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EVERY PLACE IS SAD: ECOLOGIES OF VIOLENCE AND BIOPOLITICAL PARADIGMS
IN CONTEMPORARY CENTRAL AMERICAN CINEMA

By

ARYANDES AARÓN LACAYO

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Every Place is Sad: Ecologies of Violence and Biopolitical Paradigms

in Contemporary Central American Cinema

By ARYANDES AARÓN LACAYO

Dissertation Director:

Dr. Jorge Marcone

This dissertation examines how contemporary Central American cinema responds to legacies of violence and civil wars in Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador. Despite the Treaty Accords of the nineties, a fragile if not untenable peace hovers over the region. The films under discussion fall under three main critical paradigms: the logic of autoimmunity and the body; states of exception and the bare lives of migrants; and the human-animal ethical divide. I analyze seven fiction and documentary films: Julio Hernández Córdón's *Gasolina* (*Gasoline*, 2008) and *Polvo* (*Dust*, 2012); Ishtar Yasin's *El camino* (*The Path*, 2007); Diego Quemada-Díez's *La jaula de oro* (*The Golden Dream*, 2013); Gabriel Serra's *La Parka* and Neto Villalobos's *Por las plumas* (*All About the Feathers*), both from 2013; and concluding with Tatiana Huezo's *El lugar más pequeño* (*The Tiniest Place*, 2011).

The underlying preoccupation in this study points toward the ecological dimensions of violence that still need to be acknowledged and reckoned with in Central America. I explore the specific ways cinema traces the material effects of violence on both humans and nonhumans, including other animals, objects, toxic substances and the physical environment. In doing so, this study contributes to conversations in three main

fields: Central American studies, Latin American cinema studies, and the Environmental Humanities. I argue that these films develop a complex and nuanced poetics of (in)visibility by way of illness, migration, and a precarious animality between humans and other animals. These three conditions register the mechanisms through which the migrant, the indigenous, the poor, the disappeared and the displaced have been rendered politically insignificant, “invisible,” and a thing of the violent past, while revealing ecologies of violence in which they become politically salient again.

The dissertation is organized into three chapters with close readings of a pair of films alongside four continental philosophers: Jacques Derrida, Roberto Esposito, Giorgio Agamben and Emmanuel Levinas. The first chapter examines Derrida’s logic of autoimmunity and Esposito’s immunitary paradigm in relation to illness, substances and the human body, that is, the human body at the limits of illness and a damaged memory. The second chapter explores the figure of the migrant alongside Agamben’s biopolitical concepts of *Homo sacer*, bare life and state of exception. In this chapter devoted to geography and movement, the migrant finds herself at the limits of a political and juridical system that cannot ensure her protection nor guarantee her rights as a citizen. The third chapter considers a shared animal precarity that cuts across the presumed limits between humans and other animals by way of Levinas’s ethics of the Other. I conclude with a brief analysis of a Salvadoran documentary as a response to the spectrum of violence running across contemporary Central American cinema.

The filmmakers I study form part of a transisthmian network of artists that continues to produce a nuanced and mobile cinema both within and outside the region, challenging its own geographical limits. Central America may have moved away from its

strategic position between different political ideologies played out during the Cold War of the 20th century. However, in terms of the critical migrational forces caused by civil unrest in this new century, the region's position—both imaginable and tangible—between North and South America remains as relevant as ever. These films reveal ecologies of violence that speak to the urgency of a more expansive human engagement with other forms of life sharing this same world. In doing so, Central America cinema asserts a more visible and dynamic presence within Latin America and beyond it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND DEDICATION

I like to think that you are never really alone when you can turn to art—books, films, music, and many other things—to comfort you. In one way or another, they are companions whom you find along the way or who sometimes find you. The writing life might be the same way. As Hannah Arendt reminds us, writing can often be solitary—an enriching form of solitude—but it need not be isolating or lonely. In the several years I have spent writing this dissertation and in graduate school, I am blessed to have had dear advisors, guides, mentors, interlocutors, friends and family who have offered their companionship—within and beyond countless pages—with generosity and grace. In the lines that follow, I would like to give them my deepest thanks.

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sensitive reading of each and every word—and then again—defines what I would call the most intimate form of reading. *Muito obrigado, o meu parceiro.*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements and Dedication	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1. The Poetics of Autoimmunity: Toxic Memories and Somatic Responses in Julio Hernández Córdón's <i>Gasolina</i> and <i>Polvo</i>	24
Chapter 2. Migrancy without Refuge: Bare Lives and Itinerant States of Exception in Ishtar Yasin's <i>El camino</i> and Diego Quemada-Díez's <i>La jaula de oro</i>	80
Chapter 3. Precarious Animality: Ethical Interruptions in Gabriel Serra's <i>La Parka</i> and Ernesto Villalobos's <i>Por las plumas</i>	135
Coda. The Tiniest New Place: Tatiana Huezo's <i>El lugar más pequeño</i>	192
Bibliography	203

Introduction

Although more audiences are watching films made in Central America beyond the walls of a museum or an art cinema in large metropolitan areas such as New York City, Los Angeles or Toronto, a few individuals—academics included—have told me throughout the course of my doctoral study something along the lines of the following statement: *I don't think I can even name one Central American film*. I expected to hear this from people outside of universities but I was still surprised when I also heard it from scholars working in Latin American studies. This statement reminds me of something Guatemalan intellectual Arturo Arias has said in relation to Central American literature. In the introduction to *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America* (2007), Arias recalls the story of a Southern Cone professor who, at an academic discussion in a Southern California university, ironically asked, “But is there even such a thing as Central American literature?” (ix). If such a question about literature sparked a series of debates, it is now a perfect time to consider what kind of reactions a question about the existence of a Central American cinema would provoke. It has been a decade since Arias shared this anecdote. The question is doubly pressing considering that Arias himself states that Central American cinema, along with other forms of visual media, is still in its infancy in the region (xii).

An underlying argument in my doctoral project has been to explore the idea that in fact, there *is* a Central American cinema dealing with contemporary issues that concern the region as a whole. This dissertation examines a particular subset of films that contend with the legacies of violence more than two decades after the official end of civil wars in the region. I examine the specific ways cinema traces the crucial material effects of

violence on both the human and nonhuman in Central America. I argue that the films in this study have developed a complex and nuanced poetics of (in)visibility by way of three biopolitical paradigms: autoimmunity and the body; states of exception and the bare lives of migrants; and the human-animal ethical divide. These paradigms register the mechanisms through which the migrant, the indigenous, the poor, the disappeared and the displaced have been rendered politically insignificant, “invisible,” and a thing of the violent past, while revealing ecologies of violence in which they become politically salient again. By ecology I mean a physical interaction across species and material spaces encompassing animals (human and nonhuman), objects and environments. I understand this particular ecology as a material network of living organisms and as a political terrain fraught with violence.

I am concerned with the aesthetic and political dimensions of violence thought through ecologically. Three questions guide my study: First, how do legacies of war in Central America affect the human body in relation to illness and memory? Second, given that much of the region’s cinema involves itinerant narratives of journeys, migrations and displacements, how does the physical—and thus, also political—proximity to the U.S. and Mexico shape their particular cinemas? And lastly, how does the region’s physical environment and geography inform Central American cinema? Considered together, these questions reveal the underlying preoccupation at the core of my study: political violence, migration and civil wars point to an ecological dimension that still needs to be acknowledged and reckoned with in terms of Central America. As I discuss further below, the wars caused humanitarian crises with enduring ecological consequences in the region.

This project is a deeply personal one. I was born in Nicaragua a year before the Sandinista Revolution toppled the longstanding Somoza regime in 1979. My family experienced the euphoria of the country during the first exciting years of the national transition. While I was still a child, I migrated with my parents and a small part of my paternal family to the United States while my mother's side of the family stayed behind. While my grandmother shared stories with me, as I was raised in the U.S. and attended elementary school during the turbulent decade of the 1980s, I felt as if Nicaragua was on the evening news every night while I did my homework. For me, the country of my birth became a visual spectacle of politics and war on a television screen that I did not really understand. I consider myself to be part of the Central American diaspora caused by civil wars. Several of the Central American filmmakers I discuss in this dissertation—and some of the stories they tell—also form part of this regional diaspora.

My personal reasons aside, why focus on Central America? And why Central American film in particular? As Arias also explains in *Taking Their Word*, Central America has remained at the margins of a double periphery in terms of the Spanish-speaking world and the Western Hemisphere, “marginalized both by the cosmopolitan center and by countries exercising hegemony in Latin America” (xii). My study embraces this challenge against geopolitical invisibility by contributing to conversations in three main fields: Central American studies, Latin American cinema studies, and the Environmental Humanities. The profile of scholarship on Central American literature, history and culture within Latin American studies has steadily increased since Ileana Rodríguez published her seminal work, *Women, Guerrillas, and Love: Understanding War in Central America* in 1996. In her book, Rodríguez disrupts twentieth century

narratives of guerrilla texts written by male revolutionaries by offering a feminist vision of the political and literary representations of gender. Her emphasis on the role of Central American women in both government and the nation-state expanded the critical scholarship of Central America within Latin American and subaltern studies.

Since then, several other panoramic volumes on Central America have appeared concerning the legacies of war on the written page. Although I focus on cinema and exclusively on films within a period of the last 20 years, my study resonates with the important investigations into the region's literature carried out by various scholars. For instance, Ana Patricia Rodríguez's *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures* (2009) examines the literary and cultural productions of the region from 1899 to the 21st century. For Rodríguez, 1899 stands as an important point of departure since it marks the year when the United Fruit Company (UFCO) was officially incorporated in Boston. Rodríguez offers the “in-between” trope of the *transisthmus*— “an imaginary yet material space”—to read Central American cultural texts regionally along geopolitical lines beyond national confines (2). The ecologies of violence that I explore in the films of this study run similarly along transregional paradigms that surpass national boundaries. I choose the watershed year of 1960—the beginning of the Guatemalan Civil War—to frame the historical period of wars that affected Central America as a region. Following Rodríguez's methodological approach of reading Central American culture as a “transisthmian space,” I understand Central America as composed not only of the seven countries that officially make up the region (Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama) but also of parts of Southern Mexico such as Chiapas and the Yucatán peninsula that

share Mayan cultural connections with Guatemala and Belize, respectively. This transisthmian space covers various languages and linguistic heritages beyond Spanish.¹

Beatriz Cortez's *Estética del cinismo. Pasión y desencanto en la literatura centroamericana de posguerra* (2010) also proves fruitful to my study. Cortez considers contemporary Central American narrative under an "aesthetics of cynicism" fueled by the sense of disenchantment in a postwar period. Her approach of reading literature as a praxis of disillusionment harmonizes with the way I trace the biopolitical dimensions of violence in Central American films. For example, the three paradigms I discuss in the following chapters involving illness and the body, journeys of migration, and animal violence also relay a form of extinguished hope. In fact, the first part of this project's title—"Every Place is Sad"—refers to what the indigenous female protagonist in Julio Hernández Cerdón's Guatemalan film, *Polvo* (*Dust*, 2012) says about her village destroyed by war, discussed in Chapter 1. But I would also add that the films evoke an ecological dimension to that pessimism. The films speak to a poetics of ecological forgetting or disavowal of the problems inherent in sharing a physical environment with others, both of which I explore more specifically in Chapters 1 and 3.

My understanding of Central American films as both migrant and mobile (particularly the films of Chapter 2) also runs parallel to Alexandra Ortiz Wallner's investigation of the novel in *El arte de ficcionar: la novela contemporánea en Centroamérica* (2012). In her study, Ortiz Wallner focuses on the nomadic condition of

¹ Spanish is spoken by at least 30 million people but the region also includes speakers of English and Creole in the Caribbean side of Central America and various indigenous languages. Belize remains the only country with English as an official language besides Spanish. Indigenous groups include the Mayan (in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador); the Garifuna in Honduras; the Miskito in Nicaragua and the Kuna in Panama among others.

various Central American novelists producing literature that is equally mobile, a literary form “sin residencia fija” (xii). The study of the novel under the term *literaturas centroamericanas*, Ortiz Wallner argues, must acknowledge the force of migration and displacement of Central American populations as transnational, transregional and global (xii). Her comparative approach covers a series of novels written during and after the civil wars between 1985 and 2006. Ortiz Wallner’s conceptualization of the novel as a nomadic narrative synchronizes with the way I understand Central American film as a migrant regional cinema marked by ruptures, silences and physical dislocation across countries. Given that this study of films focuses on a regional area, I resort to the use of the term *Central American cinema* with caution. The films in question are but a small part of the region’s heterogeneous cinema and they do not offer universalizing narratives of what could problematically be called *Central American cinema* or in Spanish, *cine(s) centroamericano(s)*. I am aware that such a region includes countries with specific histories, cultures and political circumstances.

However, despite this rise in Central American literary scholarship, the cinema of the region remains relatively unknown outside of its borders and in relation to Latin American Studies. A focus on this understudied area of Latin American cinema can help shift the prevalent cultural image of Central America as largely defined by its geography, turbulent history, and physical proximity to the United States. The current news from Central America, however, shows a distressing reality. Unaccompanied children waiting in U.S. detention centers and migrant caravans facing tear gas at the U.S. border with Tijuana, Mexico are not things of the past but happening right now. Despite this violence, the region’s filmmakers, the project argues, offer richly nuanced visions of their countries

that go beyond straitjacketing metaphors of a failed peace in an increasingly globalized world.

Given the history of political instability during the twentieth century in Central America, the reasons for the nascent state of the region's cinema are manifold but not surprising: a history of military regimes, the irregularity of state support to the film industries, the dearth of film schools, the hegemony of Hollywood in Central American theaters, and the relative isolation of Central American film industries, even with respect to each other. Prolific Costa Rican film scholar Maria Lourdes Cortés has examined such disparities in depth. In her article "Centroamérica en celuloide. Mirada a un cine oculto," Cortés considers Central American cinema as "quizá una de las más desconocidas e invisibilizadas de la cinematografía mundial" (*Istmo*). As she observes, Central American filmmakers have had the double task of grappling with the general problems of Latin America and the particular ones of the region, which have been the most disputed among the global powers during the last two centuries (*Istmo*).

Notwithstanding these difficulties, as Cortés points out, Central American cinema in fact dates as far back as the beginning of the twentieth century. Fictional film production in the region has existed since the first three decades of the century in Guatemala, El Salvador and Costa Rica. The Guatemalan film *El agente No. 13* (Alberto de la Riva, 1912) is considered the first Central American film. Unfortunately, no extant copies remain of de la Riva's film; like other works of this early period of Guatemalan cinema, *El agente No. 13* was lost after the earthquakes of December 1917 and January 1918 in Guatemala City. Elsewhere—in Panama, Honduras, and Nicaragua—film production emerged in the second half of the twentieth century (Cortés, *Istmo*).

Cortés delineates five main types of filmmaking that have characterized Central American cinema throughout the twentieth century: first, the official cinema of the State, which includes documentary shorts and newsreels of presidents and dictators as well as idyllic tourist publicity; second, *artesanal* or *costumbrista* cinema, which affirmed traditional forms of national identity; third, commercial films produced largely for entertainment since the 1970s; fourth, a small auteurist cinema guided by artistic movements such as Italian neorealism and the French New Wave; and finally, a largely state-sponsored revolutionary cinema with both political and pedagogical aims (*Istmo*).

As a contribution to the visibility of Central American cinema, this dissertation outlines what I could identify as a sixth tendency corresponding to the postwar era. Spanning from the nineties until the present, this period has been characterized by a precarious peace, in which poverty, crime and corruption persist in the context of an increased neoliberalism. The postwar era begins with the peace treaty accords (Nicaragua in 1990, El Salvador in 1992, and Guatemala in 1996), which ended—if only in name—several decades of armed conflict. The guerrilla period in Central America began in Guatemala in 1960 and concluded with the 1990 Sandinista defeat in Nicaragua; the Cuban Revolution (1959), on the one hand, and the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the demise of the Soviet Union (1991), on the other, also frame this period. Although only Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua experienced wide-scale civil wars, armed struggles also occurred in Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panama.² Accordingly, this sixth

² Let me offer a word about the films of other Central American countries not included here. In terms of film studies, more critical scholarship should include the cinematography of the other countries that constitute the isthmus: Belize, Honduras and Panama. With the exception of El Salvador, those other countries did not experience an official war outright during the eighties, but they have not been immune to the conflicts affecting the region. For instance, Guatemala and Belize have maintained a territorial dispute that extends as far back as the colonial period. Although Belize gained independence from Britain in 1981—at the height of the Guatemalan Civil War—Guatemala did not recognize its neighbor until a decade

tendency is characterized by a confrontation with the legacies of violence in the region: repressive regimes, disappearance and torture, displacement and migration, ethnic tensions, and the economic reverberations of colonial rule.

In the field of Latin American cinema, the literature on Central American film remains scant, with most scholarship focusing on Mexico, Cuba, Argentina and Brazil. The only full-length monograph on Central American cinema in English is Jonathan Buchsbaum's *Cinema and the Sandinistas: Filmmaking in Revolutionary Nicaragua* (2003). In Spanish, María Lourdes Cortés has written both a historical overview of Costa Rican cinema—*El espejo imposible. Un siglo de cine en Costa Rica* (2002)—and a panoramic study of Central American cinema—*La pantalla rota. Cien años de cine en Centroamérica* (2005). General books on Latin American cinema have also thus far dedicated only brief chapters to Central America. John King studies the region in conjunction with the Caribbean in *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America*, first published in 1990, while Thomas Deveny's more recent *Migration in Contemporary Hispanic Cinema* (2012) devotes an important chapter to Central American cinema.

In *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market* (2007), Deborah Shaw points out that from the late 1990s, Latin American cinema has achieved more international visibility, sparking a rise in Latin American film scholarship. Despite these encouraging trends, films from certain smaller Latin American countries are still not seen or have a very limited release (1-2). Shaw reminds us that as a term,

later. The border remained heavily patrolled as Belizeans feared a possible Guatemalan invasion as late as April 1982. A more notoriously violent example is the U.S. invasion of Panama between December 1989 and January 1990—Operation Just Cause—which deposed Manuel Noriega's authoritarian regime and left 3,500 Panamanians dead and a capital in ruins. Locals compared one neighborhood in Panama City with Hiroshima (Walters).

Latin American cinema remains a generic category and that, while it may help to create a niche market for films from that region, the term cannot possibly include all of Latin America, and still renders a host of countries invisible (3), as the term occludes certain regions as well as films from less developed film industries. Shaw identifies a number of countries that are still rarely if ever included in full-length books on Latin American films or in major retail film outlets, including, not surprisingly, five from Central America—Guatemala, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador—and she points out that films from these countries are not released outside their national borders.³ Although it has already been over a decade since Shaw published her book, her observation still rings true.

Like Cortés's *La pantalla rota*, this study takes a regional approach. I rely on a very small collection of six films from Guatemala, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, and, in the Coda, one film from El Salvador. Nevertheless, these seven films prompt viewers to reflect on the configurations of violence—political, cultural, interspecies—in a region that is still facing the reverberations of war. In doing so, they provoke ethical discussions about the nature of cultural memory and political consciousness—or the lack thereof—in relation to trauma and violence in the 21st century. These directors challenge notions of what Central American cinema might mean for the viewer who is not familiar with the region, at the same time that they suggest what it could become in the future. The environmental layers of violence that these Central American filmmakers uncover—make visible—are, at the same time, aesthetic and political. In this regard, my study is informed by Jacques Rancière's understanding of the relation between aesthetics and

³ The other three countries she mentions are in South America: Bolivia, Paraguay and Venezuela.

politics or, more specifically, his argument that aesthetics is at the core of politics. Rancière defines politics as the possibility of reorganizing what has been said, done, heard—and also imagined—within the context of a community. For this reason, politics is mainly concerned with what he terms “the distribution of the sensible” (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 12-13). Such distribution of the sensible “simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions with it” (Rancière 13). Aesthetics reconfigures the sensible, rendering visible, audible, sayable, and doable what had remained impossible or even unthinkable.⁴ Rancière’s notion of the redistribution of the sensible serves as a fruitful lens through which to understand the efforts of Central American filmmakers to shift the limits of the possible by imagining new ways of communication and collaboration among people. Along these lines, filmmaker Julio Hernández Córdón dedicates *Polvo* (*Dust*, 2012) to those Guatemalans who engage in “proyectos impensables en un país como el mío” (*Polvo*).

As an exploration of the ecological dimensions of violence in Central America, this project also engages with the field of the Environmental Humanities, especially in relation to the “more than human” world. As Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye detail in their critical introduction to the field, *The Environmental Humanities*, the expansive and interdisciplinary field has been steadily growing in the 21st century, since emerging across various departments in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵ In the 1990s, a group of Australian

⁴ For a more extended discussion of Rancière’s concept of the distribution of the sensible, see the chapters “Artistic Regimes and the Shortcomings of the Notion of Modernity” and “The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics” in *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

⁵ Those departments included literature, philosophy, history, geography, gender studies and anthropology (Emmet and Nye 3).

researchers adopted the term “ecological humanities” while the MacArthur Workshop on Humanistic Studies of the Environment (1991-1995) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology challenged the nature-culture binary “by locating ecological problems in the behavior of human institutions, beliefs and practices” (Emmet and Nye 3). By 2010, scholars had adopted the term “environmental humanities” in Australia, North America and Western Europe. In the chapters that follow, the human element is crucial in these Central American films; however, equally crucial are the toxic substances, objects, other animals and the physical environments that surround them. These nonhuman actors (or actants) challenge and destabilize the anthropocentric nature of the political subject by either their presence or intervention in cinematic representations of violence in Central America.

Although the films in this dissertation reference environmental conflicts, they do so obliquely, in a way that is not always immediately apparent or recognizable. In this regard, at first glance these films might not appear to exemplify “ecocinema.” The first ecomedia seminar of the Association for Studies of Literature & Environment (ASLE) in 2011 proposed a working definition of ecocinema as films that promote an active ecological awareness (Monani). However, in his article “Ecocinema and ‘Good Life’ in Latin America,” Roberto Forns-Broggi offers a more capacious understanding, asserting that ecocinematic works exhibit an eco-awareness that “reflects a consciousness about both fruitful and problematic relations with natural life” (85). The films may inspire an ecological awareness in the viewer, but for the most part the characters themselves do not recognize their problems in that way. Instead, the films suggest a crucial disavowal—a kind of forgetting or a clouding—of the ecological undercurrents to the problem of

violence in Central America. Forns-Broggi makes the important point that films that “mask or eliminate” an ecological awareness also form part of ecocinema studies since the films do “not have to be explicit or intentional” (85-86). It is in this sense that the Central American films in this study could be characterized as ecocinematic texts.

Indeed, this project gestures toward an open question: What could a Central American ecocinema look like? This study takes a step toward addressing this urgent question given that more scholarship in Central American (film) studies is needed to answer this question more fully. In this regard, my methodological approach of reading these films ecocritically also aligns in part with what Adrian Ivakhiv has termed a “green film criticism” or *eco-cinecriticism* in his article “Green Film Criticism and Its Futures” (2008). Ivakhiv states that cinema has rarely been viewed through an ecocritical lens and that there is little evidence that the field of ecocriticism (which arose first in literary studies) has properly or consistently addressed film and cinema studies (1). Ivakhiv points out that only a handful of articles published since the 1990s in the journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE)—the same journal that published his article—have focused on film. A few important full-length studies in English have been devoted to questions of ecology and cinema in recent decades, including Sean Cubitt’s *Ecomedia* (2005) and, more recently, Ivakhiv’s *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (2013), and the edited collections of essays, *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice* (2012) and *Transnational Ecocinema: Film Culture in an Era of Ecological Transformation* (2013). These collections offer valuable critical scholarship on both non-Western media (such as Chinese, Indian, and aboriginal

Australian), and case studies on American and British film and television, but they include fewer examples from Latin America.

Fortunately, scholars have recently adopted an eco-critical lens in Latin American cinema studies, particularly in regards to directors associated with New Argentine Cinema (NCA) such as Lucrecia Martel, Pablo Trapero, Adrián Caetano and Lisandro Alonso. In “Exhausted Landscapes: Reframing the Rural in Recent Argentine and Brazilian Films,” Jens Andermann traces the allegorical weight of landscape in contemporary South American cinema, as recent films consciously make use of the landscape form to highlight this symbolic exhaustion. For Andermann, recent rural films from Argentina and Brazil employ landscape in such a way as to “dismiss the repertoire of rurality proper to a previous, national cinematic modernity” (51). The fraught relationship between ecology and violence has also been examined in contemporary Mexican cinema, such as the films of Carlos Reygadas and Amat Escalante. In “Towards a Cinema of Slow Violence,” Juan Llamas-Rodríguez considers Escalante’s hyper-violent film about narcotrafficking, *Heli* (2013), in terms of Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” from an environmental social-justice framework. The recently edited collection of essays, *Slow Cinema* (2016), contains a section on ecocriticism and the nonhuman turn. One chapter focuses on rural Mexican and Argentine cinema, with Reygadas’s film, *Japón* (*Japan*, 2002) and Lisandro Alonsos’s *Los muertos* (*The Dead*, 2004) as case studies.

As the following chapters show, I situate the discussion of Central American cinema in relation to Mexican and Argentine cinema for an important reason. The legacies of authoritarian rule, political oppression, and violence—particularly the history

of disappearances and torture—in these countries during the twentieth century offer relevant parallels to Central America. In Chapter 1, I also consider Guatemalan cinema alongside contemporary Peruvian cinema, given that both countries's indigenous populations faced brutal political violence during the 1980s. This broader context allows for the positioning of Central America in conversation with these larger socio-political parameters and, arguably, with more prominent Latin American film industries.

