas/kamala-harris-immigration.html.

Kessler, Glenn. "No, Amnesty International Does Not Say 60 Percent of Migrant Women in Mexico Have Been Raped." *The Washington Post*.1 Feb 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/02/01/no-amnesty-international-does-not-say-percent-migrant-women-mexico-have-been-raped/. Accessed 12 Oct. 2021.

Galindo, Regina José. *Ablución*. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Susman Collection, 2007.

---. *Piedra*. Encuentro Hemisférico del Centro de Estudios de Arte y Política. São Paulo, Brasil, 2013.

Gómez-Barris, Macarena. *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Golash-Boza, Tanya Maria. *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor and Global Capitalism*. NYU Press, 2015.

Gomez, Delmar Ulises Mendez. "Rompiendo Muros: Narrativas Fílmicas Sobre Las Migraciones «irregulares» Centroamericanas." *Revista Reflexiones*, vol. 99, no. 2, Jan. 2020. *www.academia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu43246849Rompiendo_muros_narrativas_fi_lmicas_sobre_las_migraciones_irregulares_centroamericanas.

Gottschalk, Marie. *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics*. Revised, Princeton UP, 2016.

Hamilton, Nora. *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles*. Temple University Press, 2001.

Ixcanul. Directed by Jayro Bustamante et al., La Casa de Production, Tu Vas Voir Productions, 2015.

Kaussen, Valerie. *Migrant Revolutions: Haitian Literature, Globalization, and U.S.*

Imperialism. Lexington Books, 2008.

Kelley, Ryan. "Kinopolitics and the Figure of the Migrant: An Interview with Thomas Nail." *The Other Journal*, 28 Nov. 2016, https://theotherjournal.com/2016/11/28/kinopolitics-figure-migrant-interview-thomas-nail/.

La Bestia. Directed by Pedro Ultreras. Venevision International, 2010.

Influence Film Club. Poster for the film *Who is Dayani Cristal? "Who is Dayani Crystal?* Discussion Guide." December 2014. *Influence Film Forum*. http://influencefilmclub.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Who-is-Dayani-Crystal-DG.pdf.

Los Invisibles. Directed by Gael Garcia Bernal and Marc Silver. Amnesty International. 8 November 2010. YouTube.

La Jaula de Oro [*The Goldren Dream*]. Directed by Diego Quemada-Diéz. Animal de Luz films, Kinemascope Films, and Machete Productions, 2013.

La Llorona. Directed by Jayro Bustamante et al., El Ministerio de Cultura Y Deportes de Guatamala, La Casa de Production, Les Films du Volcan, 2020.

Luibheid, Eithne, and Lionel Cantu Jr, editors. *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings*. 3rd ed. edition, Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Macías-Rojas, Patrisia. *From Deportation to Prison: The Politics of Immigration Enforcement in Post-Civil Rights America*. Reprint edition, NYU Press, 2016.

María En Tierra de Nadie. Directed by Marcela Zamora, Idheas, 2011.

Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. 1st edition, Duke University Press Books, 2000.

Martinez, Oscar. *A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America*. Verso, 2017.

---. *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*. Verso, 2014.

Massey, Douglas S., and Karen A. Pren. "Unintended Consequences of US Immigration Policy: Explaining the Post-1965 Surge From Latin America." *Population and Development Review*, vol. 38, no. 1, Wiley, Mar. 2012, pp. 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2012.00470.

Menchú, Rigoberta. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Verso, 1984.

Mendoza, José Jorge. *The Moral and Political Philosophy of Immigration: Liberty, Security, and Equality*. Lexington Books, 2018.

Menjívar, Cecilia. *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America*. University of California Press, 2000.

---. "Illegality." *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, NYU Press, 2017, pp. 93-95.

---. "The Racialization of 'Illegality.'" *Daedalus*, vol. 150, no. 2, MIT Press, 2021, pp. 91–105. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01848.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception: An Introduction*. Routledge, 2002.

"Mexicans Decline to Less Than Half the U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Population for the First Time." *Pew Research Center*, 16 Aug. 2021, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/12/us-unauthorized-immigrant-population-2017.

Mignolo, Walter D. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke University Press Books, 2011.

"Migrancy." *The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/migrancy. Accessed 28 Oct. 2022.