In my view, the possibility of envisioning Central American film in relation to a green film criticism or an ecocinecriticism requires (and cannot be disassociated from) an ecological awareness—an eco-dimension—to the legacies of violence in the region. The ecocritical lens that I call for in reading the films in this study relies on two main tenets: first, this approach does not privilege the human over other non-human forms of life, but rather takes into account the agency of other animate beings and inanimate objects and elements. Second, what one could characterize as the “natural” environment does not serve as something secondary or supplementary to human courses of action. In other words, I recognize the environment as an active participant—in the context of Central American conflicts, a casualty of violence—not as mere setting for human suffering or a landscape of war.

In the context of the region's history, several of the promises that have accompanied liberal humanism (such as equality, liberty, access to education) remain undelivered. A “more than human” approach to understanding the Central American legacies of war can help uncover the layers of violence underneath those empty guarantees. As Arturo Arias also asserts in *Taking Their Word*, Latin Americans have encountered far too many signs such as “democracy” and “freedom” consisting of “social

meanings contrary to those of most standard dictionaries” (127-8). In other words, these terms lack a consistent referent in social reality. Do these promises remain attainable in a discourse that no longer places the human above other forms of life? My contention is that these promises only remain viable and can only be delivered if we consider them within the context of particular ecologies of violence. The ecological crises affecting the region are at least partly caused by the unquestioned elevation of (certain sectors of) human life over other forms of life.

The Central American civil wars were characterized by a general disregard for life with devastating ecological consequences that continue to this day. As Dana Alston and Nicole Brown point out in their article “Global Threats to People of Color,” El Salvador is one of the most ecologically ravished nations in the Western Hemisphere due to decades of land scorching and military bombings. The Salvadoran Air Force dropped more than 3,000 tons of US-manufactured bombs on the countryside during its war (180). An ecological approach to Central American cinema compels us to think what the human can become once it is no longer considered the pinnacle of life but rather a form of life alongside others. Such an approach benefits from an eclectic theoretical mode of analysis that resorts to various fields of study to examine the political, racial, sexual, and ecological dimensions of violence.

This dissertation considers fiction and documentary films produced in Central America during the last 20 years by six filmmakers mostly born after 1960. Except for one director, all could be considered Central American in one form or another. Some were born outside the region; others have parents and family from one of those countries or have spent part of their childhood or adult life in Central America. The list includes

one director now based in Mexico City (Julio Hernández Córdón), one from Nicaragua (Gabriel Serra), two working in Costa Rica (Ishtar Yasin and Ernesto Villalobos) and one born in El Salvador (Tatiana Huezo). The exception is Diego Quemada-Díez, who was born in Spain but works in Mexico and has become a Mexican citizen. I include Quemada-Díez in a chapter with Yasin, who was also not born in the region, because their films on Central American migration offer interesting global perspectives. Several of these directors currently live and/or work both within and outside the region and share connections with the United States, Mexico and Europe. In terms of geography and economics, Mexico holds a particular significance for a few of the directors in this study. Three directors have made films either in Mexico or in Central America with the support of Mexican funds and either live or have been raised in Mexico. For example, Hernández Córdón, born in North Carolina, with both Mexican and Guatemalan heritage, studied film in Mexico City. Although all of his past films take place in Guatemala, his most recent films are set in Mexico and Costa Rica. Nicaraguan director Gabriel Serra made his debut film, *La Parka* (discussed in) while studying film in Mexico City. Tatiana Huezo, born in El Salvador but raised in Mexico, works in Mexico City but returned to her native country (and particularly, her grandmother's home town) to film *El lugar más pequeño*, (*The Tiniest Place*), which I discuss in the Conclusion.

Moving between diverse geographical backgrounds, these filmmakers form part of the Central American diaspora that has also included large-scale migrational patterns both within and outside the region brought on by decades of wars. Furthermore, these directors problematize the notions of what constitutes a specifically national, regional or even local Central American cinema, given that their production teams include members

of various nationalities and their films are financed and distributed across the global markets of Europe, North and South America. Although the directors may focus on the particular problematics of a certain country, their films also adopt a global perspective to rethink the concept of violence in Central America beyond the boundaries of a homeland, further deontologizing the concepts of nation and national identity—an inside vis-à-vis an outside—defined by history or geography. The purpose of placing the significant work of these particular directors alongside others is not so much to consider how an external or foreign gaze may uncover layers of invisibilities in relation to an internal or domestic one; instead, the aesthetic practices and political concerns of these filmmakers *already* make of Central American film a transnational phenomena with international implications and in dialogue with global cinema.⁶

The project is organized thematically into three chapters, or what I would call three ecological coordinates or “limits” across crucial axes of investigation. The concept of a limit proves fruitful here because the word suggests a boundary or an edge, but also a periphery, something marginal that lies outside the confines of what is presumed to be understood. The first chapter examines the logic of autoimmunity in relation to illness, toxic substances and the human body; that is, the human body at the limits of illness and

⁶ As a multicultural region, Central America points to the problematic process of linguistic diversity in its own regional film festivals. For example, despite an admirable vision for cultural inclusivity, the Central American Festival Ícaro still consists of predominantly Spanish-speaking films since the competition does not include films from Belize. The particular case of Belize highlights the notion that what counts as Central American film involves both inclusion and exclusions. Is Central America a region defined by geography or by the shared history of Spanish colonization among other colonial powers? Belize’s exclusion suggests that, notwithstanding the diversity of the vision that the Festival Ícaro promotes, this vision relies on particular shared linguistic heritages. Belize holds its own festival, The Belize International Film Festival (BIFF), which just held its 13th edition in November 2018 in Belize City.

a damaged memory. The second chapter explores the figure of the migrant in relation to geography and movement. In this chapter, the migrant finds herself at the limits of a political and juridical system that cannot ensure her protection nor guarantee her rights as a citizen. The third chapter straddles the presumed divide between the human and other non-human animals. More specifically, the chapter investigates the limits between humans and animals by way of a shared precarity that cuts across various species—humans, cattle and roosters in particular. Although the films articulate several of these axes simultaneously, I have organized the chapters according to which of them highlight each of these axes more prominently.

Chapter 1, “The Poetics of Autoimmunity: Toxic Memories and Somatic Responses in Julio Hernández Córdón’s *Gasolina* and *Polvo*,” examines a series of autoimmune responses in relation to two substances, gasoline and dust. I consider the concept of an “autoimmune cinema” in two Guatemalan films by Julio Hernández Córdón, *Gasolina* (*Gasoline*, 2008) and his second feature *Polvo* (*Dust*, 2012) in terms of Jacques Derrida’s logic of autoimmunity as well as Roberto Esposito’s concept of immunization. I argue that both films offer an innovative way of understanding the legacies of Guatemala’s Civil War (1960-1996) by tracing how the sick or damaged body interacts with these substances. The chapter highlights a somatic nexus between political memory—or its lack—and an inherited damaged immunity. Both of the protagonists of *Gasolina* and *Polvo* suffer from autoimmune conditions (asthma, allergies and headaches) as they embark on a form of road trip either towards home or as an escape from it. The (in)visible interaction between body and illness is the product of toxic legacies of violence that the characters may or may not ultimately recognize. This chapter

on Guatemalan cinema also dialogues with both contemporary Argentine cinema and Peruvian cinema: Lucrecia Martel's *La mujer sin cabeza* (*The Headless Woman*, 2008) and Claudia Llosa's *La teta asustada* (*The Milk of Sorrow*, 2009).

Chapter 2, "Migrancy without Refuge: Bare Lives and Itinerant States of Exception in Ishtar Yasin's *El camino* and Diego Quemada-Díez's *La jaula de oro*" considers two Central American films that track migrations in opposite directions. Whereas Quemada-Díez's *La jaula de oro* (*The Golden Dream*, 2013) focuses on the more well-known pattern north across Mexico to the United States, Yasin's *El camino* (*The Path*, 2007) centers on a journey south from Nicaragua to Costa Rica. In their focus on the geographical and political dimension of the migrant, these films reveal an ecological form of violence that follows the protagonists across various dangerous terrains. I read Thomas Nail's political theory of the migrant in terms of social movement—what he calls kinopolitics in *The Figure of the Migrant*—alongside Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical concepts of bare life and a state of exception in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. In doing so, I consider the political ramifications of the migrant body as a figure of bare life that carries a state of exception in transit. To this end, I explore visual representations of a few physical sites that suggest a disposability or dehumanization: the garbage dump, the brothel and the meat-packing assembly plant. If the first chapter considers Guatemalan cinema as a form of "autoimmune" cinema, this second chapter envisions contemporary Central American cinema from the vantage point of endangered children. In doing so, I characterize Central American film as a migrant cinema marked by silences, ruptures and displacements.

The third and final chapter, “Precarious Animality: Ethical Interruptions in Gabriel Serra’s *La Parka* and Ernesto Villalobos’s *Por las plumas*,” explores how two Central American directors navigate the precarious borders—and ethical limits—between humans and other non-human animals in two debut films from 2013: Gabriel Serra’s Mexican biographical documentary *La Parka* and Ernesto “Neto” Villalobos’s Costa Rican comedy *Por las plumas* (*All About the Feathers*). I explore how both films question the ways in which the human is marked as ontologically different from other animals alongside contemporary issues in critical animal (or *animality*) studies. I argue that by featuring the paradoxical figure of the “animal” in Central America, these films highlight significant forms of violence between humans and other animals, while imagining another form of relation between them. Both films center on the complex dynamics of humans killing other animals for food or relying on them as companions. In *La Parka*, a man named Efraín (nicknamed “La Parka”) kills bulls at a slaughterhouse outside of Mexico City for more than 25 years to provide for his family. In *Por las plumas*, a lonely security guard in San José, Costa Rica named Chalo buys a rooster in the hopes of turning him into a champion cockfighter. Whereas *La Parka* kills animals for money, Chalo’s rooster is simultaneously pet, friend and companion. Both *La Parka* and *Por las plumas* highlight a normative violence and a shared precarity—a precarious animality—between humans and other animals, within and outside the confines of the slaughterhouse and the (cock)pit. This chapter differs from the previous two in that it focuses on two countries (Mexico and Costa Rica) that have not experienced an official civil war like their Central American neighbors; however, they have faced the reverberations of violence from neighboring countries. For example, the fraught history

of the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica goes farther back than the 1980s, but disagreements between both countries have intensified violently in the last thirty years since the war in Nicaragua ended. As for Mexico, many Central American migrants must travel through the country on their way to the United States.

I conclude my study with an evocative documentary from El Salvador, Tatiana Huezo's debut film, *El lugar más pequeño* (*The Tiniest Place*) from 2011. I have chosen this particular film as a response to the dialogues of violence running across the previous films in the study. Those films about sick bodies, undocumented children and imperiled animals speak to ecologies that uncover countless layers of violence. *El lugar más pequeño* responds to this spectrum of violence by reclaiming the damaged history and land that the war has left in its wake. *El lugar más pequeño* centers on the townspeople of Cinquera, a mountain village in El Salvador that was practically destroyed by the national army. Like other towns all over the country, Cinquera disappeared from the official maps. Huezo forms part of the diaspora brought on by war and migration. She travels to her grandmother's native village to talk to the humble but brave people who decided to come back and reconstruct their tiny community in the same place. Nuevo Cinquera embraces a local grassroots sustainability, similar to the way it had done before the war. This ecological emphasis on the local can serve as an example for other towns that have suffered similar fates across the globe. Cinquera enacts what I would call an ecological reclaiming of history and place despite the painful memory and toxic histories that the previous films reveal. In this way, Huezo's film explores at the same time that it leaves open the conditions that other Central American artists and filmmakers in this study have touched on: haunted memories, damaged lives, the loss of loved ones. *El lugar más*

pequeño is a fitting choice with which to conclude since the film encapsulates in its own modest way the pain—but also the strength—of living through war and surviving it. In doing so, this final film from a tiny place lies at the core of this study: an ecological meditation on the legacies of civil war and the fresh, bold ways that contemporary Central American cinema calls out to a much larger world.

Chapter 1. The Poetics of Autoimmunity: Toxic Memories and Somatic Responses in Julio Hernández Córdón's *Gasolina* and *Polvo*

“Con suficiente presupuesto filmaría una historia... Todos serían asmáticos, así su respiración sería normal.”

—Julio Hernández Córdón, on the possibility of filming a movie with an endless budget in *Hasta el sol tiene manchas* (2012)

Breathing and Stealing

Early into Julio Hernández Córdón's film, *Gasolina* (*Gasoline*, 2008), Gerardo (Carlos P. Dardón), a middle-class Guatemalan teenager, is stealing gasoline from a neighbor's car. Using a plastic container to store the gasoline, he sucks the air into the tube so that the liquid, with the help of pressure, moves upward defying gravity. Ingesting small amounts of gasoline while stealing it, Gerardo spits the fluid out. The theft seems easy enough. But Gerardo, the viewer soon find out, suffers from asthma. When he is caught stealing and held at gunpoint by Mario (Danieri Gudiel), a teenager who lives on the property, the neighbor's gun seems to trigger Gerardo's asthma attack. In the middle of his theft, Gerardo's body begins to convulse. Although Gerardo begs for his inhaler (“mi medicina”), Mario refuses to hand it back to him, thinking it is some kind of candy. The inhaler, like gasoline, becomes an object of theft. Unable to breathe normally, and without gasoline, Gerardo eventually heads home. The theft of gasoline and the act of breathing are connected by more than their shared laboriousness; the film establishes a nuanced causal relation between them. For Gerardo, the difficulty of breathing derives from stealing gasoline in at least two ways: first, his theft of gasoline has led to the counter-theft of his inhaler; and second, his asthma may be caused or exacerbated by breathing the toxic fumes of the plastic tubes.

What does a film about a Guatemalan teenager stealing gasoline have to do with the failure to breathe? Why does Hernández Córdón focus on asthma and, more generally, respiratory illnesses and disability not just in *Gasolina* but also in his other films? The answer lies in a reference (and possibly homage) to a master text of contemporary Guatemalan cinema, *El silencio de Neto* (*The Silence of Neto*, 1994) directed by Luis Argueta. Argueta's landmark film, made fifteen years before *Gasolina*, illustrates a traumatic period in Guatemala's history—the 1954 coup d'état against a democratic regime—by way of a boy's coming-of-age and his triumphant struggle over his asthmatic condition. In this light, the film stages a relationship between the socio-historical and the personal by way of a traumatic somatization, or the ways in which the body expresses its relation to the outer world. In *El silencio de Neto*, asthma is not only a medical condition but also a somatic disequilibrium that inscribes socio-historical conditions. The film, which illustrates a child's struggle to breathe, is a kind of talking cure that alleviates trauma as the boy learns to speak out against injustice in 1950s Guatemala.

With *Gasolina*, Hernández Córdón proposes a more complicated form of somatization that is no longer easily associated or identifiable with historical or political trauma corresponding to the 1954 coup and the Civil War that followed. Instead, *Gasolina* reveals an autoimmune process in an ambiguous relationship to the violence of prior decades. The asthmatic body in *Gasolina* may repeat and reverberate with the national legacies of violence but it ultimately acts against itself, preventing any form of resolution or reconciliation. In this light, *Gasolina* forges a somatic discourse with the socio-historical that is starkly different from that of *El silencio de Neto*. The corporeal

affliction does not determine behavior nor serve as its context; rather, this suffering is intertwined with other objects, bodies, substances and elements. In *Gasolina*, asthma—the problem of breathing—suggests not only a failure of representing the Guatemalan history of violence but also the impossibility of speaking about it.

An Autoimmune Cinema

This chapter considers a poetics of autoimmune responses within what I consider an autoimmune cinema in two Guatemalan films by Julio Hernández Córdón: *Gasolina* and his second feature, *Polvo* (2012). I argue that his two films, which feature an eponymous substance or object (gasoline and dust, respectively) as their titles, offer a novel and radical way of grasping the legacies of Guatemala's Civil War (1960-1996) by placing the ways in which the body interacts with these substances at the center of their narratives. The concept of a disabling condition and its (in)visible effects both on and through the body plays a crucial role in both *Gasolina* and *Polvo* since the protagonists suffer from autoimmune maladies such as asthma, allergies and headaches. In both films, the characters travel from their towns and cities to the sea and countryside. I consider the concept of movement both in terms of a physical visible journey and a somatic (in)visible interaction between body and illness. These mutually reinforcing processes manifest the legacies of violence that Guatemala must contend with in a postwar era. Their repercussions, as my discussion of the films makes clear, include the still-entrenched invisibility of the indigenous, the traumatic effects of disappearance and displacement and the thwarted relationship of vengeance to an ever-receding justice.

I begin by situating Hernández Córdón's work within the history of contemporary Guatemalan cinema and by discussing how his films forge both a conversation with and a departure from *El silencio de Neto*. I consider both Jacques Derrida's autoimmunity paradigm and Roberto Esposito's concept of immunization to trace the somatic role of gasoline in and through the body of one of the main protagonists of *Gasolina*. I then turn my discussion to *Polvo*, examining how the autoimmunitarian logic adds an ecological layer to the somatic one, as dust affects the body of both an urban documentarian and the indigenous protagonist he films, whose life has been directly affected by war.

Julio Hernández Córdón's Cinema

Although born in the United States (North Carolina, 1975) Hernández Córdón was raised between Mexico and Central America (Guatemala and Costa Rica). After earning a degree in educational communication in Guatemala City, he studied film at the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica in Mexico City. Most of his films take place in Guatemala, the country with which he identifies. As the filmmaker states, "I search for real stories to tell, and want my work to reflect the place where I come from. I combine these elements with my point of view and imagination to create stories that could only be told in Guatemala" ("Festival Scope"). Moving between shorts, documentary and feature films, Hernández Córdón has directed *KM 13* (2003); *Gasolina* (2008); *Las marimbas del infierno* (*Marimbas from Hell*, 2010); *Hasta el sol tiene manchas* (*Even the Sun Has Spots*, 2012) and *Polvo* (*Dust*, begun in 2009, completed in 2012). His first film made outside of Guatemala, *Te prometo anarquía* (*I Promise You Anarchy*, 2016) focuses on the torrid romance between a pair of gay teenage skaters in Mexico City and their

dangerous involvement with a drug mafia. He has since made two other films with female protagonists, *Atrás hay relámpagos* (*Lightning Falls Behind*, 2017), a film set in Costa Rica and centered on a pair of teenage girls who turn an old car into an Uber taxi, and *Cómprame un Revólver* (*Buy Me a Gun*, 2018), in which a young girl wears a mask to hide her gender in what the film's trailer calls "a not so distant future" in Mexico. His feature films, produced with relatively low budgets and with mostly nonprofessional actors, have garnered much critical acclaim in festivals. Among other accolades, Hernández Córdón has won the Horizontes Award at the San Sebastián International Film Festival for *Gasolina* in 2008 and the Grand Jury Prize at the Miami Film Festival for *Las marimbas del infierno* in 2011.

In his early forties, Hernández Córdón forms part of an ambitious young group of Guatemalan filmmakers who have made films a decade or so after their country officially ended the war. That group includes Jayro Bustamante (*Ixcánul*, 2015), Verónica Riedel (*Cápsulas*, 2011), Sergio Ramírez (*Distancia*, 2012), Mario Rosales (*El regreso de Lencho*, 2010), and Mendel Samayoa (*La vaca*, 2011). Like the work of his fellow Central American filmmakers, Hernández Córdón's films explore problems affecting a country dealing with the aftermath of political violence such as endemic corruption, police brutality and chronic poverty. The film industry in Guatemala is the most prolific in Central America, producing a total of 17 films between the two years 2010-12 (Ordóñez).

The promise of these Guatemalan directors represents a departure from the state of affairs that Arturo Arias found in the Guatemalan film industry during the 1980s. In "Mayas and Gringos: The Contemporary Guatemalan Political Documentary," Arias

asserted that, although the various political crises in Central America produced a flourish of politically committed filmmaking (as in Nicaragua and El Salvador, two other countries facing their own civil war at the time), in Guatemala “there has been no real cinematic production worthy of mention by Guatemalans during the last decade” (15). Understandably, Arias, who was writing at a time when Guatemala’s war still had not come to an end, restricts his discussion to documentary films, and the decade of which he speaks was arguably the most repressively brutal in that country’s almost four-decade war.⁷

Asthma and Silence in Guatemalan Cinema

A body that is unable to breathe—and to speak—is a theme that runs prominently through Hernández Córdón’s cinema. Like the teenage Gerardo in *Gasolina*, one of the protagonists of his later film, *Polvo*, suffers from respiratory ailments. And there is a scene in the mixed-media fictionalized documentary from 2012, *Hasta el sol tiene manchas*, in which the director himself announces that with a proper budget he would film a story in which all the characters would share one thing in common. In this moment that I have quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, Hernández Córdón states, “Todos serían asmáticos, así su respiración sería normal.” According to the director, if such a chronic condition became universal, all would be equal⁸; put plainly, if illness became the norm, then no one could be ruled out as abnormal or physically deficient. Hernández Córdón’s

⁷ The article was published in 1994, two years before the Treaty Accords of 1996.

⁸ Although it features more of an ensemble cast, *Hasta el sol tiene manchas* centers on a young man who seems to have a mental disability with slurred speech and with eyes always turned upwards when speaking. The director comments later in the film that the actor who plays him, a good friend of his, does not have a speech impediment and the disability is only part of his role.

statement questions the allegorical valence that a disabling condition such as asthma initially fulfills in Guatemalan cinema of the 1990s—that is, asthma as “standing in” for national afflictions— in a film such as *El silencio de Neto* discussed below.

Asthma, a respiratory condition marked by bronchial spasms in the lungs that often makes breathing difficult and painful, also forms part of the narrative thread of *El silencio de Neto*. Written by Justo Chang and Luis Argueta, and directed by Argueta, this was the first Guatemalan film to be screened internationally, and it remains the most successful Central American movie in terms of critical reception and participation in prestigious festivals such as Sundance and San Sebastián (Cortés 503).⁹ A sentimental *Bildungsroman*, the film focuses on the coming of age of Neto Yepes (Óscar Javier Almengor), a sheltered and privileged Guatemalan twelve-year old boy from a comfortable bourgeois family during the mid-1950s. Like Gerardo in *Gasolina*, Neto also has asthma and suffers from a breathing attack early on in the film. The film focuses on an earlier traumatic period of Guatemala’s national history, the CIA-orchestrated 1954 coup against President Jacobo Arbenz which ended a decade of progressive democracy and social reform and ushered in further civil unrest that would intensify into war.

Film scholar María Lourdes Cortés defines Neto’s “silence” in national terms. For Cortés, the silence underscores “las fracturas sociales y étnicas de una Guatemala silenciada” where the indigenous population still remains largely at the mercy of a powerful white elite (502). In this light, the silence that characterizes Neto is not only somatic but also symptomatic of a national disability. His silence stems not only from an

⁹ It is worth mentioning here Gregory Nava’s well-known *El Norte*, which was made a decade earlier in 1983. *El Norte* tells the story of two Maya youth who escape the Guatemalan Civil War and travel via Mexico to the United States. The film was released nationwide in the U.S. and garnered critical acclaim including an Academy Award nomination for Best Screenplay.

asthma that prevents him at times from breathing—and thus, from speaking—but from a stifling status quo and a complacent inability/refusal to speak out against injustice. As his liberal uncle Ernesto (Herbert Meneses) urges Neto, “Cuando hay que hablar, hay que hablar...Eres callado como tu madre, como el resto del país...Silencio como esto no es bueno, nos lo metieron desde que nacemos pero tenemos que sacarlo por completo.”

Ernesto, who returns to Guatemala after many years living abroad, plays the cosmopolitan outsider who teaches his nephew about the well-entrenched injustices of his country and in doing so he ensures a more socially-conscious coming-of-age for his nephew. He is also that traveler, who after spending time abroad, has come back to his homeland at a time in which the nation is undergoing an internal crisis. Neto, who suffers from his own internalized conflict—by way of his asthma—but learns to speak out against prejudice, comes to embody the nation itself.

However, it is not sufficient to consider the character’s asthma as a mere symbolic manifestation of the nation’s problems, namely the ways in which an enforced silence ruptures Guatemala’s cultural fabric. Asthma also reveals a (permanent) condition that is sustained through the intervention of other factors—not just medical but also cultural, geographic and ecological—in the context of the post-war period. Put differently, the silence that Guatemala seems to suffer cannot be explained only by mere physical or biological causality. That silence undergoes, as I explain farther below, a somatic process as the body speaks to a different “order” of things not confined to national history or politics. The signs that constitute *El silencio de Neto* in national and historical terms—such as illness (asthma), geography (volcanoes), a crucial trip to the countryside (the mountains) and middle-class youth (Neto and his friends)—appear in *Gasolina* as well.

The film's protagonist Gerardo is also an asthma-suffering teenager who spends most of his time with his male friends as they plan a trip outside of the capital.¹⁰ But these signs are no longer assembled within an easily understandable narrative of how trauma can be overcome. Instead, they are vastly dispersed throughout the visual and aural field of *Gasolina*, resisting any one form of historical organization or symbolic representation. Gerardo, unlike Neto, does not undergo a transformative process of learning to speak out against injustice, and neither, as I clarify below, does he embody Guatemala as a nation that has come to terms with its own form of historical amnesia.

Gasoline: Running on Empty

Gasolina is Hernández Córdón's first feature film; based on his own script, the film takes places in the course of about 24 hours, beginning and ending in the daytime, but it was shot mostly outdoors at night. The cast is comprised mostly of non-professional actors and much of the film's dialogue incorporates Guatemalan slang. The three teenage protagonists, Gerardo, Rai (Gabriel Armas Fortuny) and Nano (Francisco Jácome), share in pranks, crude jokes, silly games and the communal act of stealing gasoline from their neighbors. Unsure of where they are heading and how they will get there, these seemingly aimless middle-class teenagers embark on a nightmarish escapade. In one turbulent night, they get caught up in various fights with people from the neighborhood and drive towards the Pacific Ocean in a stolen car.

The trio's camaraderie fuels a capacity for violence that, like a volatile volcano, manifests itself abruptly throughout the film. For example, sixteen-year old Rai has

¹⁰ In Guatemala, *ladino*, not to be confused with the medieval Judaeo-Spanish language, refers to a person of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage.

impregnated Nano's younger sister, which triggers the rage of Nano's father (Josué Sotomayor), who wants to hold him accountable for his actions. In one scene, the father comes lunging at Rai, who hides under a car. In another scene, Nano hits his own father as if to protect his friend. The violence present throughout *Gasolina* explodes at the film's climax. During their high-speed drive, the boys accidentally hit an indigenous couple on the highway. As a man's body lies on the road and a woman crouched at his side cries out in an indigenous language, one of the boys decides to burn the man by dousing his body with gasoline. The woman runs away in panic and the boys subsequently flee the scene of the crime. The film concludes with the group finally reaching the sea. Standing on a desolate beach, while Rai and Nano sleep (the car may have run out of gas), Gerardo stares out at the sea in the middle of an asthma attack. The film concludes with him hopelessly knocking on the door of a nearby building for help.

An Asthmatic Body: Stealing Gasoline, Breathing In

The somatic role that gasoline plays in *Gasolina* in relation to what I consider Gerardo's autoimmune process, discussed further below in this chapter, manifests itself most visibly in two crucial scenes. In these two scenes, Gerardo undergoes an asthma attack while participating in an act that involves the toxic chemical. In the first one, an initial scene of the film discussed at the beginning of this chapter, a neighbor catches him stealing gasoline. In the second scene, at the end of the film, a convulsive Gerardo pleads for help after his car has run out of gas and lies stranded on the beach.

In an essay entitled "How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies," Bruno Latour considers the body not in terms of an essence or an

already-determined nature, but as “an interface that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements” (206). Following this definition of the body as continually influenced by both internal and external forces, we can read Gerardo’s asthmatic body as the somatic nexus—the point of convergence—between gasoline, illness and acts of violence. However, a toxic element such as gasoline does not, and cannot, provide answers for the specific motives behind the action of the protagonists. Gasoline in *Gasolina* does not, for instance, explain what causes Gerardo to steal or why he suffers from asthma. The film’s opening credits scene, which gives way to Gerardo’s first asthma attack, only alludes to what the reasons could be.

If *Gasolina* ends with a scene of convulsive breathing, it almost begins with one as well. The opening credits underscore a system of violence from the very beginning. The first shot of the film is a large close-up of part of the back of a blue Mercedes Benz, with the license plate at the left of the frame and a broken taillight on the right side of the frame. The top of the license plate reads “GUATEMALA 2004,” and the pyramid ruins of Tikal surrounded by a lush jungle—one of the most iconic symbols of Guatemalan national pride—fill the entire space of that plate, while another national symbol, the emblem of Guatemala’s flag, covers a small section to the left. This license plate functions as a condensed version of the frame, since it is similar in dimension to the film’s aspect ratio. The film will rely on automotive movement to “drive” the narrative forward, and the importance of gasoline to that movement is first alluded to by a row of vertically-moving numbers appearing at the bottom of the screen as if they were part of a gas pump gauge—an image we actually see when the teenagers stop at a filling station

roughly 56 minutes into the film—or a car’s odometer. Eventually, the numbers become letters that move into place to spell out the word “GASOLINA.”

Appropriately, the title is fixed at the center of the frame. This centralized position, which spells out the one-word title of the film, gasoline, also points to a key element at the center of the film’s plot. That the vehicle is not only a European make and model but also a relatively expensive German Mercedes-Benz denotes a particularly affluent status in a Central American country. Due to the positioning of the fuel tank door between the license plate and the taillight, this particular car may be an older version of a Mercedes, presumably from the 1970s or the 1980s.¹¹ As the credits begin to appear on the screen, we see the lower torso and legs of a young man (Gerardo) dressed in a T-shirt and military fatigue pants with two empty plastic containers.

Gerardo, we will soon learn, is stealing gas, and his body engages completely with this illicit act. We see a pair of arms constantly moving around the frame as they siphon the gas from the car into the plastic gallon container. Although the top part of his body is mostly out of the frame, we can see a partial view of Gerardo’s head as he bends down to suck the air out of the tube. The task is not easy since he has to struggle several times given that the fluid does not come out very quickly. As he struggles, we hear the guttural sounds his throat makes as he is forced to spit out the gas several times. Gerardo’s crouching body reveals the arduousness of this labor. His process of breathing, sucking and spitting out signals a form of embodied guttural response—a mechanized regurgitation—to the act of stealing that in the process, ensures its completion. As

¹¹ I explain further below the relationship of vehicles to the historical context of *Gasolina*. It is not mere coincidence that the make and model of this Mercedes-Benz corresponds to what is arguably the most brutal period of Guatemala’s Civil War, the period spanning the late 1970s and early 1980s.

gasoline travels up through the tube, the body also acts as a form of siphon apparatus connected to the car by way of the throat. The next scene in this sequence reveals that while this theft—a violation of private property—takes place, another teenager (Mario, the neighbor) rehearses some kind of violent exercise. Standing in an open field, Mario places a jar filled with what seems to be insects or flies on the ground. He walks around and from a few paces points a gun at the jar. Is he practicing how to use the weapon? Does the jar stand in for a possible human target? In any case, the grassy field serves as the shooting range for the simulation of various possibilities for violence. That is, the gun makes possible a form of self-defense—of protecting oneself from trespassers—but it also serves as an instrument capable of causing bodily harm to someone else.

This scene of simulated violence gives way to the actual violence that soon follows in association with Gerardo's stealing and his difficulty in breathing. Gerardo's body, like the empty plastic container, serves as something of a receptacle, and it is open to external forces with the capacity to affect it.¹² The body, which participates in the process of stealing gasoline by breathing in the fumes and spitting out part of the fluid, is that same body convulsed by a stifled breathing that turns into an asthma attack as Gerardo does push-ups for Mario. Seen in this light, Gerardo's body serves as both an active participant in acts of vandalism and trespassing (stealing gasoline) and an open vessel receptive to other more specific forms of violence (such as bodily assault) that can pass through it and affect it.

¹² The horizontal lines of Gerardo's plastic container resemble those of the car's broken taillight and the lines of the garage door of Mario's white and yellow house.

The Autoimmunitarian Paradigm in *Gasolina*

Gasoline plays a crucial if ambiguous role in the construction of a somatic discourse on violence in *Gasolina*. Is it only Gerardo's asthma that prevents him from breathing properly and causes his attacks? Or is Gerardo's breathing in of gasoline—the inhaling of toxic fumes while he steals—also to blame for this condition? After all, Gerardo himself agrees to submit his body to further strenuous activity once he is caught in the act of stealing by Mario. Gerardo comes up with the agreement that if he does fifty push-ups, neither his mother nor Mario's will find out about this incident. These push-ups, however, seem to induce Gerardo's asthma attack. In order to cover up his crime of stealing gas and trespassing (and not be shot by Mario), Gerardo engages in something that only exacerbates his violent predicament. That is, in order to protect himself from Mario's gun, Gerardo agrees to perform a physical activity at the risk of triggering his asthma. As a way of self-defense, Gerardo undergoes a process of self-exposure to physical danger. If, recalling Latour, the body functions as an interface that is continually affected by forces beyond its control, Gerardo's body enacts what I call an autoimmune response.

The scientific definition for autoimmunity as a mechanism of self-defense and self-destruction refers to the way the body's immune system triggers misdirected immune responses in its resistance to invading microorganisms such as viruses, cancers, parasites and bacteria ("What is Autoimmunity?"). During an autoimmune disorder, the body's immune systems fails to distinguish between healthy tissues and antigens, attacking normal body tissue "by mistake" ("Autoimmune disorders"). In its infinite capacity to

protect itself, the body attacks itself.¹³ The logic of autoimmunity also lends itself to a political reading. Various prominent thinkers of political philosophy have taken it up in relation to biopolitics, the state and matters of internal security. In his meditation on 9/11, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” Jacques Derrida, for example, defines the law of autoimmune processes as “that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal fashion*, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity (94). In seeking out perpetrators of violence beyond its borders, and possibly not finding any, the state may seek out enemies within itself—inside its own body politic—to eradicate perceived dangers. In doing so, the state, Derrida argues, is “at once remedy and poison” (94). For the philosopher, such autoimmunitary logic also goes by a much older name, the *pharmakon*, which Derrida traces back to Plato (124).

Derrida’s logic of autoimmunity can help to illustrate how Gerardo’s asthmatic body enacts a form of self-destruction while trying to protect itself in the process. As the altercation of the film’s initial scene illustrates, Gerardo’s body resorts to a self-defense mechanism when it finds itself the target of a violent scenario. And within this apparatus of immunity, objects and substances that are meant to relieve his asthma seem to do the exact opposite. For example, Gerardo keeps at hand his indispensable inhaler. By breathing into this compact and portable device, he inhales a certain dose of medicine to help with his respiration. Gerardo also walks around the neighborhood not only with plastic containers to steal gas but also with a yellow plastic receptacle, his respirator, which he recharges in his bedroom, to help him breathe. If he fills those containers with

¹³ According to the U.S. National Library of Medicine, there are more than 80 types of autoimmune disorders. Examples of autoimmune diseases include multiple sclerosis, lupus, chronic rheumatoid arthritis, celiac disease, and Type 1 diabetes (“Autoimmune disorders”).

gasoline from other's people tanks, he also "fills" up with air from the yellow tank. The breathing tank, with its transparent tube and accompanying electrical cord, resembles the transparent plastic containers he uses to steal gasoline. When Gerardo recharges his respirator in his bedroom, this particular air tank functions as an intermediary receptacle between the electrical outlet and Gerardo's physical body. Connected to the electrical outlet, the tank is also connected to Gerardo's mouth. In this regard, as Gerardo's body attaches itself to a series of plastic devices, it resorts to them for breathing. In doing so, Gerardo's body enacts a form of respiratory prosthesis, with his lungs linked to these synthetic materials.

However, to consider such objects within a visual economy of (auto)immunity means that we not only examine them as devices that help him breathe but also as instruments that simultaneously prevent the act of breathing itself. For instance, Mario mistakes Gerardo's inhaler for a weapon—as if it too were a gun—when Gerardo takes it out of his pocket, prompting Mario to grab it. That the inhaler is medicine and not a threatening object matters little since despite Gerardo's protest, Mario refuses to give it back to him. Such mis-recognition of a crucial object, the act of mistaking an inhaler for a gun, highlights a disturbing economy of urban violence in a place like Guatemala City, in which seemingly innocuous devices can be immediately perceived or rendered as threatening weapons. In this way, Gerardo's inhaler—as both remedy *and* poison—effectively blocks his breathing and prolongs his asthma attack. Gerardo's inability to use his inhaler sets the stage for another scene of violence, forcing him to engage in another form of assault. The fact that Gerardo's inhaler is not really a weapon and that Mario's gun (which we later learn does not have any bullets) may not even be a real gun is of no

consequence. That teenagers like Gerardo can walk around in what may seem a peaceful middle-class neighborhood in the middle of the day stealing gasoline so easily but also that *any* resident can be armed and ready to shoot underscores the violence of living daily in many areas of the city, not only the more marginalized parts of the capital. How is gasoline related to these acts of violence in *Gasolina*, beyond the fact that the theft of this toxic element places Gerardo in trouble? Considering that gasoline is a flammable liquid—a quality that is underlined in a later gas station scene where a high angle shot shows a warning sign reading “INFLAMABLES”—Gerardo’s altercation with Mario points to a certain “combustibility” of spontaneous acts of violence that, like gasoline, have the capacity to engulf those with which it interacts.

The Combustibility of Violence

I would like to put further pressure on the relationship between the capacity of gasoline to burn—its combustibility—and the random acts of violence in post-war Guatemala that pervade *Gasolina*. Gerardo’s asthmatic body provides a somatic discourse of spontaneous violence that runs a dangerous course in the film. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the film engages with a series of visual cues or signs that an earlier film like *El silencio de Neto* also relies on to construct its discourse of illness (asthma) as a national trauma (the CIA-orchestrated 1954 coup against President Jacobo Arbenz). The signs that both films share include illness (asthma), geography (volcanoes) and a boy’s road trip outside of the capital in the company of his male friends. However, in *Gasolina*, the concept of asthma—Gerardo’s inability to breathe—does not and cannot easily explain away the political trauma from

which Gerardo and his friends may suffer. If anything, the traits that define gasoline as a fluid—its capacity to burn; its toxic ephemeral quality—signal a dangerous spontaneity of violence that can erupt at any moment. Gerardo and his friends were most likely not yet born or were too young to experience first-hand the events of the war. They are too disaffected and too apathetic to critically engage with the violence that continues to engulf Guatemalan society. In other words, the teenagers are too disengaged to make any sense of the reverberations of war that has made of Guatemala a place in which a neighbor (like Mario) can be a potential assailant. Their attention span is as ephemeral as the gasoline they steal.

In this film, the element of gasoline indeed plays a crucial role in the discourse of violence in post-war Guatemala—but the way in which it engages with political history is obtuse, scattered, dispersed. Before I launch into a further discussion of the more nuanced roles that gasoline may play in the film, a short summary of the decades-long Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996) is in order. The country's brutal war was marked by the forced disappearance, torture and murder of civilians and leftist fighters as well as the strategic genocide of various Maya groups. The war holds a singular place in twentieth century Cold War conflicts in the Americas given that the United Nations-sponsored Truth Commission specifically considered the war as genocide "because the population, lived spaces, and culture of Maya people were disproportionately targeted by government forces" (Gould and Estrada 102). The Maya suffered most of the violence, and were more than 90% of the casualties. The human rights reports of both the United Nations and the Guatemalan Catholic Church attest to a strategic genocide against the Maya in the early 1980s (Carey and Little 5). By the time the Guatemalan Peace Accords were signed on

December 29, 1996, more than 200,000 people had been killed or forcibly disappeared. At least 400 Mayan villages were destroyed, 1.5 million people internally displaced and half a million forced into exile in Mexico and other countries (Rodríguez 105).

In *Gasolina*, airplanes make several recurring appearances throughout the film. A few of them fly by day and night over the residential community in which the three teenagers live. On several occasions the boys spend time discussing them at length.¹⁴ Gerardo also has a few toy airplanes in his bedroom. In the opening sequence, after using his respirator, Gerardo lies on his bed and stares at a pair of toy planes dangling from his ceiling. The point of view shot shows the planes hovering above Gerardo's head as if they were flying suspended in mid-air. In another scene, a highway serves as a "launching pad" for the teenagers' imaginations. While riding together, they begin to talk about airplanes and imagine themselves as pilots. They discuss such specifics as the position of the tires on a Boeing, and when one of them spots an airplane flying overhead, he classifies it as an Airbus 330, a type of commercial plane. The highway becomes a sort of runway as the car transforms into an airplane and the teenagers become pilots. For Ana Yolanda Contreras, this fantasy sequence illustrates a need to retreat into a dream-place with the possibility of remaining "en un estado idílico y no desembarcar nunca" (4). Contreras interprets this fantasy in terms of a social condition, as a metaphor for the desire of many Guatemalans to escape a bleak reality that they cannot avoid. Many citizens, Contreras argues, "quisieran escapar de la realidad de violencia, inercia y aburrimiento en que se encuentran sumergidos, pero no pueden hacerlo" (4).

¹⁴ Their residential zone may be quite close to the airport since airplanes fly directly overhead. Unlike most other Central American cities in which airports are located in the countryside a distance from the capital, Guatemala City's airport, like Mexico City's, is located directly within the limits of the capital.

However, notwithstanding the youthful camaraderie and desire for freedom that this fantasy represents, I argue that these airplanes—like the cars from which the teenagers steal gas—also suggest an escapism marked by an obliviousness to physical surroundings. This fantasy sequence somewhat parallels the later crucial scene marking the film’s abrupt climax. Later in the film, the teenagers are distractedly watching another airplane (discussing whether or not it is a Concorde) when they hit a pair of pedestrians crossing the road and fatally injure one of them. If their driving turns into flying as part of a fantasy, their careless driving ultimately culminates in a fatal accident—a real crime—with irrevocable consequences. When the boys are back on the road, when they are fleeing after having burned the body of the man they ran over, the lights of the car on the dark highway parallel the lights of the plane above in the night sky, with the highway itself again resembling an airport runway. In a similar way that gasoline fuels the car in which they drive and the airplane they steer in their fantasy, the chemical also “fuels” their escapist dream of driving out, of flying away, from their accountability. If the airplane fantasy is but an illusion, the murder is all too real. In running over the man, setting fire to his body, and escaping the scene of the crime, the teenagers run away from all forms of ethical responsibility.

Fire, Gasoline and White Phosphorus

What do the spontaneous acts of violence in *Gasolina*—which revolve around the stealing and using up of gasoline from cars—have to do with the earlier historical period of the nation’s Civil War? The chemical nature of gasoline plays an infamous role in Guatemala’s recent political history and cultural memory. As both a flammable and toxic

substance, gasoline fueled the military airplanes that bombed scores of villages and burned alive hundreds of Mayan *campesinos* during the war. The three years from 1981-1983 marked the bloodiest period of the war due to the ravages of Operation Sofia. Launched by the Guatemalan Army, this genocidal military strategy sought to stifle rising guerrilla warfare by eliminating the civilian bases in which they were believed to be hidden, explicitly targeting the country's Mayan population. Instituting a scorched earth policy in the highlands, special army units known as the Kaibiles and private death squads burned crops and villages, killed livestock, poisoned water supplies and desecrated Mayan cultural sites ("Genocide in Guatemala").

However, the airplanes in the film's fantasy sequence cannot easily stand in for those military airplanes that bombed indigenous villages during the war. The airplanes in *Gasolina* are commercial vehicles that evoke not so much the horrors of war but rather the allure of an ever-increasing globalized aviation industry that has successfully monopolized Central America.¹⁵ For example, one of the boys mentions that he would never fly for the military since its airplanes are known for having defective parts. Also, the clothes that the teenagers wear in the dream sequence are not military garb but the uniformed suits that commercial pilots wear. Nonetheless, the political symbolism of airplanes in *Gasolina* cannot be disavowed. Gerardo indeed wears military fatigues in the film (including in the very first scene) and the trio's dialogue refers to the national air force in more than one way. One of the teenagers says that if he were to have an airplane, he would use it to live in as if it were his home. Because during the war airplane pilots

¹⁵ As has happened in other parts of the world, all Central American regional airlines have (with the exception of Panama's Copa Airlines) ceased to exist as national industries. The once prominent airlines servicing Central America (such as Guatemala's Aviateca, El Salvador's Taca, Nicaragua's Aeronica and Costa Rica's Lacs) have all come under a Latin American conglomerate, Avianca.

dropped the bombs that decimated an endless number of villages and left many people homeless and displaced, there is a dark historical undercurrent to the character's seemingly innocent statement.

As a poisonous chemical fluid, gasoline shares a combustible composition with white phosphorus, another element implicated in the country's violence. White phosphorus was most likely used in the infamous burning of the Spanish embassy on January 31, 1980, a date that remains indelibly inscribed in Guatemala's recent history. The country's military regime, under dictator General Lucas García, not only burned down the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City but also asphyxiated most of the people trapped inside. The embassy had been peacefully taken over by a group of K'iche' and Ixil farmers, *campesinos* and university students.¹⁶ The Mayan farmers, who organized a march in the capital to protest the kidnapping and murder of peasants in the region of *El Quiché* by the national army, had been denied a hearing in Congress and their adviser had been assassinated (Ball et al 23). The conflagration claimed a total of 36 lives, including the protesters, their allies, and embassy staff. The Mayan demonstrator Gregorio Yuxá, who suffered third-degree burns but escaped the fire, was later kidnapped from the hospital by paramilitary forces, tortured and shot. His body was subsequently found on the campus of the Universidad de San Carlos. The victims included activist Vicente Menchú, father of future Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchú. The only other person to escape the fire, Spanish Ambassador Máximo Cajal y Lopez, survived by jumping out a window and fleeing the country.

¹⁶ The protesters included members from the *Comité de Unidad Campesina* (Committee of Peasant Unity), *Frente Estudiantil Robin García* (Robin García Revolutionary Front) and other groups associated with the *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (The Guerrilla Army of the Poor).

The burning of the embassy proved to be a catalyst with enormous consequences in the escalating violence of the Guatemalan government against its own citizens. Although armed conflict had existed since 1960, the time between the late 1970s and early 1980s has been recognized internationally as the period in which human rights violations in Guatemala reached an unparalleled intensity, particularly in terms of strategic violence against Mayan groups (Shea 4). Although it is estimated that more than 100,000 people died during the war, more than half of them were victims of political violence since the late 1970s (Shea 9). According to Arturo Arias, the Embassy burning became “the defining event” in Guatemala’s Civil War (161). After then, many Guatemalan middle-class professionals and moderates joined the revolutionary struggle against the regime. Spain broke off diplomatic relations with Guatemala (and did not restore them until 1984), the military lost face on the global stage, and the Reagan Administration in the United States also distanced itself from Guatemala’s national situation (Arias 144).

Who and what actually caused the fire has remained a divisive polemic for more than three decades. The police may have introduced a white phosphorus liquid that ignited the Molotov cocktails that the protesters had brought in. What is certain is that, on orders from the national government, a police raid allowed the fire to consume the embassy, as officers refused to unlock the doors of the second floor, where everyone remain trapped, and prevented firefighters from effectively containing the blaze (Ball et al 23). This tragic event is never directly mentioned in *Gasolina*, and my intention in recalling it here is, not simply to frame the film in terms of a political allegory of the nation, or as an allegory of a collective trauma. Instead, I wish to emphasize the painful

ongoing uncertainties regarding how a specific substance, white phosphorus in this case, played a key role in a horrific act of violence. The use of phosphorus suggests that the substance did not act according to some human agent's will (the police, for example) but because of its own chemical properties given the circumstances. In this regard, phosphorus was an actor, not merely—and no longer—a tool for someone to use.

Gasolina reveals not so much the historical ambiguity of toxic elements such as gasoline but rather, the nuanced ways in which its dangerous “combustibility” provokes scenarios of spontaneous violence that are all too common in post-Civil War Guatemala. The flammability of gasoline—its propensity to burn—alludes to the volatile situation of a country *still* consumed by violence in a time of unsettling peace. In *Gasolina*, cinema aligns itself with the multiple, ambiguous, and (in)visible roles that a toxic substance such as gasoline can play in recent Guatemalan history. Gasoline in *Gasolina* engages in a visual discourse of violence that does not fit so comfortably inside historical narratives that seek to explain political traumas. If, in *Gasolina*, gasoline is visibly linked to theft, murder, and the burning of evidence through its associations with other objects and persons (container, fluid, fire, burning body, car, highway), the ambiguous invisible involvement of white phosphorus in the historical events of that January in 1980 is forever linked to molotov cocktails, a police raid, embassy staff and Mayan protesters. The relationship between the gasoline of *Gasolina* and the phosphorus of 1980 remains unsettling. The violence that surrounds the element of gasoline in the film may allude to, but cannot properly encapsulate, an easy narrative of collective historical trauma. Nonetheless, gasoline, like white phosphorus, suggests the inexorable violence that has marked Guatemalan history. Both elements—gasoline in film; phosphorus in national

history—participate in mercilessly orchestrated acts of violence that hide the evidence and conceal the traces of horrific crimes.

On Impunity: The “Still” Disappeared

As cinema that places itself alongside history, *Gasolina* illustrates how a toxic substance such as gasoline participates in a visual economy of violence and propagates newer cycles of violence, even if the protagonists may not be aware of it or may have forgotten its history. The violent cinematic combustibility of gasoline, reaching its climax in *Gasolina* with the intentional burning of an indigenous man, resonates ominously in relation to the atrocities committed against Guatemala’s Mayan population during its recent past. That the man burned to death in *Gasolina* is indigenous is not insignificant considering that Guatemala is approximately 40% Mayan. Consisting of at least 22 Mayan groups with their own language, the nation has the highest number of indigenous groups in all of Central America. The teenagers’ burning of this indigenous man in order to hide the evidence of their complicity in a hit-and-run parallels the gruesome fate of the embassy victims and Mayan protesters burned to death as part of the State’s efforts to rid themselves of any traces of culpability. Given that in *Gasolina* the indigenous man is burned with an object of an earlier theft, a tank of stolen gasoline, the film reveals a visual economy of recurring violence that persists years after the war has ended. Seen in this light, *Gasolina* engages obliquely with the mechanisms remaining in place and by which certain sectors of Guatemalan society can still choose to deny any responsibility for their actions and consistently ignore all of those who exist outside of their social position. The way in which these middle-class *capitalino* teenagers can swiftly dispose of

the body and remain unaccountable for their crime reflects the larger problem of the State's consistent historical refusal to properly acknowledge the nation's indigenous population as both political subjects and legitimate citizens. The film's act of impunity reinforces not only the vulnerable position of the indigenous, but also the well-entrenched privileges of a powerful *ladino* elite that remains in control in so-called "post-war" Guatemala. The burning of a man on the highway suggests both a lack of memory of the recent past and the indifference to such history. There is no trauma in *Gasolina* because the boys simply do not have a sense of historical memory.