Milian, Claudia. "Central American-Americanness, Latino/a Studies, and the Global South." *The Global South*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2011, pp. 137–52. *Project MUSE*, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/the_global_south/v005/5.1.milian.html.

---. *Latining America: Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies*. University of Georgia Press, 2013.

Milian, Claudia, and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo. "Introduction: Interoceanic Diasporas and The Panama Canal's Centennial." *The Global South*, vol. 6, no. 2, May 2012, pp. 1–14. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.6.2.1.

Muñoz, Jose Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 34695th edition, NYU Press, 2009.

Nail, Thomas. *The Figure of the Migrant*. Stanford University Press, 2015.

Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. New paperback edition / with a new forward by the author, Princeton University Press, 2014.

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Second edition, Indiana University Press, 2010.

Ortiz, Ricardo L. *Latinx Literature Now: Between Evanescence and Event*. 1st ed. 2019 edition, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Osuna, Steven. "Transnational Moral Panic: Neoliberalism and the Spectre of MS-13." *Race & Class*, vol. 61, no. 4, SAGE Publications Ltd, Apr. 2020, pp. 3–28. *SAGE Journals*, doi:10.1177/0306396820904304.

Padilla, Yajaira M. "The Central American Transnational Imaginary: Defining the Transnational and Gendered Contours of Central American Immigrant

Experience." *Latino Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, June 2013, pp. 150–66. *Crossref*, doi:10.1057/lst.2013.2.

Passel, Jeffrey, and D'Vera Cohn. "5 Facts About Illegal Immigration in the U.S." *Pew Research Center*, 28 May 2021, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/12/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s.

Peccadillo Pictures. "The Golden Dream: UK Cinema Release." 2014, http://www.worldonlinecinema.com. Accessed 20 Sept 2021.

Puar, Jasbir. "'I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess.'" *Feminist Theory Reader*, by Carole R. McCann et al., edited by Carole McCann et al., 5th ed., Routledge, 2020, pp. 405–15. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003001201-47.

---. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke University Press Books, 2007.

Pulse Films. "Who Is Dayani Cristal | The Film." *Who Is Dayani Cristal*, https://whoisdayanicristal.com/. Accessed 8 Dec. 2022.

Quemada-Diéz, Diego. Screenplay of "La jaula de oro." *Los cuardenos de cinema 23*. https://cinema23.com/cuaderno/la-jaula-de-oro/, 2014.

Raftree, Linda, et al. "Who Is Dayani Cristal | Impact Reports." *Who Is Dayani Cristal*, https://whoisdayanicristal.com/impact. Accessed 1 January 2022.

Ramírez, Catherine S. *Precarity and Belonging: Labor, Migration, and Noncitizenship*. Edited by Sylvanna M. Falcón et al., Rutgers University Press, 2021.

Rapold, Nicolas. "Searching for the Life That Belonged to a Body." *The New York Times*, 24 Apr. 2014. *NYTimes.com*, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/25/movies/who-is-dayani-cristal-follows-a-migrants-final-journey.html.

Ratje, Paul. *Topshot-US-Politics-Immigration-Texas*. September 19, 2021. *Getty Images*, https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/united-states-border-patrol-agent-on-horseback-tries-to-news-photo/1235366682.

Rivas, Cecilia M. *Salvadoran Imaginaries: Mediated Identities and Cultures of Consumption*. Rutgers University Press, 2014.

Robinson, William I. *Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change, and Globalization*. Verso, 2003.

Rocco, Alessandro. "La representación de la migración de Centroamérica a los Estados Unidos en el film 'La jaula de oro', de Diego Quemada Díez." *Oltreoceano*, vol. 9, no. 0, Mar. 2015, pp. 131–40. riviste.forumeditrice.it, https://riviste.forumeditrice.it/oltreoceano/article/view/640.

Rodríguez, Ana Patricia. *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures*. 1st ed, University of Texas Press, 2009.

Rosa, Ketlyn Mara, and Janaina Mirian Rosa. "Chasing Falling Snow: Traveling Through the Borders in La Jaula De Oro." *Cultural Drafts Magazine*, vol. 6, no. 11, Jan/June 2015, pp. 11–26. *Jan/June*, *Coxim/MS,* doi:10.1400/230488.