Gasolina does not work through the traumas of war but rather shows how violence continues years after the war has officially ended, and, to an extent, blocks—or cancels out—any form of commemoration. In the film, any reference to the strategic genocide of the indigenous during the war remains oblique and any denunciation of post-war politics remains unsaid. In this regard, Hernández Cordon's cinema resonates with the work of the so-called New Argentine Cinema (NCA) that rose against the backdrop of the economic crisis of that South American country in the mid-1990s. This diverse group of directors—which includes Lucrecia Martel, Pablo Trapero, Adrián Caetano, Lisandro Alonso and older veterans such as Martín Rejtman and Esteban Sapir—has been known for creating "mundane, gritty and mostly urban features, stepping aside from the more rhetorical declamations of their predecessors" (Sosa 251). *Gasolina*'s oblique and ambiguous strategy for engaging with political history shares significant parallels with what, for Cecilia Sosa, has come to define NCA: "Their dissimilar films share a common claim: they build their minimal stories by using a bare narrative without moral engagement that similarly rejects any sententious political statement" (251).

By illustrating how easily an indigenous man can be made to disappear, *Gasolina* reveals the violence inherent in a society that continues to render certain groups invisible and disposable. In this regard, by showing that bodies can *still* disappear in a country years after the official end of its war, *Gasolina* forms part of a contemporary Latin American cinema of the disappeared, and bears a particular affinity with an Argentine film by Lucrecia Martel. In “A Counter-narrative of Argentine mourning,” Cecilia Sosa considers the violence of the dictatorship that made 30,000 disappear during the country’s “Dirty War” (1976-1983) by examining Martel’s *La mujer sin cabeza* (*The Headless Woman*, 2008), a film that also focuses on the disappearance and possible death of a victim of a hit-and-run. Although the historical circumstances of Guatemala and Argentina differ, the most repressive period of Guatemala’s Civil War corresponds to the years of Argentina’s own Dirty War, the late 1970s and early 1980s, a time in which many other Latin American countries also experienced their own form of state terrorism.

But both *Gasolina* and *La mujer sin cabeza* allude to their respective country’s traumatic past without directly referencing the war period. In fact, scholars such as Daniel Quirós argue against the prevailing view of Argentine cinema critics, who have linked films such as *La mujer sin cabeza* exclusively with the years of the dictatorship. Instead, Quirós considers Martel’s film within the historical framework of Argentine neoliberalism and President Carlos Menem’s second government in the late 1990s (246).¹⁷ In Martel’s film, a young (poor, possibly indigenous) child may have been run

¹⁷ Quirós notes that Martel has mentioned in various interviews that the film’s crucial car accident has much to do with a car boom—“explosión de autos”—that occurred in the Argentine region of Salta during Menem’s presidency. Salta is both the setting for *La mujer sin cabeza* and Martel’s city of origin (246). Given that a car’s particular brand can denote social class, the film’s car symbolism also shares affinities with the vehicles in *Gasolina*. Vero’s sedan in *La mujer sin cabeza* would most likely correspond to the Mercedes-Benz belonging to Mario’s family (Gerardo’s neighbors) in *Gasolina*.

over and killed by a white upper-class woman while driving on an empty road. Although a child is not burned to death as in *Gasolina*, the woman's family covers up all traces of her fatal driving accident. The white Argentine woman, like the Guatemalan teenagers, flees the scene of the crime and remains unaccountable for the consequences of her actions. The trio's criminal camaraderie in *Gasolina*, also presents, as Sosa perceives in Martel's film, an "uncomfortable script of a collective complicity. The plot that everybody knew and nobody could tell. The script that reveals that someone can disappear, can be kidnapped, tortured and murdered without leaving traces" (255).

Following Sosa, the body of the indigenous man on the highway—burned alive or already dead?—like the unburied, anonymous child's corpse in *La mujer sin cabeza*, evokes not only "the vanished lives of dictatorial times" but also the "disappeared [that] are still encrypted in the present, circulating, emerging from different states of humanity, embodied by the current marginalized lives" (257). Sosa calls these still-disappeared the "new faceless" who remain socially excluded and unacknowledged like the poor majority in post-war democratic regimes (250). If, for Sosa, *La mujer sin cabeza* illustrates how the poor and the non-white still remain largely excluded in Argentina, *Gasolina* manifests the ways the indigenous Mayan communities remain unnoticed and, are thus still treated as if they were invisible in contemporary Guatemala. Both films underscore the violence against minorities that persists in times of so-called peace. And such periods of peace, in both Central and South American nations, remain politically volatile in the age of an increasing neoliberalism fraught with social injustice and exclusion.

Disjointed Coordinates: Misreading History and Geography

Like the female protagonist in *La mujer sin cabeza*, the teenagers in *Gasolina* also choose to forget their victim when they abandon the couple they hit. As in Martel's film, no one ever mentions the "dirty war" in *Gasolina*, but the conflict looms like a spectral shadow of a violent past over a precarious present. A short but crucial scene involving a "wrong" volcano highlights a peculiar form of forgetting. Rai and Nano stand at the corner of their residential community, a *colonia* on the outskirts of Guatemala City. As they wait for Gerardo, Nano misidentifies the name of a prominent volcano near the capital, calling it Fuego ("Fire"). Rai immediately corrects him. They are not staring at the still-active volcano Fuego, famous for erupting several times in Guatemala's history, but the long-extinct volcano Agua ("Water"). His buddy's mistake gives Rai the perfect opportunity to make fun of Nano. Rai tells him that it looks like he did not learn anything in school, implying that anyone would have learned the difference between Fuego and Agua. Nano's act of misidentification—of getting the volcano's name wrong—prompts Rai to tease him further. He goes on to ask Nano if he even knows the shape of a volcano. Sure he will know the answer to this question, Nano replies irritably: "Un triángulo con un hoyo en la punta, imbécil." This is a lesson of Guatemalan geography that Nano may not have properly learned in school or that he ignored and forgot somewhere along the way. This scene, in which Nano misidentifies one of the most prominent volcanoes of Guatemala's topography, links an act of forgetting with the element of fire. His seemingly careless act of forgetting geography, of simply mistaking one volcano for another, calls into question the way violence is remembered—or rather in this film, forgotten—in a country ravaged by war for decades.

Recalling the volcano lesson scene above, in which Nano likens a volcano to a triangle with a hole at its tip, the teenage trio (also a triangle of sorts) contains a dangerous central crater. Nano's seemingly insignificant mistake of not knowing the correct name of the volcano—it is Agua and not Fuego, water and not fire—also signals a disregard for the sacred place that volcanoes have held in Mayan cosmogony and the specific acts of violence against both people and land that have occurred within Guatemalan geography. For example, Guatemala's Lake Atitlán, (the largest of Central America, surrounded by three other volcanoes) served as the specific site of several human rights abuses during the Army's scorched-earth policy. And although volcanoes have long been considered both "spiritual guards" and "protectors of people" for the Highland Mayas, the State banned all visits to volcanoes for the use of sacred ceremonies until the war's end in 1996 (Beek 3-4). As with other Latin American countries, human rights reports have detailed various instances of people being thrown into lakes, the Pacific Ocean and the craters of volcanoes during the war ("Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Republic of Guatemala").

The names of Agua and Fuego carry particular connotations. Both volcanoes, along with a third, Acatenango, located southwest of Guatemala City near the colonial city of Antigua, are famous for dominating the landscape when not covered by clouds. The extinct Agua, which in the local Mayan Kaqchikel language is *Hunahpu* ("place of flowers"), has not had any eruptions. On the other hand, Fuego, or *Chi Q'aq'* ("where the fire is") has erupted several times since the Spanish Conquest. Considering the lyrical Mayan names of the volcanoes, by misidentifying the volcano, Nano also misreads the fire when he designates Agua, the place of flowers—a relatively stable volcano—as the

site of fire, Fuego, a still-active one.¹⁸ In a way, this simple mistake incriminates Nano in the fateful decision he chooses to make later in the film, when he single-handedly, to the shock of his friends, decides to burn the indigenous man on the highway. Volcanoes also play a significant role in *El silencio de Neto*, in terms of Neto's entrance into adulthood. Like the teenagers in *Gasolina*, Neto forms part of a trio of friends. But *El silencio* concludes with a no-longer silent Neto, having successfully climbed the volcano Agua with his friends, shouting into the horizon.

Nano's misidentification of a volcano not only suggests a lack of awareness of topography and an apathy towards his surroundings but also an ignorance of the environmental history of Guatemala City. The disaffected teenagers live out their reckless youth aimlessly, oblivious as to where they are headed, but they are also disconnected from both the physical environment and the city's environmental past. That Nano cannot recall the Spanish names for the volcanoes, which are allegorical of the past, indicates that he also cannot recognize the historical weight they have played in the city's cultural heritage. This lack of awareness also creates a considerable distance between them and those other Guatemalan citizens outside of their compact social milieu. That the teenagers refuse to acknowledge and help the indigenous victim that they have run over on the highway reveals a disregard for others. This particular disregard for others makes visible in *Gasolina* a broken ethical relationship that has unfortunately come to characterize post-war Guatemalan society. For Ana Contreras, violence runs through the film by way

¹⁸ The "peacefulness" of the volcano Agua has recently been linked with the commemoration of the victims of violence. On January 21, 2012, 12,000 people climbed Agua to protest domestic violence and remember the more than 600 women murdered the year before in Guatemala. Forming a human chain up to its peak, the participants of the "Walk for Life" included the former and now imprisoned president, Otto Pérez Molina, a former army general during the country's war ("Guatemalans climb volcano in protest against violence").

of disconnected channels of communication and ruptured family structures. As she correctly points out, the teenager's family consists of "unos padres de familia llenos de angustia y desolación buscando proteger a sus hijos sin realmente saber cómo hacerlo, y [que] a su vez, irónicamente, utilizan la violencia como medio de resguardarlos del mundo exterior (4)." The parents, who engage in domestic violence themselves, fail to protect their children because they do not know how. In turn, the teenagers cannot really learn anything from their parents. Both parents and children, then, "son figuras espectrales sin rumbo" (Contreras 4). In this regard, these disoriented teenagers, similar to their parents, may not be "faceless" in Sosa's terms, but they do carry an empty head on their shoulders. Or they are, in fact, recalling Martel's film, headless—*sin cabeza*—in the sense that they lack a compass, a sense of direction and of history, with disjointed coordinates leading to nowhere.

This sense of emptiness parallels the hollowness of the 1996 Treaty Accords that did little to effectively end the violence that persisted after the war officially drew to a close. As Kevin Gourd and Yvonne Estrada argue, an enduring national peace proved implausible for two main reasons. On the one hand, poverty, unequal land distribution and systemic racism against the Mayas remained. On the other, "while the Peace Accords promised a more just and democratic Guatemala, the institutions supporting the Accords did not have the power to enact the structural changes that the revolution had not produced" (Gould and Estrada 107). Military leaders and government officials responsible for war crimes were not removed from office and continued to wield power (107). What *Gasolina* makes quite visible is that the official war may have ended but the structures of violence remain stiflingly intact. The film's cinematography accentuates this

claustrophobia. Since the story takes place in the course of one night, many scenes of *Gasolina* are filmed in darkness with long takes and long shots in which the teenagers's sometimes slurred speech seems like indiscernible dialogue. Given that most of the film takes place at night, *Gasolina* may be suggesting that the country remains stuck in a dark time where violence, injustice and exclusion remain well entrenched. In this regard, Dan Fairanu's disparaging review of the film in *Screen Daily* fails to recognize something done quite effectively in *Gasolina*. Fairanu laments, "Possibly the most serious disappointment for the viewer curious to find out about Guatemala is that the country portrayed here is so shrouded in darkness that almost nothing is visible." On the contrary, what *Gasolina* brings to light—makes visible—is the mechanisms that still enables marginalization and injustice to continue.

Uncanny Landscapes: Trapped Outside

To consider *Gasolina* an example of autoimmunitarian cinema suggests that we consider the narrative of the film itself under the paradigm of an autoimmune process. The film's final sequence reveals how a story of violence woven throughout *Gasolina* eventually breaks down completely by the end. Unlike the adolescent hero of *El silencio de Neto*, who learns to finally speak out despite his asthma, the teenagers' complicity in a hit-and-run in *Gasolina* marks a stifling silence that continues to haunt Guatemala years after the Treaty Accords. By fleeing the scene of the crime, the youths not only free themselves from all accountability but contribute to a culture of violence that still torments the country. By the end of *Gasolina*, when they finally reach the sea, it seems almost certain that they will remain unpunished. Gerardo's asthmatic body, convulsed by

breathing attacks throughout the film, serves as that visual somatic nexus between decades of war and a precarious present that remains afflicted by the legacies the conflict has left in its wake: impunity, violence, fear, and a stifling silence. The final water sequence, however, complicates any notion that the teenagers could wash their hands clean of murder.

While the other two sleep, Gerardo experiences his final breathing attack standing at the beach while staring at an oil tanker out at sea. There is a mixture of sounds: Gerardo's heavy breathing, ocean waves, the wind and an airplane flying overhead. This is the last airplane that appears in *Gasolina*. Interestingly, all sounds seem to blend in, the wind and water paralleling the sound of an airplane's engine and Gerardo's lungs as if they were one and the same. As he walks to what seems to be a nearby factory or warehouse (but might also pass as a former army bunker) the grating noise of metal being sharpened adds a cacophonous sound that gradually escalates in volume. Although they are finally outside of the city and adjacent to the open immensity of the sea, this last scene underscores Gerardo's confinement. It as if he were not only trapped inside his body while unable to breathe—with a muffled breathing caught at the unbearable edge of his lungs—but also somehow trapped outside on the beach, suffering a kind of agoraphobia, with no one to help him. A long take frames his solitary figure as if he were completely alone.

Gerardo knocks on the metal door of the structure for help but no one answers. His stifled breathing amidst a barren landscape of a beach (save for one pig searching for food) adds a somatic layer to the existential desolateness that for Jean-Luc Nancy is at the center of the question of landscape. I do not wish to enter a long discussion regarding the

concept of landscape but I would like to conclude my discussion of *Gasolina* with a brief mention of its significance here. In a chapter of *The Ground of the Image* entitled “Uncanny Landscape,” Nancy conceives of landscape as a space empty of people that estranges and is uncanny because “there is no more community, no more civic life” (61). For Nancy, landscape points to something of a rupture or a void, a “suspension of a passage” from one place to another (61). In the context of *Gasolina*’s final sequence, the beach—but with its humans and animals—may suggest something of an empty landscape, with Gerardo’s asthmatic body as an interrupted, suspended passage in itself, blocking the flow of air from lungs to mouth. The image of a suffocating Gerardo staring at the sea reveals a vision, following Nancy, of “those who have lost their way and those who contemplate the infinite—perhaps their infinite estrangement” (61).

The Autoimmunitarian Logic of Dust in *Polvo*

I now turn to a wider discussion of the autoimmunitarian logic in relation to the body and ecology in *Polvo*. Whereas *Gasolina* aligns itself with the violence in Guatemala before and after the war in a very oblique way, *Polvo* engages directly with the violent repercussions of those years. The film focuses on the story of Juan (Agustín Ortiz Pérez), a young indigenous musician who suffers from migraines while he searches for the remains of his father, who disappeared during the war. The man who reported his father to the military lives in the same town where Juan makes his home with his mother, wife and newborn baby. His family was displaced from their former village while he was a child during the war. Juan is accompanied on his journey to the countryside by a non-indigenous *chapín* filmmaker, Ignacio (Eduardo Spiegeler), who is making a

documentary out of his story and suffers from allergies.¹⁹ Juan attempts suicide several times and, in one pivotal scene, consumes fertilizer. At the same time, he seeks revenge on the neighbor by killing his son. The making of the film stops when Juan decides to no longer participate. With his fate unclear and a possible capture by the police immanent, Juan finally visits the remains of his childhood village with Ignacio. In an open field, *Polvo* concludes with the pair competing in a friendly bicycle match.

In this second half of the chapter, I consider to what extent *Polvo* enacts an autoimmunitarian logic of murderous revenge and attempted suicide through Juan. Recalling the role that a toxic substance such as gasoline plays in relation to Gerardo's asthmatic body in *Gasolina*, I argue that the element of dust—*polvo*—also participates in recurring cycles of violence by signaling both Juan's personal and national traumas, which cannot be reconciled. However, whereas in *Gasolina* the teenager (Gerardo) did not experience the war himself, Juan, the protagonist of *Polvo*, is a direct victim of the national conflict. His consumption of fertilizer illustrates an ecology against life in that Juan tries to die by eating something poisonous that otherwise increases the fertility of the land. Dust not only refers to “natural” particles of earth or waste matter but also to the decomposing materiality of the body, of what remains after a body dies—*los restos*—and becomes a corpse. In the context of Guatemalan political violence, dust also alludes to the disappeared victims and corpses that remain unaccounted for in mass graves in the Mayan highlands. In *Polvo*, dust engages with both the human body and political history, becoming visible through its effects on the protagonists. In this regard, *Polvo* adds an ecological layer to the somatic discourse of violence observed in *Gasolina*. As soil/earth,

¹⁹ *Chapín* refers to someone who is Guatemalan, similar to *nica* for Nicaraguans or *tico* for Costa Ricans.

dust may also stand in for the landscape itself as a damaged casualty of war that, like humans and animals, experienced the ravages of armed conflict.

The Man in the Forest

A recurring, haunting image of a man in the forest reinforces Juan's traumatic experience throughout the film and his uneasy relation with himself and others. In one initial scene, a young naked man climbs the branches of trees in a forest with his back turned and, in another, the man is tied to a tree staring at a direct angle at the viewer. Whether these images are flashbacks to the fate of Juan's long-lost tortured father or correspond to Juan's hallucinatory dreams of his father remains unclear. A third alternative is possible: Juan might be dreaming that he himself is the man since the sequence cuts directly from the man in the trees to Juan sleeping while reclined against the exterior walls of his house. The forest could be a symbol for life—a shelter that protects from harm—but the tree here ties the man down. This bondage could suggest either a trapped life, a life lived involuntarily or even an escape from life. Whatever the case, this “unbalanced” life within a physical environment, in turn, leads to an unbalanced relation with others, as the next sequence shows.

As his baby cries inside his home, Juan wakes up. Like the man tied to a tree, Juan is also in a way “tied up” up by a double-edged form of violence, or, recalling the horizon and the vertical lines of his home's exterior, imprisoned by a stifling obsession. He harbors an urge both to take his own life and to seek revenge on Basilio (Carlos Gómez Subuyuj), the neighbor who is at least partly responsible for his father's disappearance. When the film begins, Juan has already attempted suicide more than once.

After entering the house, Juan slits his veins with a knife while his family sleeps.

Although he becomes unconscious, the cut does not prove fatal and his wife responds:

“Otra vez lo hiciste.” Seeking help, his wife later carries his seemingly moribund body on a wheelbarrow at daylight. Considering the Mayan genocide of the war years, such an image carries historical weight. As I explain later, the image figures a harrowing event that Juan’s mother Delfina (María Telón Soc) experienced, an event that Juan later recounts during the filming of his story. Juan’s lifeless body recalls the countless bodies of dead *campesinos* carried away for burial by their surviving family members after the national army devastated their village. The image of the pair of shoes that his wife removes to get a better footing while pushing the wheelbarrow foreshadows a detail in a story that is later recalled in *Polvo* involving Juan’s mother and a soldier’s boot.

Furthermore, that the vehicle is a wheelbarrow, an object used oftentimes for plowing or gardening, is crucial given that Juan will later try to kill himself by ingesting fertilizer, a substance used for agriculture and gardening.²⁰

Somatic Economies: Headaches and Allergies

Like *Gasolina*, where Gerardo’s asthmatic body displays the symptomatic mechanisms of violence that continue to haunt Guatemala, Juan’s body, afflicted by headaches, undergoes a visceral series of crises. The automobile sequence, which leads to the scene in which the filmmakers shoot Juan’s testimony in an open field, includes a conversation about headaches and allergies. As in *Gasolina*, the problem with breathing is linked to the act of driving. Juan travels with Ignacio and Alejandra (Alejandra

²⁰ As explained previously in the chapter, not only did the Army decimate hundreds of rural villages but also destroyed innumerable fields of crops and livestock.

Estrada), the director's pregnant girlfriend, to a remote part of the countryside to shoot a scene of the documentary. While discussing their children, Alejandra displays anxiety about the possibility that her children may inherit Ignacio's allergies. She tells Juan that she hopes their future child is not allergic to dust like Ignacio, who almost died once from a breathing attack: "Ojalá no salga alérgico al polvo como aquel. Se pone como los peces cuando los sacas del agua." Although Alejandra's trepidations as a future mother may seem reasonable enough, her statement nonetheless suggests a fear that her husband's compromised immunity might just be passed down to her *own* descendants.

In this regard, a possible allergy to dust reflects not only a parent's worry for a child's safety but a fear of a vulnerable, transmittable inheritance. During an allergic reaction, dust functions as an intruding agent that stifles the nostrils as if covering them with a thick mist and often making the eyes itchy and watery. Hernández Córdón reinforces the hazy appearance of such invisible particles floating in the air by the particular use of lighting, framing and focus. As Alejandra speaks, her face in profile stares to the right side of the frame while the camera captures the sun's blinding light behind her. The rays seem to go through her while the reflection of the rays on the windshield gives the appearance of translucent yellow circles of sunshine suspended in midair. This murky effect is repeated a bit later when Juan, sitting in the back seat of the car, begins to narrate how his father was taken by the military. Behind his blurred figure is the car's dirty rear window, which appears to be caked with dust, making the open field behind him also appear faded and dusty. The abundance of dust and the image of the faded field in the background indicates a land damaged by soil degradation.

The discussion about stifled breathing turns into a conversation about the difficulty of driving with bad road conditions. The dialogue draws a nuanced parallel between the journey by car and the physical act of breathing since the difficult, almost impassable terrain, with its arduous roads, corresponds to a body's blocked respiratory tract during a breathing attack. Although Juan does not have allergies, he suffers from chronic headaches. The act of traveling on rough roads is also linked to this form of ailment. Juan tells Ignacio: "Hablando del terreno, allí se oyen lamentos en las copas de los árboles; por eso me duele la cabeza cuando vengo aquí." Juan believes his headaches are, if not the result of, at least partly caused by hearing the moans—*los lamentos*—of those who disappeared or died during the war and continue to haunt the forests. Alluding to the recurring image of the man tied to or perched in a tree, Juan continues to be haunted by his father's disappearance. This form of haunting—Juan being continuously tormented by the ghosts of the past—may express itself most viscerally by way of Juan's own damaged immunity. Juan's father, his mother tells the filmmakers at one point in *Polvo*, also suffered from debilitating headaches. While Alejandra worries that her child will suffer from the same allergies as Ignacio, Juan may have literally and metaphorically inherited his immunological vulnerability to migraines from his father.²¹

Juan tells them that he is unsure whether it is his father who moans, preferring to think of him as being elsewhere. This uncertainty is common to both Juan's headaches and Ignacio's allergies. These two types of ailments share unclear or unknown causes,

²¹ There is no mention in the film of Ignacio's relationship to the war. However, his family is not untouched by the current problems affecting Guatemala City. In one scene, he becomes a victim of police brutality. While having dinner in a restaurant, a pair of policemen come to take away his father. Ignacio asks to see the piece of paper that they wave around as a warrant for his arrest. They refuse to show it to him. As they protest, one of the men takes his father away while the other beats Ignacio to the ground and leaves him there.

but the effects are certainly felt by the person experiencing them. For example, Juan's headaches might be migraines or a pain alongside a nerve (neuralgia) caused by a range of problems. Ignacio's allergies, likewise, might be the result of various factors considering the scientific definition of an allergy as a damaging immune response by the body to a substance like pollen, fur, food or dust to which the body has become hypersensitive.

(Auto)Immunity: Self-Defense and Self-Destruction

Let us recall again Bruno Latour's definition of the body—mentioned earlier in the chapter—as an interface that is continually affected by other forces. Following Latour, we can understand Juan's body as a somatic crossroads in which contradictory urges and toxic decisions (such as the revenge killing of his neighbor's son or his own suicide attempts) are simultaneously played out. Juan's contradictory impulses of killing his neighbor at the same time that he tries to kill himself display a mechanism of defense and destruction. His disturbingly erratic behavior speaks to a double-edged strategy of violence: acts of violence towards others while committing acts of violence against himself. Such opposing forms of violence can also be situated within Derrida's paradigm of autoimmunity discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to *Gasolina*. Recalling again the philosopher's logic, autoimmunity indicates the behavior by which a body works to destroy its own immunity. For Juan, this law of autoimmunity would dictate that any desire he may have to seek justice for his father is constantly thwarted by his obsessive quest for revenge, ultimately leaving him with the urge to destroy his own life in the process. Such a twisted and self-defeating logic forces a vulnerable Juan to be utterly

exposed to that indescribable and unidentifiable “wound” that for Derrida escapes the possibility of ever really being named (94).

This ineffability manifests itself physically by way of Juan’s headaches. His mysterious migraines, which begin to torment Juan whenever he speaks or shares too much of the war years with the filmmakers, illustrate something of a toxic memory that displays itself somatically. Juan’s body, affected by painful headaches the causes of which are unknown to him, illustrates the ambiguous physical ways in which trauma continues to persist and torment a child of war who has now become an adult. Given that specific memories of the war seem to trigger Juan’s headaches, *Polvo* reinforces the logic of autoimmunity in both a somatic and a political dimension. Juan cannot reconcile his position as a witness to his father’s disappearance with his role as a participant/actor in a film documentary that tries to recall those war memories. If he were able to do so, he would be on the path to health. He could tell his story and by sharing his truth, he could find a way to mourn. Furthermore, considering that Juan suffers from headaches *as a result* of both making the film and hearing the moans in the forest, the somatic cannot be disassociated from—but is rather inextricably linked to—political violence in *Polvo*. Juan’s headaches—like Ignacio’s allergies and Gerardo’s asthma in *Gasolina*—illustrate a suspended passage, a broken immunity, in which the body fails to successfully protect against itself.²² In doing so, *Polvo* reveals a somatic discourse of trauma by resorting to ecological signs that plague Juan such as the moans in the treetops, the recurring vision of a man tied to a tree and, as I explain farther below, a fertilizer-induced suicide attempt.

²² In another way, the making of the documentary within *Polvo* also provides an interesting form of meta-autoimmunity. For example, as *Polvo* progresses, the “film” within the film becomes suspended, blocked, and ultimately unfinished (a passage cut midway?) due to economics (a weak budget) and personal relationships. By the end of *Polvo*, the film will clearly not be produced.

Juan's relationship to sickness and to dust in *Polvo* reveals not only the likelihood that his body is reacting to psychological pressures that, in turn, rely on outside sources. Another possibility is that Juan's body is *polvo*—dust itself—but not any *polvo* but this particular dust covering the Guatemalan land. Since Ignacio suffers from allergies caused by this dust, *polvo* is also part of Ignacio's body. This damaged substance is a material consequence, more or less directly, of the history of violence that has damaged both human and non-human alike.

Filming the Documentary

Juan's chronic headaches, whether symptomatic of both a traumatic childhood and of his obsession for revenge, are inextricably implicated/entangled in the making of the documentary. The film crew travels to the countryside to film its material. After previously having quit the project several times, Juan once more decides that he no longer wants to tell his story. In one scene, his mother tells Ignacio that the series of painful questions Juan must answer in front of the camera leave him exhausted, with horrible headaches and the inability to sleep at night. He is forced to buy pills to ease the pain but, without a job, he cannot afford the medication. Furthermore, due to budget constraints, neither Juan nor his mother have been paid for their participation in the film. Delfina wonders about Ignacio's and his girlfriend's honesty since they must be getting paid something for making the film, which causes Juan so much suffering. Ignacio tells Delfina: "Para nosotros es un trabajo como cualquier otro." What is just a job for the

directors is something altogether different for Juan and his family, who have to relive their traumatic war experiences in front of a camera.²³

Juan travels with Ignacio and Alejandra to a forest to shoot a scene of the documentary. While they shoot, Juan narrates the harrowing story of how he and his mother escaped the military by running to a nearby field. As she ran with Juan in her arms, she fell into a ditch while the soldiers captured the other women running ahead of her. She hid there while the military rounded everyone up and ordered a helicopter to take them away. Delfina and Juan remained sprawled on the ground, thus evading capture, until the army left at night; to prevent Juan from crying, his mother put her breast inside his mouth. The helicopter's descent had flattened the grass under which his mother lay and a soldier standing nearby stepped on her foot. This detail in the story recalls the image of the pair of shoes that Juan's wife removes earlier in the film when she hauls his motionless body on a wheelbarrow after one of his suicide attempts. These shoes, then, function as a visual loop of unseen images, that is, of reverberations of violent images of the past recalled by memory.

There are particular elements in the sequence's *mise-en-scène* that not only visually correspond to the horrific tale of violence that Ignacio and Alejandra are filming but also to the elements of violence present in *Gasolina*. For example, the open field near the entrance to the forest in which Ignacio parks the Mercedes-Benz alludes to the grassy field to which Delfina ran to avoid the soldiers, saving her life. This scene recalls the open space in which the indigenous couple in *Gasolina* are run over. As the crew shoots

²³ Ignacio, ironically, drives a Mercedes-Benz, which is very similar to the model used in *Gasolina*. Delfina is aware that having a car, especially an imported German automobile, in a poor Central American country like Guatemala, is a privilege enjoyed by a minority. When she asks Ignacio about the car, he says that it was a gift. She replies: "Ustedes mienten. En este tiempo nadie regala las cosas."

Juan, he stands in front of a cement wall topped by concertina wire, as if he were about to be executed on the spot by a firing squad. This image evokes the fate of many victims who were shot and killed, either in plain view for all to see or clandestinely during the war.

But there is no longer a firing squad in this open field, only a pair of filmmakers shooting Juan's painful testimony. Their black metal cameras, however, disturbingly resemble machine guns. The diagonal lines marking the creases of Ignacio's blue face mask—to protect him from the dust and the pollen of the field—recall Gerardo's breathing tank. Interestingly, the face mask also forms a visual match with the grid-like pattern of the bare, grey cement walls. Juan's poignant stance, staring to the left of the frame at Ignacio's camera, becomes even more melancholic when the viewer learns that inside those walls is a military outpost where Juan's father may have been imprisoned. Ignacio asks Juan during the filming to describe how he would visit the detention site in hopes of his father recognizing him. After a few moments of somber silence, Juan refuses, telling Ignacio: "Hay cosas que es mejor no contarlas."

The on-location site of the military outpost, adjacent to an open field with nearby trees, evokes those other physical sites of violence such as the grassy ditch in which Delfina hid Juan as a baby and those other real shootings that occurred in fields, villages and prisons throughout Guatemala. The act of standing in front of a former prison re-activates Juan's displaced memories that are painful to recall. He decides to quit the film entirely. Recording such toxic memories on film proves too much for Juan to bear. Juan's role in the film—as a child of a *desaparecido* who gives oral testimony—would not serve as a talking cure to assuage the trauma of being a victim of the war. Juan's recollections

of his father form part of a displaced, inaccessible memory. For instance, Juan does not even own a real photograph of his father. Juan knows that Delfina provided him with photos of other people over the years, telling him that those images were of his father. Despite Delfina's attempts, the town hall refused to grant them access to their photo records. Only after they return to the local registry with the filmmakers is Juan finally able to see a photographic image of his actual father.²⁴

The Bad Harvest: Fertilizer, Poison, Suicide

Juan's decision to eat fertilizer halfway through the film reveals his most disturbingly visceral suicide attempt in *Polvo*. After announcing that he no longer wants to participate in the documentary, Juan decides to buy fertilizer from a local store (*agroservicio*) that sells various agricultural and gardening products. On the left side of the store's facade, the list of chemicals available for purchase include fungicides (such as Antracol) and plant fertilizers (Bayfolan). To the right of the door the large faded red letters indicate the store's name: *LA BUENA COSECHA*. When a passerby sees Juan carrying the sack of fertilizer on a bicycle, the neighbor asks if he has bought some land. Juan tells him that he will soon find out. This cuts to Juan walking towards Basilio's son, who is washing the old school bus that his father owns. Juan proceeds to attack him, dragging the boy inside the bus as he struggles. The camera discretely films this episode from outside the bus, only showing Juan through the windows as he kicks the boy relentlessly and bashes him with what seems to be a large heavy metal appliance. There is then a shot of the boy's legs, immobile, on the bus floor surrounded by newspapers. Juan

²⁴ This may also explain his mother's desire early on in the film to take a photograph with Juan so they can finally keep a visual record of their family.

runs to the town announcing that there is a thief inside the bus. The townspeople, gripped by a mob mentality, destroy the bus and set it ablaze. In a fit of panic, Juan runs to the field where he left the sack of fertilizer and begins to stuff chunks into his mouth. His compulsive eating turns into vomiting. The recurring image of the man on the treetop reappears, as if witnessing Juan's suicide attempt.

Considering the logic of autoimmunity, Juan's effort to kill himself by eating fertilizer immediately after he murders Basilio's son and the village sets fire to the bus illustrates the twin mechanism of self-defense and self-destruction. Juan protects himself from the mob's violence by fleeing the scene of the crime, only to end up trying to die by eating poison. The possibility of being caught by the authorities and held accountable for his crime may represent a threat more insurmountable to Juan than dying by his own hand. Whether or not he planned this homicide-suicide all along, his erratic behavior can be viewed as a disturbing reaction to the mass-scale violence he himself has provoked. In terms of a reaction to a perceived threat, Roberto Esposito's paradigm of immunity—like Derrida's logic of autoimmunitarian response—also offers a particularly useful lens with which to examine how Juan's body attempts to safeguard itself in the presence of danger. Crucial to Esposito's concept of immunization is the emphasis on the location of a/the threat with the potential to affect the body both from an outside and from within.²⁵

In *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, (as with the other two corresponding books forming a trilogy, *Communitas* and *Bíos*) Esposito places the paradigm of immunization at the core of an analysis of how the political has undergone a

²⁵ *Gasolina* could also be viewed as representing an autoimmunity that eventually breaks down completely by the end of the film. Recall the final sequence in which an asthmatic Gerardo cannot find help. If immunity signals an outside threatening an inside, Gerardo is ultimately trapped "outside" on the open beach while his friends sleep comfortably inside the car.

radical transformation into *biopolitics* in modern Western discourse. According to Esposito, whether the “danger that lies in wait” takes the form of a disease threatening a body, an unwanted trespassing of the body politic, or any other kind of perceived dangerous interference, “what remains constant is the place where the threat is located, *always on the border* between the inside and the outside, between self and other, the individual and the common” (emphasis mine, 2).

Where—and also, through what means—does this threat make itself visible in *Polvo*? Esposito defines immunity as a form of reaction. As Esposito states in *Immunitas*: “The first thing to point out is that the immunitary paradigm does not present itself in terms of action, but rather in terms of reaction—rather than a force, it is a repercussion, a counterforce” (6-7). That Juan attempts suicide immediately *after* killing Basilio’s son and successfully inciting the town’s mass hysteria suggests a form of impulsive reaction to the violent series of actions that he himself carries out. For Juan, his suicide may suggest not only a form of self-defense but also a form of escape from the panic he has unleashed. In this light, a paradigm of immunization is at work with Juan’s suicide attempt providing a counter-action—a preventative measure—to the threat he himself has caused. The (auto)immunitary paradigm manifests itself by way of Juan’s own seemingly erratic and contradictory behavior, simultaneously protecting and negating life by killing others and attempting to kill himself too.

By consuming fertilizer—a chemical or natural substance added to soil or land to increase its fertility—Juan engages in something of an anti-fertilization process, a dangerous auto-sterilization that can prove fatal. If fertilizer is a kind of food for the soil but poisonous for humans, Juan seems intent on eating his way to his own death by

ingesting this toxicity until he eventually vomits it out. In this light, Juan commits an ecological act of violence against himself by attempting suicide at the same time that his body rejects what he tries to consume. Juan's body engages in an autoimmune process that is completely out of control. Recalling the store's name where Juan buys the fertilizer, "La Buena Cosecha," Juan engages in an autoimmune process that has run amok, in which his body becomes a repository of a "good" harvest gone toxically wrong, something of a *mala cosecha*.

The physical site of Basilio's son's murder—the inside of his father's bus, a former school vehicle—also reinforces the ecological symbolism of a toxic harvest in terms of physical violence. Before killing the son, Juan wrecks the bus's interior by throwing chunks of dirt and animal excrement all over its walls, seats and floors. As flies gather around the chunks of manure on the floor of the bus, the vehicle's interior takes the form of a fertilized piece of land or field, suggesting a harvest gone toxically wrong. When Basilio's son first sees the bus, he undergoes a physical, violent reaction of disgust by vomiting. The newspapers sprawled across the exterior of the bus and throughout the interior indicate that the bus may have been in the process of being repainted and reupholstered after Juan's vandalism.

The bus, which has been used for transporting passengers but now burns to the ground, becomes a grave for the son's murdered corpse. In this light, the destroyed vehicle also points to the physical violence that is still a part of daily life in a place such as Guatemala. Basilio's bus in flames, something of a combustible cemetery—although the boy is never buried—alludes to the toxic instantaneous "flammability" of post-war violence in Guatemala that, like the stolen gasoline in *Gasolina*, spreads and is

perpetuated by spontaneous acts of random violence and terror. That the bus resembles in form (but not in color) those iconic yellow American school buses is significant given that hundreds of old decommissioned U.S. buses have made their way to several countries in Central America, particularly Guatemala. As part of their recycled life, the buses have been bought, overhauled and renovated. Oftentimes, the new owners christen them with special names, which are written proudly across the windshield. Given a facelift and a second chance in Central America, the buses have helped to improve the national economies by providing more access to transportation in cities, towns and villages.²⁶ However, these buses also signal the violent reality of places such as Guatemala, where more than 1,000 bus drivers and fare-collectors have been murdered since 2006 for not paying the extortion money demanded by local gangs (Mark Kendall).²⁷ Thus, *camionetas* attest simultaneously to the revitalization of local (and national) economies and to the well-entrenched problems of local urban violence, bribery and corruption that continue to claim innocent lives on a national scale.

Eco-Traumas: Guatemala and Peru

Both Juan's migraines (possibly passed down from his father) and his fertilizer-induced suicide attempt gesture to a form of ecological trauma. In other words, Juan's suicide attempt illustrates an ecological process by which his body engages with both the

²⁶ A decommissioned former school bus is the star of the documentary *La Camioneta: The Journey of One American School Bus* (Mark Kendall, 2012). *La Camioneta* traces the migrant journey of an American bus to its new life in Guatemala.

²⁷ Extortion is a prominent theme running through Hernández Córdón's films as well as contemporary Salvadoran cinema. In Hernández Córdón's *Las marimbas del infierno* (2010), a Guatemalan gang blackmails a deliveryman-musician to the point that his family has to escape Guatemala City. In Arturo Menéndez's *Malacrianza* (2014), a piñata vendor in a small town in El Salvador finds an extortion letter on his doorstep asking him to pay \$500 in 72 hours or he will be killed.

trauma and memory of violence. Other Latin American filmmakers have explored the theme of a child “inheriting” a traumatized and broken immunity from their parents in the aftermath of political violence. For example, Claudia Llosa’s *La teta asustada* (*The Milk of Sorrow*, 2009) focuses on the troubled life of an indigenous Quechua-speaking young woman, Fausta (Magaly Solier), whose mother was raped by military forces during Peru’s internal armed conflict (1980-2000) when she was pregnant with Fausta. Peru’s indigenous Andean population, like the Mayas of Guatemala’s highlands, faced incredible brutality during their own war. The film’s title—*La teta asustada*—points to the process by which female victims of sexual violence transmit the emotional trauma of their physical abuse via blood in utero or via breast milk to their children. The physical passing down of a woman’s painful memories by way of blood or a milk of sorrow links the body with trauma and memory. Anthropologist Kimberly Theidon has termed this process the frightened breast syndrome. What Theidon also calls a “dis-ease” signals a damaged, traumatized matrilineal immunity that is passed down somatically from mother to offspring (9).

As a child who witnessed her mother’s rape from inside the womb, Fausta endures her own form of eco-trauma. Terrified of men and of the world outside her home, she keeps a potato inside her vagina as a way of protecting herself. As much as her mechanism of self-defense proves effective, her body acts out in the process of housing this plant tuber within herself. Fausta is prone to fainting spells, dizziness and nosebleeds. As a way to earn money to bury her mother’s corpse, she works as a maid in an affluent white woman’s house. Fausta gradually learns to assert her character and recognize her dignity in the face of domestic exploitation. By the film’s conclusion, Fausta has gathered

the strength and determination to have the potato removed. Her decision of inserting but later expelling the potato somewhat parallels Juan's strategy of ingesting, but immediately vomiting out, the fertilizer. Both Juan and Fausta's broken—but salvageable, if not reconstituted—immunity highlight the process by which painful memories are lodged viscerally in the body.

Theidon explains this materiality of memory in terms of suffering and the violent consequences of history. In "*The Milk of Sorrow: A Theory on the Violence of Memory*," Theidon illustrates a process by which "painful memories accumulate in the body and how one can literally suffer from the symptoms of history" (10). Memories are not only housed in physical sites of symbolic commemoration such as buildings or landscapes, Theidon rightly argues, but they "also sediment in our bodies, converting them into historical processes and sites" (10). Both Juan's and Fausta's painful memories about their parents are rendered legible by way of a damaged immunity that they inherit from their own father and mother respectively. However, whereas Fausta's milk of sorrow is transmitted matrilineally by her raped mother, Juan's debilitating migraines are passed down by way of a disappeared father.

Every Place is Sad: Guatemalan Highlands, Other Casualties of War

That Juan refers directly to trees and the forests—*hablando del terreno*—when he speaks about his headaches with Ignacio and Alejandra also suggests the eco-trauma that Juan must endure. Juan believes the moans in the forest trigger his headaches in one form or another. His conviction suggests a disturbing relationship between a vulnerable corporal immunity and ecological trauma in relation to war. In other words, Juan's

visions of a man in the trees may signal the way political trauma assumes an ecological layer, an ecological form of trauma. Guatemala's Civil War, like its Central American counterparts in El Salvador (1980-1992) and Nicaragua (1979-1990), were characterized by a general disregard for life. Out of the many thousands killed and forcibly disappeared or displaced throughout the Guatemalan countryside, the victims were of course not only humans. The National Army decimated their victims's livelihood by slaughtering countless animals and razing entire fields of crops. Members of the displaced population destroyed vegetation themselves as they sought to escape the national government's orchestrated land-scorching tactics against them. Juan's mother alludes to the memories of this destruction in one poignant scene. Near the end of *Polvo*, when Alejandra asks her if she and Juan would move to Xetmanzana, their former village, if they were to find it, she responds: "Vamos a ver, para mi todos los lugares son tristes." And indeed, the film's final sequence reveals that the village of Xetmanzana has completely disappeared.

In this regard, Guatemala's countryside cannot be reduced to geography. The Mayan Highlands not only serve as symbolic sites of remembrance for past atrocities but are also other *casualties* of war that have undergone violence. Whereas in a Guatemalan film such as *El silencio de Neto*, an asthmatic teenage Neto stands in for a country in crisis during the 1954 coup that gives way to civil war, *Polvo* adds an ecological dimension to an irreconcilable somatic immunity that continues to be threatened by political violence. By having Juan, a survivor of the war, suffer from headaches, and Ignacio, a director making a film about the war, suffer from allergies, *Polvo* links illness with ecology. Considering the context of the war, the film's somatic discourse on violence—although focused primarily on human protagonists—reminds one that

suffering is not confined to the human. The strategic ecology of killing (of humans, animals and the environment) the Guatemalan Army carried out during the war is rendered in the film as an economy of violence that continues to affect the protagonists in one way or another in intimate relation with their physical environment. This economy makes itself known through the basic elements that are also the four main “natural” elements found in classical Greek thought: air, fire, water and earth. Sicilian philosopher Empedocles (ca. 450 B.C.) defined these four elements as “roots” or *rhizōmata* in ancient Greek (Russell 62, 75). As we have seen, both *Gasolina* and *Polvo* forge their narratives by way of these elements.

Reclaiming a Sad Place

To conclude, I would like to point out the sad but crucial joy that *Polvo*’s final ludic scene offers. In my discussion of the repercussions of violence in both *Gasolina* and *Polvo*, I have not focused on another element integral to Hernández Córdón’s cinema: a camaraderie marked by play. In *Gasolina*, the teenagers build their bond of friendship by playing games and pranks on each other. In *Polvo*, Ignacio goes bowling with his daughter; Juan plays a game of basketball with his mother for the first time (and she scores!); and now these two friends compete. In this final scene, Juan and his filmmaker-turned-confidant Ignacio engage in a playful moment of competition. As they stand in a sunny open field, Juan learns that his village once stood in this place. He tells Ignacio that he killed Basilio’s son. With this admission, Juan seems to finally lift a gruesome weight off his shoulders. He watches Ignacio—with his face mask dangling from his neck—drive around in circles with his bicycle. They discuss fertilizers and stomach pumps. Juan

asks his “brother” if he would help him build his house here. Ignacio agrees, although he warns him that he just might be caught by the police soon. Juan suggests that even if such a moment of happiness, in a place where his family and his unborn son might make a home, were to last only for a short while it would be still be worth it. They decide to compete in a spontaneous bicycle match. Ignacio goes first. Juan then goes for the rematch. With his future unknown, Juan drives away as Ignacio looks on.

The protagonists in both films—Gerardo in *Gasolina* and Juan in *Polvo*—poison themselves with elements that are supposed to be sources of energy: gasoline and earth. But these elements culminate in a toxic form of energy that does much more harm than good. At the end of *Gasolina*, we find Gerardo struggling to breathe on a beach where no one can help him. In *Polvo*, Juan wants to end his life by eating fertilizer. Gasoline and dust point to the violent memories of the past that remain entrenched—and unreconciled—in the body, in the air, and in the land. In both films, Guatemala remains a sad place haunted by a violent history and a difficult present. However, Juan’s plight, unlike Gerardo’s struggle, remains hopeful. Juan’s playful interlude with Ignacio suggests a resistance to death and a desire to reembrace life. He now wants to create good memories in the same place in which he experienced so much loss. Juan wants to build a house and, like a fresh open field, clear his head and plant a new life. This desire for a good harvest to come—of future memories for his family and himself—suggests an ecology of life against violence, against the pain that has not let him live. Juan wants to recover his life precisely by reclaiming the physical land where his town used to stand. In doing so, he reclaims a sad, damaged place on his own terms. In this way, *Polvo* opens a

future path that *Gasolina* closes off—the possibility of breathing again in a clearer way despite a toxic history.

Chapter 2. Migrancy without Refuge: Bare Lives and Itinerant States of Exception in Ishtar Yasin's *El camino* and Diego Quemada-Díez's *La jaula de oro*

“The migrant is the political figure of our time. Most people today increasingly fall somewhere, and at some point, on the spectrum of migration, from global tourist to undocumented labor.”

—Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant*

Leopoldo Canda: A Nicaraguan's Death in Costa Rica

Around midnight on November 10, 2005, Leopoldo Natividad Canda, a Nicaraguan man living in Costa Rica, was attacked and killed by a pair of Rottweiler dogs inside the grounds of an automotive repair shop in the city of Cartago. Nine men looked on without offering any help. The witnesses included seven policemen, the nightwatchman and the shop's owner. Canda had been living in Costa Rica since he migrated at the age of ten. According to the victim's sister, Cipriana Canda, her brother was neither a delinquent nor an unlawful trespasser. Far from being a stranger to the property, Canda would regularly receive pieces of scrap metal from the shop's owner (Larios). On October 2012, Cartago's Tribunal Court unanimously acquitted the seven policemen of all charges. According to the judges, no sufficient evidence existed to prove their culpability, citing that they had neither control of the scene nor the necessary equipment to save Canda's life from the dogs (Bravo).²⁸

According to Vilma Núñez, president of the Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH), a human rights organization following the case, there was far from little evidence to demand responsibility: “Sabemos que existían todos los elementos de juicio y todas las pruebas necesarias para establecer las responsabilidades de todas las

²⁸ An eighth policeman had also been charged but he was not present at the trial due to a cerebral hemorrhage. His case seems to remain pending.

personas que se habían involucrado en tan horrendo crimen. Entonces con este antecedente, nos parece una monstruosidad jurídica y es una barbaridad” (Larios). Did Canda die in the presence of Costa Rican police—or more precisely, was he allowed to die—because he was a poor Nicaraguan? Would his fate have been otherwise had he been Costa Rican?

I offer this unfortunate example of a Nicaraguan man’s sad death to highlight the vulnerability that many Central American immigrants experience while trying to survive in a neighboring country. The impunity of those who witnessed Canda’s fate and did nothing forms part of a larger story that is far too common among immigrants. The verdict of this trial not only underscores the xenophobia prevalent in Costa Rica against immigrants from their northern neighbor—Nicaragua—but it also establishes a dangerous and threatening precedent: As Canda’s sister proclaims, “Hoy fue mi hermano, mañana puede ocurrir con cualquiera de los miles de nicaragüenses que trabajan en el vecino país, y hay que sentar un precedente” (Larios).

This chapter explores the dangerous plight of the migrant in two migration films: Ishtar Yasin’s hybrid feature *El camino* (*The Path*, 2007) and Diego Quemada-Díez’s feature debut *La jaula de oro* (*The Golden Dream*, 2013). Although the Latin American road movie is already a well-established genre in Hispanic cinema (both of Julio Hernández Cerdón’s Guatemalan films *Gasolina* and *Polvo* from the previous chapter can fall within this category), *El camino* forms part of a lesser-known sub-genre particular to Central American geography: the regional migration film from Nicaragua to its southern neighbor, Costa Rica. I analyze this particular journey south, what we can call the “short” story of migration from one Central American country to another, in

relation to a longer and more extensive migration story north through Mexico to the United States in *La jaula de oro*. More specifically, I consider Thomas Nail's political figure of migrants in terms of social movement, what he calls kinopolitics, to trace how the human trajectory in a menacing terrain engulfs them within an ecology of violence at every step of the way. In both films, Central American children and teenagers embark on a perilous trip to escape extreme poverty in their home countries only to face an even more complex transnational geographic network of violence that includes sexual abuse, kidnapping, extortion and murder.

I argue that both *El camino* and *La jaula de oro* uncover the mechanisms through which the Central American migrant is rendered, in Giorgio Agamben's terms, *bare life*, that is, "a life that may be killed by anyone—an object of a violence that exceeds the sphere both of law and of sacrifice" (54). Nail's exposition of his theory of kinopolitics briefly suggests that the figure of the migrant embodies a form of bare life, but Nail does not enter into a discussion of the implications of bare life in relation to Agamben's political philosophy, as I will do here. The films also explore the tenuous networks through which the Central American migrant navigates a *de facto* "itinerant" and geographic state of exception—a space in which the law coincides with its suspension. More specifically, I consider the state of exception as both itinerant and geographic—an itinerancy created and marked wherever migrants find themselves, in this case mostly throughout the physical spaces of Costa Rica and Mexico, where they are forever exposed to the possibility of either death or disappearance at the edge of survival. To do so, I consider several physical sites that the migrant children in *El camino* and *La jaula de oro* navigate: the garbage dump, the brothel and the manufacturing plant. These particular

sites of trash, sex and manual labor underscore the disposability and dehumanization of the migrant's body.