Ruiz Marrujo, Olivia. "Women, Migration, and Sexual Violence: Lessons from Mexico's Borders." *Human Rights Along the U.S.-Mexico Border: Gendered Violence and Insecurity*, edited by Kathleen Staudt, Tony Payan, and Z. Anthony Kruszeweski, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, AZ, pp. 31-47.

Sassen, Saskia. *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*. First edition, Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2014.

Schmidt Camacho, Alicia R. *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. New York University Press, 2008.

Schreiber, Rebecca M. *The Undocumented Everyday: Migrant Lives and the Politics of Visibility*. First edition, Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Illustrated edition, Duke University Press Books, 2016.

Shaw, Deborah. "Migrant Identities in Film: Migrations from Mexico and Central America to the United States." *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, vol. 3, no. 2, Nov. 2012, pp. 227–40. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc.3.2.227_1.

---."Serving the Master Text: Rethinking Digital Paratexts in the Social Issue Film Who Is Dayani Cristal?" *Screen,* vol. 59, no. 2, p. 258. *www.academia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/37123605.

Shemak, April. *Asylum Speakers: Caribbean Refugees and Testimonial Discourse*. Temple University Press, 2010. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucsc/detail.action?docID=3239540.

Sheridan, Thomas E., and Randall H. McGuire, editors. *The Border and Its Bodies: The Embodiment of Risk Along the U.S.-México Line*. University of Arizona Press, 2019.

Silver, Marc. *Who Is Dayani Cristal?* Pulse Films, Canana Films, Canana USA, 2014.

Sin Nombre. Directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga. Focus Features, 2009.

Solano, Jeanette. "Who Is Dayani Cristal?" *Journal of Religion & Film*, vol. 17, no. 1, Feb. 2013, https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss1/22.

Soto, Armando Octavio Velázquez. "Compromiso Ético: Documentales Sobre Migración En México." *Cuadernos Americanos*, Jan. 2018. www.academia.edu, https://www.academia.edu/37341624.

"Spectre, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press. *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/186082. Accessed 8 Dec. 2022.

Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Diacritics, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 65–81. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/464747.

Temblores. Directed by Jayro Bustamante et al., Tu Vas Voir Productions, La Casa de Production, Memento Films Production, 2019.

"Vanish, v." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press. *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/221386#eid15848736. Accessed 8 Dec. 2022.

"Vice, n1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press. *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223113. Accessed 8 Dec. 2022.

"Virile, adj. (and n.)." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press. *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223796? Accessed 8 Dec. 2022.

"Virtue, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press. *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223835. Accessed 8 Dec. 2022.

Vogt, Wendy. "Stuck in the Middle With You: The Intimate Labours of Mobility and Smuggling along Mexico's Migrant Route." *Geopolitics*, vol. 21, no. 2, Routledge, Apr. 2016, pp. 366–86. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2015.1104666.

Watson, Sonja Stephenson. *The Politics of Race in Panama: Afro-Hispanic and West Indian Literary Discourses of Contention*. 1st edition, University Press of Florida, 2014.

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke University Press Books, 2014.

Westmoreland, Mark William. "A Roundtable on Thomas Nail's 'The Figure of the Migrant.'" *PhaenEx*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1, June 2016, pp. 141–62. *phaenex.uwindsor.ca*, https://doi.org/10.22329/p.v11i1.4574.

Who is Dayani Cristal? Directed by Marc Silver. Pulse Films, 2013.

Wilson, Carlos Guillermo. *Chombo (Novela)*. Ediciones Universal, 1981.

Wynter, Sylvia. *On Being Human as Praxis.* Duke University Press Books, 2015.

Yudice, George. "The Central American Caribbean: Rethinking Regional and National Imaginaries." *El Caribe y Sus Diásporas: Cartografía de Saberes y Prácticas Culturales*, 2010, pp. 96–115. *works.bepress.com*, http://works.bepress.com/george_yudice/2.

Zilberg, Elana. "Gangster in Guerilla Face: A Transnational Mirror of Production between the USA and El Salvador." *Anthropological Theory*, vol. 7, no. 1, Mar. 2007, pp. 37–57, doi:10.1177/1463499607074289.

---. *Space of Detention: The Making of a Transnational Gang Crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. Duke University Press, 2011.