Ishtar Yasin's Cinema

Born in 1968 in Moscow, Ishtar Yasin is an acclaimed director, author and performance artist. She is the daughter of renowned Iraqi theater director Mohsen Sadoon Yasin and Chilean ballet dancer and choreographer Elena Gutiérrez. Her family history includes the personal experience of migration between three continents. When she was four months old, her family left Russia for Chile where they subsequently experienced Pinochet's coup of 1973. Facing persecution, they moved once again, to Costa Rica, when she was still only five. Yasin also has a Central American heritage: her maternal grandfather is Costa Rican author Joaquín Gutiérrez. At eighteen, Yasin returned to Russia, where she studied both film and theatre at the Moscow Institute of Art. She later received a Master's degree in both fields. Her performance art has received critical acclaim throughout Latin America, particularly in Costa Rica, Chile and Argentina.

In Costa Rica, Yasin founded the Ambar Theatre in 1992 and her own production company, Astarté Films, in 1998. Since the 1990s, she has worked prolifically as a director, playwright, actress, and producer. Several of her films engage prominently with social-political themes. Her first fiction short *Florencia de los ríos hondos y tiburones grandes* (1999) explores domestic abuse. A documentary, *Les invisibles* (*The Invisibles*, 2010) focuses on the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti while another, *La mesa feliz* (*The Happy Table*, 2005) examines a group of Nicaraguan immigrants living in Costa Rica. This last documentary was made during the filming of *El camino* (2005).

Yasin's desire to make a film about the Nicaraguan experience in Costa Rica partly stems from her own family's migrational history. As the filmmaker says: "Soy hija de una exiliada chilena, y un refugiado iraquí. Sé lo que significa verse obligado a abandonar tu tierra en contra de tu voluntad y eso me motivó a querer contar la historia" ("El Camino' de Ishtar Yasin Gutiérrez"). Yasin's voice stands as one among countless voices of migrants. Many of those voices lack the opportunity and the means to share their own stories, which makes what she shares about her personal migratory experience significant.

Nicaraguan Migration to Costa Rica

Every year, many thousands of Nicaraguans abandon their country—which remains one of the poorest nations in the Western Hemisphere, second only to Haiti—for better economic opportunities in Costa Rica. There are approximately 400,000 to 800,000 Nicaraguans living in Costa Rica; one-fourth of them lack proper legal documentation. Although Nicaraguans have been migrating to Costa Rica since the beginning of the 20th century, many have left in three waves: after the December 1972 earthquake that destroyed Managua's downtown; in the aftermath of the 1979 Sandinista Revolution that overthrew the Somoza dynasty and the subsequent decade-long Civil War that ravaged the country during the 1980s; and steadily in large numbers since the signing of the Treaty Accords officially ending the war in 1990. One can argue that there is currently a fourth wave. Protests against President Daniel Ortega's unpopular pension-proposal reform—and largely authoritarian rule—have led to more than 300

mostly-civilian deaths since April 2018. The wave of repressive state violence against its own citizens has drawn national parallels with Venezuela (Tharoon). The recent political instability of a country widely considered as the “safest” country in Central America has led to a new refugee crisis in the region. According to UN High Commissioner for Refugees, about 23,000 Nicaraguans have applied for asylum in Costa Rica since the April protests (Newman).

As a country with no national army and a relatively stable political climate, Costa Rica has become a haven for refugees and political exiles escaping dictatorships from other Latin American countries, particularly since the 1970s and 1980s. In a country of less than five million people, the Nicaraguan population in particular represents a substantial minority of at least 10%-12% of the total inhabitants of Costa Rica. Nicaraguans face a series of obstacles in Costa Rica, including blatant discrimination, harsh labor exploitation, and for many women, sexual abuse and coerced prostitution.

Central American Migration Cinema

El camino is one of five recent films that focus on the phenomenon of Nicaraguan migration to the south by prominent female Central American directors from both countries. The filmmaking duo Martha Clarissa Hernández and María José Álvarez produced the documentary *Desde el Barro al Sur* in 2002 under their Nicaraguan production company, Luna Films. Prior to that, Costa Rican filmmaker Maureen Jiménez directed *Más allá de las fronteras* in 1998. These three films center particularly on the experiences of Nicaraguan female migrants in Costa Rica. Since then, there has been an increase of Central American films focusing on the Nicaraguan experience in Costa Rica.

For example, Jürgen Ureña's Costa Rican short, *De Sol a Sol* (2005) details a day in the life of a Nicaraguan couple working in Costa Rica, where a woman labors as a maid and her companion as a security guard. And the documentary *NICA/ragüense*, (2005) by Julia Green Fleming and Juan Carlo Solís, portrays the lives of Nicaraguan immigrants living in San José, with a large portion concentrated in the impoverished neighborhood of La Carpio.

As Mauricio Espinoza-Quesada correctly points out, while the migratory experience of Central American nationals northwards to the U.S. has been receiving much more scholarly attention, “little or no attention (at least in North America) has been paid to the other Central American migration phenomenon that does not involve Mexico, the U.S. or the Río Grande that divides them” (96). A rise in scholarship parallels the rising visibility of Central American cinema that explores the migratory journey to the north. Recent notable examples by non-Central American filmmakers include the transnational *Sin nombre* by Cary Fukunaga (2009), Luis Mandoki's *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas* (Mexico, 2012) and *La jaula de oro* by Diego Quemada-Díez (2013), which I discuss below. These films narrate the migratory plight of Central American teenagers fleeing their country and the horrific situations they face en route to Mexico and the U.S. while confronting national police, border patrols, and predatory gangs. If such films portraying migrational patterns northwards are achieving more wide-scale visibility, films portraying the movement southwards, particularly Central American ones, such as from Nicaragua to Costa Rica, remain largely unknown outside of small circles of scholarship.²⁹

²⁹ There are other Latin American films that have explored the role of migration southward in South America, such as Adrian Caetano's *Bolivia* (Argentina, 1999) about a Bolivian immigrant in Buenos Aires.

El camino, a hybrid fiction-documentary, considered by Costa Rican scholar María Lourdes Cortés as “sin duda, el filme más personal y poético de la cinematografía nacional,” is a particular exception (182). The film was acclaimed in Cannes and the Berlin Film Festival in 2008. Although Costa Rica’s film industry is relatively small in comparison to those of Mexico or Argentina, that a Central American country produced 15 feature films between 2001 and 2011 is quite remarkable (Salas Murillo). This noteworthy feat is even more impressive considering that, with the exception of Panama, the countries constituting Central America lack national film commissions to fund their filmmakers (Erazo).

El camino tells the harrowing story of twelve-year-old Saslaya (Sherlyn Paola Velásquez) and her mute younger brother Darío (Marcos Ulises Jiménez), who search for their mother after she left to find work in Costa Rica upon the death of their father eight years ago. The siblings live with their sole family member, a grandfather (Cornelio Flores Meza) who sexually abuses Saslaya. All three live and work in La Chureca, Nicaragua’s largest garbage dump on the outskirts of the capital, Managua. After one more night of abuse, Saslaya abandons their home for good, taking Darío with her. Armed with only a purse and a small cardboard box of belongings, the pair make their way south towards Costa Rica. Along the way they encounter fellow travelers, befriend other street children and run into a traveling performance group consisting of “The Man with the Cane” (renowned French actor Jean-François Stévenin) with two younger female dancers who are making a similar trip south. The children travel by bus, by boat, and on foot on their way to the border. While trekking clandestinely through the jungle at the border, Darío gets lost and is never seen again. Alone and distraught, Saslaya eventually reaches an

amusement park in Costa Rica where she finds one of the dancers from the performance troupe, Luz (Morena Guadalupe Espinoza). The girl accompanies Luz into town and, although Luz forbids her to enter a dilapidated house, she eventually goes in. It becomes evident that the house functions as a sort of brothel and that the women are prostitutes. The film concludes with Saslaya in bed with The Man with the Cane. The cycle of abuse and violence, with which the film started, begins again.

El camino emphasizes the theme of migration as constant movement from the very beginning. The film begins in a way that is similar to how Julio Hernández Cordón's *Polvo* ends: in an open, bright field. *Polvo* concludes with Juan competing in a friendly bicycle sprint with Ignacio, his friend. The vast sun-scorched terrain of *El camino*, like the one in *Polvo*, is somewhat barren but also full of possibility and promise. In *El camino*, the children's hopes of finding their mother have not yet been damaged by the journey itself. Their optimism parallels Juan's dreams of rebuilding his house with Ignacio's help in that same site where his village used to stand before the war destroyed it. In *El camino*, a low-volume somewhat somber or even ominous marimba score can be heard as we see the faint figures of a pair of children walking in the distance. But the score quickly leads to louder, more vibrant sounds as the children begin to run down a golden path. As Saslaya gazes at the vast greener expanse ahead of them in silence, the overwhelming weight of the journey suddenly seems to loom heavily on her pensive face. This shot of the children's migrational journey already under way, their house far behind them, is a cinematic *in medias res* and a flash forward to what is to come. Although Juan in *Polvo* may never build his house (a possible arrest for murder hangs over him) and Saslaya ends up in a brothel, at these moments both protagonists exist as if they were

almost suspended in space and time, as if anything and everything could happen. If *Polvo* ends with the hope (no matter how faint or far-fetched) for a better life, *El camino* begins with a journey in search of it.

A Cinema of Movement

As in Hernández Córdón's other road film *Gasolina*, national geography—particularly volcanoes—also plays a crucial role in *El camino* in terms of migratory passages. The film's opening shot is an aerial view of the abysmal depths of the Volcano Masaya. The camera focuses on its crater as it slowly ascends upward through the ashen rocks. That Yasin chooses this particular volcano to begin her film is significant.

Masaya's volcano, one of 18 volcanoes along the Pacific coast of Nicaragua, is emblematic of the country's proud heritage as a land of volcanoes. Unlike the Guatemalan teenagers in *Gasolina*, who fail to properly identify their own country's volcanoes, the siblings in *El camino* participate in a history lesson of Nicaragua's pre-Columbian indigenous past.

In an early scene immediately following the opening credits, Saslaya and Darío are in a makeshift classroom learning about Acahualinca. The valley of Acahualinca is famous for being the site of 2,100-year-old fossilized human and animal footprints.³⁰ Several children take turns standing up to recite different parts of the same story: 8,000 years ago, the first Managua people left their footprints in the valley; a volcano erupted and the lava covered all the paths; various species of animals also left their mark. After being called on, Darío re-enacts details of the story with hand gestures. The camera pans

³⁰ Some of the fossil footprints from the volcanic area can be found in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C (Deveny 260).

over the various faces of laughing children engrossed in the day's lesson. This scene underscores both a "proud heritage and dire poverty" since the children are eager to participate while they sit on wooden benches under a flimsy awning (Deveny 260). The teacher's blackboard shows various facts written with chalk. Before they conclude their lesson, the teacher assigns them for homework the task of learning all of the names of the volcanoes that erupted.

Modern scientific research has now proven that the volcano eruption most likely did not provoke a migratory escape. The Acahualinca footprints indicate a walking gait and not that of people running away. Nonetheless, the children's lesson underscores a significant correlation between geography and migration. That is, the children learn how natural disasters can affect sudden large-scale migration. The lesson of Acahualinca's "forced" migration parallels Saslaya's future abrupt decision to escape her grandfather's sexual abuse and search for a mother who lives somewhere in Costa Rica. However, Saslaya cannot follow her mother's footprints since she disappeared without a trace eight years ago. Therefore, the girl has to forge her own path—her *camino*—with only her brother at her side and without the support of a family network. Yasin herself recognizes the significance of the traces of Acahualinca in the film. She states: "uno de los puntos de partida del camino de la película son las huellas de Acahualinca, marcas que quedaron grabadas de una migración que hubo hace 8.000 años...Esas huellas siguen ahí, como una memoria que no se borra" (Solís).

Yasin's decision to visually incorporate the footprints of Acahualinca in *El camino* highlights the enduring traces of migration as a form of memory that cannot be erased. We can consider the film according to what Thomas Nail has considered to be the

crucial but overlooked significance of the migrant. In *The Figure of the Migrant*, Nail calls for a new political theory to both understand and embrace the figure of the migrant. His politics of movement, which Nail calls kinopolitics, understands societies first and foremost as “regimes of motion” (24). The problem with Western history and philosophical discourse, Nail argues, is that “the migrant has been predominantly understood from the perspective of *stasis* and perceived as a secondary or derivate figure with respect to place-bound social membership” (3). For Nail, the sedentary, and not movement, has been considered the privileged characterizing norm for understanding human communities. In this way, the migrant has been conceived of as lacking both permanence and membership in a fixed political community (3). Thus, “[m]ore than any other political figure (citizen, foreigner, sovereign, etc.),” Nail claims, “the migrant is the one least defined by its being and place and more by its becoming and displacement: by its *movement*” (3).³¹ In this light, migration becomes the default condition for human life. However, the children’s migration in *El camino* indicates that despite that epistemologically privileged notion, the act of migration itself is not a matter for celebration. Their journey opposes the foundational migration at the origin of any sedentary society—a successful new beginning.

By incorporating the story of Acahualinca into a significant narrative within *El camino*, Yasin highlights the crucial role that movement—and its inseparable quest for survival—has played in human histories and, particularly, in these siblings’ migratory experience. Whereas in *Gasolina*, the teenagers’ unawareness of topography reveals an apathetic concern for their surroundings, in *El camino*, Saslaya uses her geographical

³¹ Nail’s intricate political theory of the migrant characterizes social motion under three main elements: flows, junctions and circulations.

knowledge to her advantage. For example, from Managua she takes a bus to the first stop in their southern journey, the colonial and touristy town of Granada. En route, Saslaya recites Acahualinca's history lesson as a way to earn a few coins from the passengers. Her brother Darío cannot help her since he is unable to speak. Whereas the disaffected Guatemalan teenagers choose to live their reckless youth aimlessly and oblivious as to where they are headed, this history lesson enables Saslaya to navigate her own passage, to take control of her own form of self-orientation, even if she does not quite know where they are headed. This geography lesson, while in movement, permits Saslaya to negotiate with a harsh economic system in which abandoned children like her are forced to work in order to survive. In this regard, *El camino* can be considered, in Nail's terms, a cinematic representation of a "regime of motion" that highlights the urgent yet politically vulnerable figure of the migrant in contemporary Central America.

Yasin decides to begin her film about Nicaraguan migration with that topographical emblem of national pride, the Masaya Volcano. The volcano holds a prominent (if not also violent and sad) place in Nicaraguan political history. Located 14 miles south of the capital city of Managua, the imposing volcano was only a mile away from a military camp and a firing range used during the country's armed conflict in the 1980s.³² Its original name is Popogatepe which in Nahuatl means "mountain that burns." During the U.S.-supported Somoza regime, it was believed that enemies of the dictatorship were thrown into its crater (Sheppard). In *Tierra de Girasoles (Land of Sunflowers)*, the film about the making of *El camino*, Yasin recalls the first time she visited the volcano with her mother in 1979, at the apex of the revolution. Her

³² The Masaya Volcano and its surroundings became part of Nicaragua's first national park in 1979, the year of the Nicaraguan Revolution.

reminiscence of that particular time in the country's history recalls the still urgent Nicaraguan decision to migrate. The director asks herself: "What has become of that revolution that made so many Nicaraguans leave their country?" Whereas Acahualinca functions as something of a foundational narrative for the early inhabitants of Nicaragua, the Masaya Volcano signals the political violence of Nicaragua's recent history in the last forty years, which has caused large-scale migration.

Bare Life, *Homo Sacer* and States of Exception

Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life offers a fruitful lens by which to consider how *El camino*, as part of Central American migration cinema, positions the precarious figure of the migrant who is constantly moving and, in many cases, is beset by both poverty and violence. I offer a brief introduction to this concept before discussing such physical spaces of fraught vulnerability such as the garbage dump, the brothel and the meat-packing plant. Bare life is undoubtedly one of Agamben's most important yet polemical contributions to Western philosophy. Following from the crucial ancient Greek distinction between *zoe* (common, biological life) and *bios* (political life), Agamben develops the concept of bare life as that which is excluded from the political order of sovereign state power (O'Donoghue). Bare human life, stripped of all rights under a suspension of law by sovereign power, is simultaneously included and excluded in the State; bare life is included in the State by being excluded from the *polis* (political community). This sovereign exclusion is based on a "relation of exception" or of a ban in which "something is included solely through its exclusion" (Agamben 18).

For Agamben, the figure of *Homo sacer* (sacred man), an obscure remnant from archaic Roman law, embodies most emblematically the concept of bare life, constituting one “who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*” (8). And this killing does not take the form of a punishment prescribed by any law. With all rights suspended and expelled from the political community, *Homo sacer* may be killed by anyone, an “object of a violence that exceeds the sphere both of law and of sacrifice” (54). According to Agamben, the figure of *Homo sacer* exists in a state of exception. In this liminal state, a concept taken from German jurist Carl Schmitt’s legal theory, a sovereign can suspend the rule of law by forming a state of emergency ostensibly for the public good. For Agamben, the concentration camp incarnates the modern paradigm of a related biopolitics, as a “space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule” (168-69). Whereas the suspension of law was only a temporary measure, the Nazi camps give this suspension a “permanent spatial arrangement” even though it still remains “outside the normal order” (Agamben 168-69). Thus, the concentration camp, as a site where all rights and obligations under the law are suspended and where all life is reduced to utter disposability, continually produces bare life as a permanent condition.

For Thomas Nail, undocumented workers quintessentially embody the “migrant proletariat” who are denied the right to own property, not *de facto* but *de jure* (221). Thus, this disenfranchisement carried out by law, Nail argues, reduces them “to nothing more than a kind of bare life” with their territorial, political, legal, and economic status completely stripped away (221-222) by a state exercising its laws, not by suspending them. The migrant’s rights are deprived not because of the law’s suspension (what would be considered proper bare life in Agamben’s terms) but because the state enforces laws

regarding citizenship. The migrant can then be left to die or to live in conditions below the standards of human dignity, and this neglect involves neither a punishment nor a sacrifice.

In the films that I analyze, the plight of the migrants assumes a form of bare life in terms of disposability, first as forgotten citizens within their own countries and, second, as vulnerable non-citizens in other countries. Considered together, physical sites such as the garbage dump, the brothel and the meat-packing plant in both *El camino* and *La jaula de oro* speak to the mechanisms of a double-disposability, that is, the process of disposing of or neglecting the rights of travelers after they have already been ignored and turned away by their own country. The migrants in these films straddle the fraught line of being forgotten citizens within their homeland and surviving in another country that does not acknowledge them as refugees or citizens. First, as I explain below, the children's precarious lives at the garbage dump highlight both their misery and their status as invisible and expendable citizens of a State that has forgotten them. Second, the insurmountable dangers they face as unaccompanied minors journeying into Costa Rica reveal an itinerant state of exception. And lastly, as migrants they are subjected to a form of bare life to the extent that they are forever exposed to any and all forms of discriminatory violence. At the end of their journey, the children escape their point of origin, the garbage dump—a site of utter waste—only to end up at another site of disposability. Saslaya is trapped in a San José brothel while Darío gets lost in the dangerous jungle bordering both countries.

The Garbage Dump: Refuse and Waste

Saslaya and Darío are forced to eke out a miserable existence living on the outskirts of Managua near La Chureca, Nicaragua's largest garbage dump.³³ That the siblings live on the capital's periphery underscores their precarious lives mired in utter poverty since they also both work at the garbage dump. The garbage dump, as a site of all that is disposable, reflects their status as forgotten citizens of the metropolis. In an early sequence, as the children work through the rubbish looking for something of value, vultures can be seen flying overhead in the background. Like these birds, the residents of La Chureca are also scavengers, scanning the vast expanse of burning trash for something they might use. These scavengers are not clean-up crews or uniformed sanitary workers but poor residents—many of them children dressed in rags—of La Chureca itself. The heavy, oppressive smoke that encircles them parallels the fumes spewing forth from the opening scene of the Masaya Volcano, as if this landfill were inside the mouth of a volcano.

Not surprisingly, La Chureca, as a depository of the city's trash, lies on the shores of Lake Managua, which for eight decades has served as the unfortunate dumping ground for the capital's feces and garbage until it became a matter of state concern in 2007.³⁴ With a handkerchief tied around her head, a burlap sack across her body, and carrying a metal stick, Saslaya works as a *buzo* in the garbage dump along with Darío and her

³³ Nicaraguan director Rossana Lacayo has created an evocative and sympathetic portrayal of one of the residents of Managua's dumpster in her documentary, *San Francisco en La Chureca* (2013).

³⁴ The contamination of Lake Managua began in 1927 when the government ordered all of the city's sewage to drain into the lake until a new sewer system could be built, which did not occur until 2007. Since then, the lake has received waste from 60 chemical companies and the capital's population of 1 million people. A treatment plant under President Daniel Ortega's administration began in 2009. But according to environmentalist and scientist James Incer Baquero, it will take more than 50 years for "the world's biggest toilet" to be fixed (José Adán Silva).

grandfather. The term *buzo* refers to those that, similar to scuba-divers, “dive” into the trash looking for salvageable items that people have thrown out such as clothes, electronic appliances and domestic goods. That these *buzos* also search for food parallels the livelihood of buzzards, birds of prey related to the North American version, the vulture.³⁵ A disturbing visual analogy forms here between trash and those who are forced to earn a living by immersing themselves in it. If trash consists of what is discarded and forgotten by urban Managua society, these working poor are to a large extent also rejected and ignored by that same city that cannot care for them.³⁶ Living in abject poverty, the urban poor, according to Espinoza-Quesada’s definition, are “exactly the people whom the Nicaraguan nation has failed” (99). Neither the dumpster nor trash correspond to bare life but the site of the dumpster and its discarded forms of life, where the dumpster has been placed, however, is a form of bare life. The physical land in which the garbage dump stands has been “killed” and this killing does not count as a sacred punishment or divine sacrifice to a king or to gods. The state has decided that those living beings—both human and non-human alike—are neither the subject of rights nor objects of state responsibility, as the Nicaraguan government has done with Lake Managua.

Garbage forms part of a discourse of (in)visibility in contemporary Western philosophy, a blind spot that modernity refuses to acknowledge. In “Documentaries without documents? Ecocinema and the toxic,” Karl Schoonover argues that “the word

³⁵ Although both words share the same prefix -buz-, there does not seem to exist an etymological relationship between the Spanish word “buzo” and the English “buzzard” (vulture) despite the similar activity in this context.

³⁶ 80% of the country’s fresh water is polluted, a problem not uncommon in other Central American nations such as Guatemala. In 1969, during the dictatorship of General Anastasio “Tachito” Somoza (1967-1979), the western shore of the lake was declared uninhabitable. At that time Lake Nicaragua was home to 20 different Managua neighborhoods. Saslaya’s family most likely lives in one of those affected areas (José Adán Silva).

refuse names stuff we do not want to see anymore; it is what we refuse.” Garbage consists of objects that have been refused any use or exchange value, and which have been placed out of sight. After we relinquish our claim on objects, they become abject. This act of refusing to see trash, Schoonover argues, is a crucial problem of optics that Slavoj Žižek has considered in contemporary documentary cinema. In two documentaries, Astra Taylor’s *Examined Life* (2008) and Sophie Fiennes’s *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* (2012), Žižek makes a case for both the ubiquitousness of garbage and our refusal to properly acknowledge the waste that always surrounds us. In *Examined Life*, the philosopher proclaims in the middle of an industrial dump: “part of our daily perception of reality is that [garbage] disappears from our world.” But waste never *really* disappears, he argues, and why do we pretend that it does? Rather, as he claims while standing in California’s Mojave Desert in *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*, it is better to accept its permanence and its futility. The Mojave Desert, what Žižek calls “this resting place for abandoned airplanes,” epitomizes a cemetery in the name of capitalism, illustrating the ruins of a mode of production that has run its course and has turned into waste. Surrounded by airplanes that no longer fly, Žižek states: “We shouldn’t react to these heaps of waste by trying to somehow get rid of it. Maybe the first thing to do is accept the waste, to accept that there are things out there that serve nothing. To break out of this eternal cycle of functioning.” *El camino* complicates Žižek’s argument by focusing on the repurposing of trash and its possible use, exchange or even aesthetic value, that is, on refusing to see trash as trash. Those living in the dumpster rescue and reuse discarded objects; what was once garbage becomes something else—no longer trash—for someone else. The inhabitants of La Chureca accept the trash that surrounds

them, but also find ways of lifting objects from trash and recirculating them. Unlike the Mojave Desert, La Chureca is not so much a cemetery of broken machinery, but a dumpster where people actually live and work. If, according to Schoonover, documentaries “forecast an impending environmental catastrophe of trash, a future global disaster with its roots in humanity’s current unwillingness to acknowledge waste as a problem,” *El camino* points to our refusal to view garbage dumps as a human community.

Waste and decomposition have become the most prominent transnational symbol for the failure of a post-war peace and neoliberal politics in Central American literature and cinema since the end of the wars in the 1990s. If Europe was in ruins after World War II, Central America, as it were, has turned into “waste.” As Ana Patricia Rodríguez claims in *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures*, “the image of *garbage* or *waste* surfaces as the metaphor of Central American nations attempting to rebuild themselves from the rubble of armed conflict while at the same time confronting the disruptive fallout of global capital” (199). In this sense, garbage is not only consumption-turned-into waste but also a residue of regional violence, failed national politics and disastrous economics.

Both literature and film emphasize the need to make visible the condition of garbage to describe the region’s postwar situation. The dumpster speaks to an alternative outsider community sustained by its own form of economic activity. Those living in the dumpster extract unclaimed goods from the garbage and, in doing so, form an enduring social life around them. The visual depiction of Managua’s La Chureca in film can be compared to San José’s Río Azul, another prominent urban garbage dump in the neighboring country to the south, Costa Rica, in contemporary literature. In Fernando

Contreras Castro's novel, *Única mirando al mar* (1993), a community of *buzos* also inhabits the garbage dump on the outskirts of a capital. Like Saslaya's family, the novel's protagonists scrounge through the dirt for scraps in hopes of finding and reusing anything worthwhile. However, for the Costa Rican *buzos*, the garbage dump is neither a place of perdition nor hopelessness; on the contrary, it holds the potential for finding a new purpose to live. By recycling and reusing what the citizens of San José have thrown out, they find a way to survive. The *buzos* find meaning not in a disposable existence but in a recycled, almost renewed form of life. The dumpster itself becomes an unclaimed natural resource—not a repository of forgotten objects but of treasures yet to be found. The residents, many of them friends and neighbors for years, have learned to forge an affective community that, like trash, renews and fortifies itself with every passing year. Despite their grim poverty, the residents of Río Azul find the supremely modest means—and most importantly, the will—to celebrate life-affirming occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries, and even weddings. By contrast, in *El camino* none of this seems possible for Saslaya and Darío's life at La Chureca. They have lost their parents and an abusive grandfather puts them to work. *El camino* does not provide a glimpse of a possible community of people living with the trash but rather of surviving despite the waste.

Nonetheless, the citizens of Río Azul share a crucial affinity with the inhabitants of La Chureca. They may not be migrants who leave their countries, like Saslaya and Darío, but they are forgotten individuals who have migrated into the capital's garbage dump by circumstance. They are already marked as outsiders, cast out from San José society and forced to live in a garbage dump after the city has turned its back on them. These citizens also include migrants displaced by the war and/or lacking access to land.

For example, the lonely protagonists who find love and get married in Río Azul, Momboñombo Moñagallo and Unica Oconitrillo, are both middle-aged individuals who move into the dump after they are no longer deemed able to work. After being fired from his job as a nightwatchman, Momboñombo finds himself without a pension. Unica, a veteran schoolteacher, faces early retirement in her mid-forties with a meager pension barely enough to survive. Both individuals are cast out by a society that no longer needs them, disposed of “por esa costumbre que tiene la gente de botar lo que aún podría servir largo tiempo” (Contreras Castro 14). The couple find happiness despite the pain of social stigma and exclusion. But living at the dumpster also poses tremendous health risks in terms of disease and work-related accidents. Although Unica and Momboñombo build a new life together at the dumpster, forces beyond their control—such as the police, state policies and private business dealings—always threaten their well-being and future.

Things That Push: Vibrant Glass and Tables

Returning to *El camino*, all is not lost at a garbage dump like La Chureca. Two objects that are salvaged from the garbage come to play a significant role throughout the film. Two men carry off a wooden table from out of the trash (which I discuss further below) and Saslaya finds what seems to be a broken piece of a rose-tinted stained-glass box, which she uses to gaze at the desolate landscape surrounding her. Objects in *El camino* are associated with two different tendencies involving the migrant’s movement: on the one hand, there are things that propel, trigger and inspire movement outward; and on the other, there are objects that hinder, obstruct, and prevent movement toward another destination. The table and the broken glass fall into the first category.

Through the tinted piece of glass, Saslaya observes a world completely cast in poverty. In one scene, the viewer can see her picking up the object and with one eye closed, she peers through it as if she were holding a camera. Such maneuvering reinforces her “filmmaking” perspective since the viewer is allowed to see her point of view (marked with a reddish hue) as she scans the landscape. What she views—or in a sense, “shoots”—is something like a dystopian vision of an apocalyptic city in the aftermath of a nuclear disaster or war: cows roaming aimlessly, piles of cardboard and plastic bags, several *buzos* making their way through the rubbish, a tractor slowly moving in the background, birds circling overhead, billows of dust and smoke. The reddish glass gives a sepia-colored tint to the entire scene as if everyone and everything were enveloped in a wave of sulphur.³⁷ If what Saslaya shoots resembles what remains of a city after a nuclear disaster or war, La Chureca represents something similar to its fellow garbage dump, Río Azul, which, for Jerry Hoeg, embodies “the ‘after’ landscape of global production and consumption” (180).

Things like the tinted glass fulfill a fundamental purpose for Saslaya. The glass not only offers her a new perspective from which to view her grim reality for what it is—a misery that seems unescapable—but also the will to finally escape her situation. Saslaya’s act of looking through a broken glass can be a reference—a “wink”—to Lewis Carroll’s novel *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). However, unlike Alice, Saslaya does not enter a fantastic world of supernatural beings; instead her vision of the surrounding wasteland is all too real. And it is a *broken* piece of

³⁷ Yasin repeats this same optic strategy but in a very different situation, in another film. In her documentary of Nicaraguan expatriates living in Costa Rica, *La mesa feliz* (2005), a young girl (similar to Saslaya’s age) also “films” the group through a pinkish-colored piece of glass.

glass through which she observes her own shattered reality. The glass also evokes the feeling of observing the world “through rose-tinted glasses” or in Spanish the romantic equivalent of “ver todo color de rosa.” Both pink and its darker counterpart, the color red, serve as crucial elements for Saslaya’s innocence and her loss of it. The dress she chooses to wear for her journey is pink—a possible color for both innocence and hope—and it may be the only one she owns. When she arrives in Granada with her brother, she almost loses him after being distracted by mannequins wearing pink outfits. As Saslaya plays with the elastic string of a bathing suit, the female vendor shoos her away telling her that she will dirty the clothes. The warning of a stained dress will become painfully ironic at the end of the film since Saslaya wears a red dress—no longer pink—to meet The Man with the Cane.

For Espinosa-Quezada (referenced earlier in the chapter in regards to scholarship on migration), the tinted glass affords both a new optics, a lens with which to perceive the brutal reality of her surroundings and the resolution to finally abandon her grandfather since it is after she experiences this “newfound vision” and “awareness and resolution” that Saslaya runs away (102). From here on, most of *El camino* relies on the vantage point of Saslaya’s own female gaze, with the lens of her broken glass functioning as if it were the actual glass lens of a camera. According to Daniel Quirós, this privileging of a child’s female gaze resists a male-dominated filmic perspective: “la película se opone a toda una tradición del género, en la que se privilegia la formación de un protagonista o héroe masculino” (6). Quirós considers the film a female *anti-Bildungsroman* given that Saslaya’s journey does not offer the chance to mature and to learn from her mistakes: Saslaya “no experimenta ningún tipo de crecimiento o formación, ya que la realidad

cruda de un mundo patriarcal e injusto no se lo permite” (6). If by *Bildungsroman* we mean a genre that consists of a narrative about a character’s formative years or intellectual awakening in which they come of age and learn about the world, Quirós’s analysis suggests that Saslaya does not acquire any new knowledge and thus, never really comes of age. In this regard, the *Bildungsroman* remains an impossible or resistant genre in this visual narrative. Considering that the German word *Bild* refers to “a picture” and *Bildung* is the German word for “education,” Saslaya’s story suggests an incomplete image of maturity. However, I would also argue that Saslaya has indeed learned extensively about patriarchal control even if she cannot acknowledge or properly verbalize her abuse. Although Saslaya ends up in a brothel at the end of the film (discussed later in the chapter), she might possibly run away once again the way she escaped her grandfather.

In this regard, the piece of glass functions as a way out of the garbage and, by extension, of the cycle of gendered domestic sexual abuse of the home. The glass becomes a prized possession for both brother and sister, serving as a form of comforting amulet on their dangerous journey. The trinket’s potentiality as a catalyst for change can be considered under Jane Bennett’s concept of vital materiality espoused in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Bennett’s political ecology of vibrant matter calls for the acknowledgment of the underlying importance of affective relations not only among living beings (such as humans, animals, plants, bacteria and other non-human species) but also among non-living things such as oils, electricity, metals and trash. For Bennett, such material alliances, or the “parliament of things,” constitute a form of thing-power “that offers an alternative to the object as a way of encountering the nonhuman

world (xvii).”³⁸ As vibrant matter, the broken piece of glass becomes a thing, serving as a catalyst for change that shakes Saslaya into action and provokes her into taking charge of her own agency as an autonomous individual. To borrow from Bruno Latour’s lexicon, this singular piece of garbage becomes a political actant that effects change. The glass, once relegated to its doomed fate as trash—as an abject object—salvages itself from the wake of oblivion. The glass enthralls Saslaya despite her contempt for the dumpster and despite the glass being trash.

The wooden table, like the piece of glass, holds a prominent place in *El camino*. It appears in several key scenes throughout the film. Carried by a pair of men (who seem to be migrants themselves), the table travels the same perilous journey as Nicaraguan migrants on their way to Costa Rica. The table rides on top of a bus to Granada and on a small boat through Lake Nicaragua. But the table is not permitted to board—denied entry onto—a larger boat in another part of the journey, and it eventually crosses the border through a barb wire gate clandestinely. Like many migrants, the table sets off from a place of little hope (in this case, La Chureca) and embarks on a path toward an unforeseeable destination and future.³⁹ The table highlights the precarious existence of the migrant on her vulnerable path through towns, lakes, rivers, jungles and security checkpoints. Such vulnerability is also accentuated by the table’s difficult physical portability. Its weight and size require two men to carry it.

³⁸ Bennett’s materialist ontology of things draws from various philosophers: Bruno Latour’s concept of the *actant* (“a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman”); Spinoza’s *conatus* (in relation to “affective bodies”); and Gilles Deleuze’s theory of the *assemblage* (“ad hoc groupings of diverse elements”) (Bennett viii-x; 20-24).

³⁹ One might also consider the table’s “recycled life” out of the trash. The table travels to Granada on top of a yellow former U.S. school bus. Such buses have undergone their own form of recycled life. The buses that previously transported American schoolchildren now transport urban dwellers throughout Central America.

In addition, the table is a wooden table, unlike the broken glass trinket that Saslaya carries. Both the table's physical composition and the labor that went in to produce it mirror other objects carved out of wood—and made from trees—that are also making their own journey in this film. In this regard, the glass box with its leaded casing that Saslaya discovers in the garbage dump also has this labor in common since it is also an artisanal object made by human hands. For example, a devout group of Catholic women carry the wooden figure of a female patron saint on a boat on their way to take part in a southern town's religious procession. The concept of work—that is, the artisanal design that went in to produce these carefully crafted objects—cannot be disregarded; they highlight the manual labor that people have put into them. Labor accentuates the relationship between objects and the migrants who abandon their country for a better job, a decent wage, and a brighter future. Both the complexity of the table's production and its migratory journey alongside humans point to the political dimension of the thing. In this light, the table-as-thing accentuates its sense of “vibrant materiality,” in Bennett's sense, that is, as both a thing of vibrant matter and a thing that *matters*. The table's vibrancy speaks to its powers beyond being *just* a table, its existence not contingent on the use others make of it. In *El camino*, the table travels forth but in no scene in the film is the table ever used *as* a table. I take Bennett's term of vibrancy or vitality to refer to the nuanced ways in which the force of a thing might connote political agency or change in terms of the human. As Bennett explains her goal: “My aspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs *alongside and inside humans* to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due” (emphasis mine, viii).

The visual affinity between the table's journey and the plight of the migrant becomes even more politically vibrant when one considers how in Yasin's documentary *La mesa feliz* (2005) another table makes an appearance. The film focuses on a group of Nicaraguan expatriates who gather around a wooden table on the roof of a hotel in Costa Rica to share their experiences and personal stories about the reasons why they left their country. The film's title, a "happy" table, refers to a joyful and convivial gathering despite the heated political debates and differences of opinion that occur during the party. A number of singing performances interrupt these debates, and the film concludes with everyone dancing on the roof. Interestingly, one participant refers to the situation of "putting roots" in Costa Rica—of finally concluding the path of migration—as similar to the way a transplanted tree, taken from its original habitat, would take fruit in another place.

Despite their potentiality to provoke positive change, however, things like the piece of glass and the wooden table in *El camino* ultimately participate in—and cannot be disassociated from—an economy of violence that their own circulation helps to enact. After Saslaya loses Darío at the border, she dreams (or hallucinates) that he has come back. In this ambiguous vision, the mute Darío plays with two pieces of broken glass as he tells her that their grandfather wants them to come back home. As Espinoza-Quesada argues, Darío's call to return to the place where Saslaya was abused—with Darío playing the role of the grandfather's messenger in the dream—suggests a form of patriarchal seduction with the object playing an alluring role to draw her back to her abuse (Espinoza-Quesada 101).⁴⁰ Similarly, the table also holds a particular relationship to this

⁴⁰ As other scholars have already noted, Darío may be named after the famous Nicaraguan poet and father of Hispanic Modernism, Rubén Darío.

form of sexual violence. Later in the film, the grandfather, realizing that Saslaya and Darío are not coming back, burns the entire house down, with himself in it. The grandfather's suicide could be considered a form of expiation for his actions. But this possible admission of guilt is ultimately pointless since it goes unacknowledged and unnoticed, going up in flames like everything else. As the fire ravages their house, the camera focuses on another wooden table being consumed by the flames. If a table could underscore a sense of domestic bliss and security—a happy family gathering for a meal—the table in *El camino* faces a different fate. The migrating table is last seen somewhere along the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. In this regard, the migrant table's disappearance speaks to something of a stunted ecology, in which roots cannot take hold someplace else. But the ever-moving table also indicates an ecology of movement; that is, as an ecology always on the move like the migrant body in this film. In any case, the table ultimately vanishes from *El camino*—possibly lost in the forest—similarly to Darío, who loses his way never to be seen again.

Objects That Hinder: Dolls and Puppets

I am not suggesting that objects function (or behave) like migrants in *El camino*. Instead, the objects call attention to the potential disposability that humans also share as migrants as well as to the potential of those migrants to become actants, agents in unexpected ways precisely because they are not in familiar territory. Both objects and the migrant children are susceptible to being abandoned, or made to disappear. This imminent possibility is analogous to both the poor surviving at a garbage dump—the site of disposability par excellence—as well as to the plight of the migrants crossing the

border into Costa Rica as precarious subjects always on the precipice of danger. Saslaya, whose mother already disappeared somewhere in Costa Rica, loses Darío too.

One could say that objects also speak to a darker vibrancy (to use Bennett's term) at work, when things properly become objects, circulating in symbolic games, instead of things that have broken free from a subject-object relationship. This force can be characterized in relation to the other objects of *El camino* that pertain to the second category I mentioned briefly above: objects that hinder (rather than provoke) movement, such as plastic dolls and wooden puppets. The latter types of object also follow the children on their path, functioning as a visual parallel, particularly to Saslaya. The grandfather collects plastic female dolls, most likely salvaged from the garbage dump (as we see Saslaya do at the beginning of the film). In another early scene, as Saslaya is washing her hair in a basin, the grandfather gently caresses the hair of one of his dolls. We can see the plastic figure of another doll sticking out of his cardboard box. As toys, dolls do not indicate here a happy childhood but suggest a game of sexual domination and entrapment. The grandfather sexually abuses her later that night. In a way, Saslaya is also another doll for the grandfather, as if she were a malleable sexual toy to satisfy his desires. Although the dolls are rescued from the trash, they point to Saslaya's broken and discarded childhood.

Other objects such as butterflies and winged puppets in *El camino* are also visually aligned with Saslaya. The symbol of a bird trapped in a cage is a visual leitmotiv repeated throughout the film. Early on, Saslaya leafs through the pages of a book belonging to her grandfather, a volume of poetry by Rubén Darío, the famous Nicaraguan poet. The book contains a desiccated paper butterfly trapped within its pages. For his

part, in Granada Saslaya's brother Darío enters the house of a woman talking to herself with what seems to be a blue paper bird inside a cage in her living room, although the sounds of real birds can be heard. And most importantly, the traveling theater of the Man with the Cane consists of a puppet show that stars a butterfly and a frog.⁴¹ While this puppet master pulls the strings, Luz dances as he recites the story of a crucified butterfly's sad fate: "Una mariposa crucificada. Crucificada en su nido un día. No se percató de su dignidad. No sabía. No defendió su honor. Un clavo se incrustó en su ala. Ecos de silencio resonaron. Otros clavos continuaron el camino del mal. Un día se descubrirá el crimen. La mariposa muere." Luz's "butterfly" dance performance—as well as her mesmerizing presence for Saslaya throughout the film—foretells Saslaya's grim future at the brothel. Both Luz and Saslaya are doomed to lose something. Just as Luz gives up her baby at the bus station, Saslaya will have to give herself up to the Man with the Cane. Unbeknownst to Saslaya, who remains enthralled with the performance in a city square, the story serves as a warning of the dangers surrounding women and girls and of the fate that will soon become hers, similar to that of the butterfly. Saslaya eventually submits to the "strings" of her new predator, the Man with the Cane, just as she was at the mercy of her previous one, the grandfather. Unlike the glass and the table, things that venture forth from the dumpster out into other parts of the world, the puppets—although they circulate as a traveling theatre—are ultimately entrapped in the theater *as* symbolic objects at the puppet master's disposal. The puppet theatre, like the glass, also entralls Saslaya but ends up luring her into another symbolic game of exploitation with the Man with the Cane.

⁴¹ Such puppets are most likely made of wood, the same organic composition such as the wooden table. The dolls are plastic.

Damaged Life in a Brothel

At the end of *El camino*, Saslaya becomes another anonymous victim. The brothel disposes of her humanity while turning her into a valued, sexual commodity. She is offered up to the Man with the Cane while the other women in the house accept it. This house of forgotten women stands for a broken and damaged version of a home where women and girls are rendered sexually vulnerable and taken advantage of physically. The unhappy women in the brothel of *El camino* might be poor immigrant women from other Central American countries. They might have also crossed the border and unknowingly forced into prostitution. When Saslaya enters the house (against Luz's strict mandate), she peers into one of the rooms in which a man sits next to a woman on a bed. In what seems to be a post-coital scenario, the client sharpens a large knife (a machete?) while the woman stares bleakly at the bedsheets with downcast eyes. The man might not only be the woman's client but her prison warden, torturer or executioner. When Saslaya enters what seems to be the lobby of the house, she encounters two females clad completely in black, as if they were at a wake or funeral parlor. Their blank, lifeless faces do not register—or seem to have the ability to acknowledge—the young newcomer who walks up the stairs. Their silence accentuates the somber and funereal atmosphere of the room in which they sit. One of them, an older woman, sits at a desk, listening to a radio while she knits. The other is a young girl holding a black, whimpering puppy. The film ends with Saslaya dressed in a red dress—her girlish pink dress discarded—in bed with the Man with the Cane as she stares at the rotting mildew and cracks in the dilapidated ceiling. With sweat on her forehead, Saslaya's face registers her silent resignation. The

camera assumes her point of view as it scans the rest of the decrepit room before the scene goes dark.

As Ana Patricia Rodríguez has argued in relation to literary texts that explore the politics of waste in Central America, Saslaya's fate at the brothel renders her as a liminal figure "suspended, in an interstitial, *unhomely* space, neither here nor there," offering no solutions to the ever-increasing living conditions of the migrant poor (213). This liminality linked to sexual violence disrupts and defies universalist narratives of belonging to a nation or of exercising rights of citizenship since Saslaya escapes the domestic patriarchal power embodied by her grandfather in Nicaragua only to fall into the hands of another transnational machine of violence at the hands of the Man with the Cane in Costa Rica. As Espinoza-Quesada attests, *El camino* destabilizes the fiction of nationhood particularly through gendered violence since the fruitless search for an absent mother does not lead to a reunion in Costa Rica with the promise of returning to the children's "motherland," Nicaragua (99). The dream of reconciliation remains "utterly void, incomplete and unattainable" (99).

Saslaya's existence is reduced to something like bare life. If, according to Espinoza-Quesada, Saslaya stands in for "a transnational space in-between, exploited by men at both ends of 'the road,'" this liminality could also point to the figure of the Central American (especially female) migrant as what remains of a damaged bare life. Ewa Plonowska Ziarek points out a possible blind spot within Agamben's philosophical concept of bare life if it does not properly acknowledge the multi-varied forms of violence that it can potentially engender. One needs to reconsider, Ziarek argues, "the way bare life is implicated in gendered, class, colonial and racist configurations of the

political and, because of this implication, suffers different forms of violence” (194).

Saslava’s fate reduces her liminal existence to not a mere biological life (*zoe*) but to what “remains,” following Ziarek, of a destroyed bios, a damaged bare life reduced to a remainder that is “wounded, expendable and endangered” (Ziarek 195). By setting foot in the brothel, Saslava enters into an existence marked by sexual bondage. This imprisonment signals a new, deadlier form of victimhood, from which she may not be able to escape. Where could she go? She has lost her mother and her brother but also her county and her humanity. By entering the brothel, Saslava crosses an implacable threshold of masculine violence beyond her control. If the knife that the client sharpens in front of the woman in an earlier scene speaks to the ever-present danger to which these women are exposed, both the cane and the set of rusty old keys on the wall of the Man with the Cane’s room ensure the threat of corporal punishment and complete subjugation for these women forced into sexual slavery. Not only has Saslava become a sexual commodity but she has also lost all of her agency in the process. The violence behind this complete loss of agency subjects Saslava to a bare life without any recognizable rights. Not only poor but orphaned, Saslava now becomes both a sexualized victim of abuse and an undocumented child immigrant unaware of any rights she might hold in this new foreign country. The rotting cracks of the room where Saslava’s rape takes place signal both the damaged childhood and the remnants of a broken hope quickly extinguished.

Migrating North: *La jaula de oro*

While films that explore Central American migration southward—such as the particular example of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica—remain largely unknown outside of

scholarly circles, the cinema of migration northward to the U.S. has garnered much greater attention. This is especially significant given the large-scale phenomenon of “illegal” Central American migration to the U.S. through Mexico. Geographically situated between the U.S. and Central America, Mexico stands as a crucial thoroughfare for Central American immigration. The urgent problems that migrants face along the U.S.-Mexico border cannot be disassociated from—are very much largely affected by—U.S. politics and American foreign policy. Massive numbers of deportations are carried out, camps and centers keep adults and children detained, while migrants face brutal violence at the hands of the U.S. Border Patrol, rival gangs, drug cartels and immigrant smugglers. Poor Central American immigrants abandon rampant urban crime and poverty in their home countries only to find themselves embroiled in a larger transnational network of extortion, discrimination and persecution. This violence runs the gamut from robbery and kidnapping to torture, murder and bodily/enforced disappearance.

A brief history of Central American migration cinema of the past 40 years must include a reference to Gregory Nava’s *El Norte* (1983), which was released in the U.S. during the three main wars of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua). *El Norte* tells the story of two indigenous siblings who escape Guatemala’s Civil War and travel via Mexico to the U.S. The film was released nationwide in the U.S. and garnered critical acclaim, including an Academy Award nomination for Best Screenplay. Three decades later, Diego Quemada-Díez’s impressive feature debut, *La jaula de oro* (2013), continues and expands the previous film’s modest but remarkable recognition. One of the most awarded Mexican films in cinematic history, *La jaula de oro*, like Cary Fukunaga’s highly-praised *Sin Nombre* (2009), is a geographically expansive reflection of Central

American migration north through Mexico. It was first screened in the *Un Certain Regard* section of the 2013 Cannes Film Festival and Quemada-Díez won the award, A Certain Talent, for his direction. Since then, it has garnered much recognition, winning several Arieles, Mexico's national equivalent of the U.S. Academy Awards.

Like Ishtar Yasin, Quemada-Díez's personal life has been marked by migration, albeit of a different circumstance. Born in Burgos, Spain, he has now lived in Mexico for two decades and has become a Mexican citizen. He began his film career working in Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* (1995) as assistant to the director of cinematography. Quemada-Díez moved to the U.S. a year later and has worked with other directors such as Spike Lee, Alejandro González-Iñárritu, Tony Scott and Fernando Meirelles. In a 2015 interview with *IndieWire*, Quemada-Díez has stated that his film is not a documentary but rather a "fiction based on reality, reenacting it from a place of authenticity and integrity" (Levine). His film team compiled more than 600 personal testimonies from men, women and children in preparation for the film. Similar to Fukunaga and Yasin, who traveled the same path of migrants they filmed posing as "illegals" themselves, Quemada-Díez visited migrant shelters along the U.S.-Mexican border, through Mexico and in Guatemala. He also frequented shelters for children in the U.S. He eventually focused on four teenagers, whose testimonies became the narrative foundation for *La jaula de oro*. The decision to focus on children reflects his concern about how younger migrants in particular are rendered as criminals at the border. As Quemada-Díez states in a September 2015 interview with *Democracy Now!*: "[It] doesn't make any sense to do this policy of militarization of the borders and the criminalization of migrants and the incarceration of

migrants, which in the U.S. is around half a million people, whose only crime was to cross a border” (Goodman).

The film’s title, *La jaula de oro*, refers to the “golden cage” of immigration, the theme of both a Mexican film and a song (*corrido/ranchera*) of the same name from the 1980s. The film in question—Sergio Véjar’s 1987 Mexican film, starring the famous Almada brothers (Mario and Fernando)—was inspired by Enrique Franco’s 1983 song. The California-based prolific Mexican norteño band, *Los Tigres del Norte*, perform the song on their eponymous 1984 album. The song’s lyrics highlight the overwhelming entrapment and alienation of surviving in the U.S.: “¿De qué me sirve el dinero? / si estoy como prisionero / dentro de esta gran nación / cuando me acuerdo hasta lloro / que aunque la jaula sea de oro / no dejaaaaa de ser prisión.”

La jaula de oro tells the story of three Guatemalan teenagers, Juan (Brandon López), Sara (Karen Martínez) and Samuel (Carlos Chojon), who befriend Chauk (Rodolfo Domínguez), a Mayan Tzotzil youth from Chiapas, Mexico. In search of a better life in the U.S., they traverse a horizon of cruelty and violence marked by arrest, deportation, extortion, robbery, kidnapping and murder. After being deported from Mexico for the first time, Samuel decides to leave the group and returns home to Guatemala. Although Juan does not want Chauk to accompany them and becomes increasingly hostile to him, the trio eventually travels north by train. A genuine friendship blossoms between Sara and Chauk, who learn to communicate despite not speaking each other’s language. At one crucial moment, they are detained by drug traffickers. Sara, who has been dressed as a boy (“Oswaldo”) in an attempt to avoid the additional perils befalling girls and women, is abducted by the warlords. She disappears completely from

the narrative, and the film follows Juan and Chauk as they continue on their path north. On another train, they are tricked by a youth posing as an immigrant who works for a group of criminals. After being held for ransom, Juan negotiates Chauk's release and the pair work their way up to Mexicali. From there they cross the border between the U.S. and Mexico through a tunnel with a group of traffickers and other immigrants. Abandoned by the coyotes in the desert, they travel on until Chauk is killed by a U.S. border vigilante. Juan finds work at a meat-packing plant in an American city. The film concludes with Juan at the end of his shift, staring up at the stars of the night sky.

Guatemala City's Garbage Dump

The Guatemalan teenagers live in one of the slums of Guatemala City. Like Saslaya and Darío, who work at Managua's La Chureca, Samuel also works as a *buzo* (in Guatemalan parlance, *guajero*) in a nearby garbage dump. His workplace appears to be the Guatemala City garbage dump—the largest and most toxic landfill in all of Central America—where more than 4,000 people have lived and worked for more than six decades. In an early scene, Juan climbs over mountains of trash to pick up Samuel. This wasteland evokes the desperate terrain of La Chureca in *El camino* with scores of individuals searching for anything of value. However, unlike Saslaya, Samuel does not seem to find anything that will propel him to abandon the garbage. If anything, his face shows resignation as he drops everything to follow his friend. As they leave, vultures fly overhead with the faint outline of one of Guatemala's volcanoes in the background. This aerial shot concludes the sequence of the garbage dump, never to be seen again in the film.

The insertion of the volcano is significant given that in the next scene we immediately see a shot of two police guards stationed outside of a building, followed by a shot of a wall covered with black and white pictures of Guatemala's disappeared. Whereas in *El camino*, the story of Acahualinca's footprints and the eruption of the Masaya Volcano signal the traces of a pre-historic migration and the path of another migration story about to begin, in *La jaula de oro*, the volcano does not herald a migration story but rather signals another form of "trace"—the *huellas* of political violence. That is, the photographs of the victims evoke the ghostly traces of those who were executed, tortured and made to disappear during Guatemala's brutal Civil War (1960-1996). These black and white faces serve as visual imprints—face-prints—of victims whose traces painfully linger as unaccounted for in the nation's recent past. That these photos immediately follow the shot of two contemporary policemen also points to the fact that political violence continues after the war and, if anything, has taken other forms. For example, the photos serve to remind the public that people have disappeared and continue to remain missing and unaccounted for by the State. The presence of armed men reminds the viewer that the task of keeping order and ensuring public safety can always lead to police brutality and armed surveillance of a country's civilian population.

The juxtaposition between the garbage dump and this wall of photographs suggests that we interpret the scene in terms of the disposability and precariousness that characterize human life in Central America during and after the wars. The people who continue to live and work in a site of utter disposability—the garbage dump—remain vulnerable, forgotten by a State that marks them as if they were easily disposable themselves. The photos of the victims of political violence also serve as visual markers of

resistance against the act of forgetting that those killed and forcibly disappeared were also deemed unworthy of life and discarded by the State.

Sara and Chauk: Gendered and Racial Violence

Although all of the children in *La jaula de oro* face constant danger in their migratory journey, Sara and Chauk are doubly vulnerable—Sara for her gender and Chauk for his ethnicity. The pair is forced to negotiate an even more complicated path to stay alive in terms of sexual and linguistic violence. Sara knows all too well that she can be kidnapped, raped, forced into prostitution or simply killed for the sole reason of being a female migrant in the company of men. Thus, she cuts her hair, bandages her breasts and takes a contraceptive pill to avoid pregnancy before the journey, putting her life completely at risk by trying to pass as a boy. In this regard, Sara's character is markedly differently from the figure of the Central American female migrant confronting gendered/sexual violence while crossing into Mexico in previous migration films such as the virginal Sayra, a Honduran girl in Cary Fukunaga's *Sin nombre* (2009), or Sabina (also Honduran) who works as a prostitute in a Mexican border town in Chiapas before being deported in Luis Mandoki's *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas* (2012).

However, like Sayra and Sabina and also Saslaya from *El camino*, Sara relies on her courage and perseverance to continue surviving on the journey until the moment she is kidnapped. Far from considering herself a victim, Sara accepts the challenge of migrating alongside men. For Jansen Itandehui, Sara's kidnapping "does not function as a narrative device to offer the other [male] youngsters a chance for a heroic rescue" as in the case of Sayra (in *Sin nombre*) who is saved from a gang rape by Willy, her fellow

male traveling companion. He ultimately sacrifices his life so she can reach the U.S. (59). In the case of Sabina, who returns abused and defeated to the same brothel at the end of *La vida precoz*, she shares a similar fate as Saslaya (from *El camino*) who also ends up in a house of prostitution.

As for Chauk, although he is male, he is an indigenous migrant from Latin America. He does not speak or understand Spanish, which puts him at a linguistic disadvantage with respect to his traveling peers. His inability to communicate in Spanish provokes the racist anger of Juan, who calls him *indio* several times in the film. With Juan as the self-imposed leader, this insult keeps Chauk at the margins of the group. Regardless of whether Chauk understands the weight of this racist slur, he cannot talk back to Juan (or fight back) in Juan's own language. The inability to challenge Juan's authority relegates Chauk to an outsider status without voice nor vote, *ni voz ni voto*. Juan's toxic masculinity prevents him from forming a bond with Chauk that is not defined by violence. Sara, on the other hand, befriends Chauk as they teach each other a few words through a verbal exchange of Spanish and Tzotzil Mayan.

That Strange Sentence of Snow

"His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."
—James Joyce, "The Dead"

La jaula de oro contains a recurring visual motif of snow falling from the night sky which serves a similar narrative purpose as Saslaya's piece of glass in *El camino*. As discussed above, Saslaya's glass trinket functions as a form of vibrant matter that enables her to escape her precarious life in the garbage dump; it is an optical lens through which Saslaya captures/films the misery that surrounds her, impelling her to action. Similarly, in

La jaula de oro, the image of falling snow represents the hope that the children migrants hold on to as they try to escape the violence in Central America. The imagery of falling snow, which is repeated several times throughout *La jaula de oro* and concludes the film, is most closely affiliated with the indigenous character, Chauk. We first see the snow when the teenagers are on the train. As Chauk falls asleep, the frame gradually darkens and cuts to a night sky with snow gently falling. This snowy scene may seem to be out of place in a migration film that mostly takes place in a Central American jungle and later in a scorching North American desert. However, the snow is coded as a recurring dream by Chauk since the image of falling snow is followed by a scene in which he awakens the next morning still sitting on the train. In other scenes, the camera cuts from a sleeping Chauk aboard another train (or standing next to an abandoned one) to the same scene of a night sky. Whereas *El camino* signals to terrestrial footprints—the *huellas*—of migrants and travelers on foot, in *La jaula de oro* the falling snow also highlights the impermanence of those footsteps. As fleeting traces of ice, snowflakes fall from the sky and dissipate on the ground. With more accumulated snow, the footsteps that cross a snowy path can yield a visual imprint but one that eventually vanishes. The snow evokes an ephemerality that also parallels the fleeting sense of hope that migrants cultivate in search of a better future.

What the snow suggests in the film is also visually reflected in the series of photographs that the children take of themselves early on. With the money Sara and Samuel make from performing a dance routine for a crowd, the teenagers get their pictures taken with different costumes and landscapes. Juan is photographed as an American cowboy—the kids chant “Shane!”—against the backdrop of a snowy mountain

forest. The brief reference to George Stevens's *Shane*, the 1953 American technicolor Western film, evokes the unrestricted freedom to travel that not all migrants enjoy. Shane, the taciturn gunfighter with a shadowy past (played by Alan Ladd in Stevens's film), is an outsider (a kind of migrant) who has the possibility of coming into a western town and riding away when it is time to go. Chauk's photograph proves to be more problematic. Wearing a feather headdress, he stands against the backdrop of a rugged snowy terrain. That the other children laugh while Chauk poses as a Native American highlights his vulnerable position within the group as an Indian "Other." As Itandehui suggests, Chauk figures an "Indianness" that "is both a display, performance and explicit construction which is used to mock him and ridicule him" (59). Nonetheless, their innocent joy and pleasure of being photographed can be seen through Chauk's cheerful smile and Juan's more reserved grin. These canvas backdrops function as temporary screens for an escapist fantasy in which the public pays to have their picture taken and act out the part of certain character tropes in the American imaginary—the cowboy, the Indian, the tourist in a pre-9/11 New York City—albeit for a moment. The immediacy and instantaneity of the photograph reveals a fleeting moment of joy and hope, akin to the ephemeral beauty of the scenes with snow.

The image of slowly-falling snow signals a sense of movement, not only in the scene in which snow falls from the sky as the teenagers sleep on a moving train, but also in a much later scene. In this crucial scene, the teenagers stare through a store window at a display of a toy train making its way through a miniature mountain town that resembles something out of the romanticized 19th-century American Northwest or Rocky Mountains. The teenagers' gaze remains transfixed as the toy train makes its way through

the rugged wintry terrain. This act of seeing through the glass parallels Saslaya looking through her own piece of broken glass in *El camino*. As Juan and Chauk stare through the store window—like a pair of Alices through a looking glass—the image of the toy train functions as part of a fantasy/dream sequence within the brutal reality of *La jaula de oro*. The miniature replica of a train passing through a town functions as a visual mechanism that transports them—even for a few moments—out of the misery and violence of their current predicament. Chauk repeats the word for snow in his Mayan language—*taiv*—the same word he had taught Sara, and now Juan recognizes it. This idealized landscape speaks to the boys’ hopes and dreams by fulfilling a fantasy within their imagination. As Ketlyn Mara Rosa and Janaina Mirian Rosa argue, the image of the falling snow is not only associated with a foreign place full of potential but also “stands for the American dream of life improvement, happiness, and fulfillment” (15). Snow, which can also stand for peace, can represent here all of these possibilities, as well as of a genuine, nonviolent friendship in a new country since Juan and Chauk participate in a linguistic exchange with Juan learning the word for snow—like Sara had done—in Chauk’s Mayan language.

Nonetheless, the train is but a toy and the mountain town is merely a wintry simulacrum, a romantic image of a place that does not really exist, to which they cannot really escape. Watching the display from the other side of the window, the teenagers cannot touch it, much less buy it. The inaccessibility of this landscape is underscored all the more so in the next scene when they are seen standing at the foot of the massive and impenetrable U.S. border. As they stare into that other country, the teenagers still find themselves on the outside looking in. But this time, metal railings—and not a glass store window—resembling the walls of a prison divide the pair. Recalling the title of the film,

the pair now confronts a large cage—a *jaula*. Moreover, these two scenes, in which the protagonists stare into the store window and look out from the border wall suggest a silent and vulnerable yet touching camaraderie between Juan and Chauk, not threatened by masculine violence. Their hopes and dreams now unite them more than the ways that their cultural differences separate them.

More than just a fanciful dream, the imagery of gently falling snow also signals alienation and the threat of imminent death that one finds in the concluding paragraph of James Joyce's short story, "The Dead." That famous literary text, part of a collection of short stories (*Dubliners*), was published in June 1914 on the eve of World War I. There does not seem to be any indication that the filmmaker has sought to create an intertextual reference to Joyce's short story, but the element of a migratory travel through the snow—albeit in very different circumstances—is worth pointing out. The epigraph at the beginning of this section refers to this text. The quote, which Richard Ellmann has referred to in his biography of the Irish author, *James Joyce*, as "that strange sentence in the final paragraph" (quoted in Foran) refers to the narrator talking about a possible journey westward for the story's protagonist, Gabriel. A prominent literary trope in Western literature, westward journeys represent a trip toward death (Foran). In a parallel fashion, Juan and Chauk are migrants traveling north but also west through Mexico and into the U.S. Recalling the mesmerizing conclusion of Joyce's short story, in which the narrator recounts "the snow falling faintly through the universe," the repeatedly falling white snow in *La jaula de oro* gives shape to the teenagers' pure bright hope for a better world (Joyce 1570). One can say that this dream of snow envisions a power to cover the

entire universe of the film, as the snow in Joyce's short story ends up covering all of Gabriel's Ireland, all the living and all the dead of that universe (Joyce 1570).

However, this image of falling snow as a foreshadowing of death becomes all too evident and very real given that Chauk soon dies. A vigilante rifleman fatally shoots him while the pair crosses the desert in the U.S. With Chauk's abrupt death, his dreams of snow quickly evaporate. For Juan, the likely sole survivor of the group since Sara's fate remains unknown, the falling snow yields a northwestern journey of grim survival and utter loneliness. He manages to escape, and at the end of the film is seen working in a factory clad in a white uniform. The culmination of Juan's struggles signals another form of death, a dehumanizing life-in-death, as one of many factory workers in a meat-packing plant. In the film's poignant final scene, Juan comes out of the factory and stares up at the night sky while snow gently falls. It really *is* snowing now. It is most likely winter. Juan can finally experience it. But it has come at a heavy price since he has lost his companions along the way. With this final visual image of falling snow, recalling the "strange sentence" in Joyce's "The Dead," Juan's dreams seem to have also completely evaporated into the air of an unknown universe, discarded like the remnants of all those animal carcasses thrown into countless trash bins.

The hopeful search for—or dream of—snow ultimately manifests itself in a bitter reality at the end of *La jaula de oro*. In this way, the search for an idealized wintry landscape parallels the Nicaraguan children's fruitless search for their mother in *El camino*. Chauk will never really experience the falling snow. Likewise, Saslaya and Darío will never find that elusive mother who abandoned them years before, disappearing from their lives forever. The snow, like the mother of Saslaya and Darío, disappears

without a trace. As for Juan, his newfound life shares a mournful affinity with Saslaya's grim fate at the end of *El camino*. Juan's melancholic face, as he stares up at the night sky, recalls Saslaya's mournful gaze as she also looks up at the rotting ceiling of her new "home," the house of prostitution in San José. The dual images of Saslaya and Juan looking up—to the sky, to the ceiling—at the end of both films suggests a conscious act of evasion. That is, they choose to look *away* from where they stand or lie, in the case of Saslaya, on the bed. Their gaze upward evades the direction of the floor, the earth proper, which stands for a life "grounded" in the harsh reality of their situations. This gaze also signals a kind of escape—or at least the hope of flight—from what geography can offer them. By geography, I mean the difficult physical terrain of border crossings, deserts and jungles that these migrant children have had to confront in search of a better life.

Sara's Disappearance and Femicide Machines

I would like to return to the physical location in which the sad fates of Sara and Chauk are played out—the Mexican desert—which highlights a topography of terror directly linked to their migrant journey. Chauk is killed on the spot by a sniper while crossing the desert. Sara's fate remains more uncertain. It takes the form of a disappearance into possible sexual slavery. After their train is hijacked by a gang, Sara is taken away by a group of men. While the other women are hauled off in the back of a truck like cattle, Sara—favored by the man who discovers she is a girl—becomes his personal property and is thrown into a car. No longer the courageous "Oswaldo," Sara becomes the pillaged female loot of a war without end. Although Sara is not visibly raped, tortured or killed in the film, she is violently assaulted and disappears into an

unknown world. Where does Sara go and what becomes of her? The film suggests a fate that has become far too common for many migrant women. Sara's virtual erasure from the narrative evokes the disappearance of countless other women who risk their lives crossing the desert that traverses Mexico and the U.S. Sara's disappearance at the hands of a gang with possible links to a Mexican drug cartel—never to appear again in the film—mirrors those other women who fall victim to sexual violence at the ever-evolving nexus between regional politics and transnational economics. As Jean Franco argues in *Cruel Modernity*, half of Mexico's 31 states and 900 municipalities “are controlled by drug cartels whose activities are not confined to drug smuggling but have now diversified and engage in extortion, protection rackets, illegal immigration, kidnapping, oil theft and pirated goods” (216).

Sara's violent abduction evokes another form of misogynist violence that occurs along the U.S.-Mexican border: the “femicides” of Ciudad Juárez. The term femicide (*feminicidio*) refers to the epidemic of rape, death and disappearance of hundreds of women and girls since the early 1990s in Ciudad Juárez, a border city in the Mexican state of Chihuahua across the Río Grande from El Paso, Texas. Since 1993, the death toll stands at least at 370. In search of better economic opportunities, these impoverished women left their homes to work in the *maquiladoras* (assembly industries) of Ciudad Juárez. According to reports, one of every three deaths was a young teen victim of sexual torture. After the women were raped and mutilated, their bodies were thrown into the streets or the desert that surrounds the town. Since 1993, approximately thirty women continue to be murdered every year (Staudt and Campbell).

In *The Femicide Machine*, Sergio González Rodríguez envisions the culture of death plaguing Ciudad Juárez—and the Mexican desert that surrounds it—in terms of an ecology of “territorial power” and “normalized barbarism” that has mutated into what he calls a “femicide machine” (7). This femicide machine, González Rodríguez argues, not only feeds off misogynist hatred, violence and *machismo*, but also relies on patriarchal systems of power—“a law of complicity”—within and on the margins of legality shared by criminals, the police, the military, the government and private citizens (11). In 2010, more than 3,000 executions took place (González Rodríguez 25). Within this machine of political corruption and social impunity, poor women are the most vulnerable victims. For González Rodríguez, the desert topography of Ciudad Juárez is part and parcel of this violent ecology since it is precisely the desert that becomes the physical repository of such carnage. The 370+ women labored in the *maquiladoras* but their violated corpses were thrown away in the desert. For Franco, responding to González Rodríguez, this desert becomes “a space laden with symbolism of freedom from the law, unplanned development and rubbish dumps” (219). As a place in which impunity thrives, the desert is cut off from all possible forms of justice. In this regard, the desert recreates the violence that the *maquiladoras* produce: the remnants of the (female) human body.

Brothels, Garbage, Animal Meat-Packing

Juan’s mournful gaze at the end of *La jaula de oro* and Saslaya’s melancholic face at the conclusion of *El camino* bespeak both an unfathomable sorrow and an uncertain future after a long migration marked by incredible violence. Both characters must contend with the remains of their childhood or rather, with what remains after their

innocence has been lost. Although their fates are vastly different, one can find a crucial parallel between Saslaya's sexual bondage at the brothel and Juan's menial labor at a meat-packing plant. Both the brothel and the factory can be considered transactional markets in which people practice forms of repetitive labor. In both instances, a form of dehumanization takes place in which the human is reduced to an existence of replaceability and uniformity. One can also recall this feeling of human disposability in the early scene in *La jaula de oro* at the garbage dump where Juan goes to meet Samuel in Guatemala City. After all, as Itandehui makes clear, despite the American abattoir's more industrialized machinery, Juan's new job is not so much different than the work that Samuel already does in Guatemala—picking-up waste. Whereas Samuel salvages discarded but reusable objects in an urban garbage dump, Juan throws away the unusable remains of animal flesh in the U.S. Despite Juan's aggressive masculinity throughout most of the film, he was not able to kill a chicken when he found one with Sara and Chauk. It was Chauk who gently decapitated the animal for the group. Juan, who could not kill an animal for food, is now forced to surround himself with dead animals who become food for others.

Itandehui reads the close-ups of raw meat in the packing plant as a humiliating form of a diminished life, "as a metaphor for the loss of life" which binds human workers to a "wage" slavery controlled by a capitalist economic machine and conditions (67). As with the brothel, which relies on prostitution to function, the food factory consists of the labor of processing animal parts to make a profit. In both cases, the human is largely a means to a larger end for the sake of someone else's benefit. Recalling González Rodríguez's claim that *maquiladoras* embody the violent mechanisms of a "femicide

machine,” something similar can be said about human labor and animal violence in the abattoir. The slaughterhouse—in which animals are processed *as food*—becomes the place where the burden of being human confronts the irreconcilable violence against other animals. Human labor ensures and propagates the industrialized machine of killing animals. This inexorable spectrum of violence that traverses both humans and other animals will be discussed in the next chapter.

The Biopolitics of Disappearance

As Franco rightly asserts, González Rodríguez suggests a comparison between the abject architecture of the assembly plant that sustains the femicide machine and Agamben’s concept of the concentration camp, which he regards as “the biopolitical paradigm of the modern” (Franco 219). Like the brothel or the garbage dump, the assembly plant makes human life precarious and expendable. The lives of the migrant youth of *El camino* and *La jaula de oro* point to the possibility of becoming disposable victims again and again. Their predicaments underscore a bare life of flight without refuge. The migrants’ states of exception are both itinerant and embodied since they carry their precarious condition with them—on their own bodies. Their lives become as expendable as the trash, their lives as replaceable as those of any other victim in a brothel, their dreams as useless as those animal parts not deemed for consumption in a manufacturing plant.

Following González Rodríguez’s analysis of the *maquiladora* as a biopolitical form of the (Latin American) concentration camp, I would then like to suggest that the Mexican desert (like the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica) is a state of

exception outside of the realms of the law. The Mexican desert, like the forest that separates Nicaragua from Costa Rica, serves as the place of imminent disappearance or death. That is, one can virtually disappear or get killed at any moment. Separated from his sister, Darío (from *El camino*) disappears somewhere along the border never to be seen again. That Darío is mute and cannot give voice to his pain—he cannot call out for help—also constitutes the border as a place of silence. Darío cannot be rescued.

Similarly, the women who are captured in the moment that Sara is found out in *La jaula de oro* have also lost their voice since their cries will prove useless. Trapped and hauled away in a covered truck, no one will hear or help them. Sara's life is laid bare, unaccounted for and damaged. Her life disappears as she is taken further into the desert by the male caravan. That desert extends farther north, toward the other side of the border where the sniper aims and shoots Chauk. Hunted down as a wild animal, Chauk's body is left out in the desert. There is no one to bury him since Juan flees for his own life.

Both Darío's and Sara's disappearance—as well as Chauk's death and Saslaya's entry into the brothel in San José—signal a suspended ecological passage with no voice to speak out, recalling those other migrant lives that have also disappeared without a trace. The passage is ecological because the difficult terrain that they have had to cross speaks to a menacing geography with real tangible dangers. As for Juan, he manages to cross into the U.S. alive, but his precarious life will most likely be marked by the fear of being deported back to a violent country. As González Rodríguez sadly warns—and recalling the devastating conclusions of both *El camino* and *La jaula de oro*—the relentless violence of the femicide machine transcends the geographical confines of a particular city such as Ciudad Juárez or San José: “It is possible that other femicide

machines are now gestating in other Mexican cities and elsewhere on the planet” (14).

This is the inexorable ecological remainder of a bare life that leaves the vulnerable migrant forever exposed at a crossroads where ethics falls apart.

The sad story of Natividad Canda’s fate, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, like that of the children who cross the desert, the forests and the borders of both films, also renders visible a moment of bare life where ethics has broken down. Canda was torn apart by dogs while the Costa Rican police watched and did nothing to help him. Here Costa Rican law was suspended as the police officers’ actions—or criminal inaction—went unpunished. And as justice for Canda’s death remains unrealized, his dignity as a human goes unacknowledged, exposing a bare life stripped down. As a non-Costa Rican citizen who seems to have subsisted on metal scraps from a repair shop, Canda was both a “vagabond” and an immigrant. Any possibility of justice for Canda’s life is disposed of within the court of law.

Children in Cages

In “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government,” the final chapter of her monumental work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt reflects on the lonely and vulnerable figure of the refugee. She writes, “To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all” (475). It is worth remembering this sense of unwelcome non-belonging in light of recent events in U.S. immigrant policy enforced by President Donald Trump’s administration. Central Americans continue to migrate through Mexico to the U.S. as they escape the violence of their home countries, especially from the Northern

Triangle region of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador—and now, Nicaragua as well. Those asking for asylum include not only cisgendered families with children but also transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. President Trump had not only promised to build a wall between Mexico and the U.S. but that the southern neighbor would pay for it.

Let us recall the name of that Mexican song by Enrique Franco from which one of the films discussed in this chapter derives its name: “La jaula de oro.” If the Mexican song refers to the golden cage of migrating north to the U.S., American policy has proved that the cage is far from gilded, but that it is indeed quite an extensive prison. In April 2018, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions issued a zero-tolerance policy for all immigrant adults, whether they cross the border alone or with children. Since the Justice Department cannot prosecute children with their parents, such a policy translated into a sharp increase in family separation. According to Homeland Security, during six weeks between April and May 2018, almost 2,000 immigrant children were forcibly separated from their parents (Rizzo).

When Democratic Senator Jeff Merkley (from the state of Oregon) visited an immigration detention facility in McAllen, Texas in June 2018, he reported in a CNN interview that “hundreds of children” were locked up in cages “made out of fencing and then wire and nets stretched across the top of them so people can’t climb out of them” (Rizzo 2). The sad fact that undocumented migrant children can be locked up and caged as “criminals” or as wild animals conjures another biopolitical space where law and politics animalize human life down to the most vulnerable condition: defenseless children. When children are caged, ethics has ceased to exist; or rather, ethics itself—the

imperative to take care of each other—has been caged. A migrant child in a cage underscores Arendt's image of the uprooted refugee, made superfluous and given no place in the world.

Thomas Nail's political theory of the migrant (discussed earlier in this chapter) forces an urgent question: "What would it mean to rethink political theory based on the figure of the migrant rather than on citizenship?" (17). This chapter, considering the captured and caged migrant of current events, addresses this question by placing the figure of the migrant at the critical center of Central American cinema. In doing so, as *El camino* and *La jaula de oro* show, a migrant cinema emerges marked by disappearances, ruptures and silences that transcend national politics. The interplay of these forces through cinema shows a migrant who forcibly disappears, who is broken down, and who is silenced. A wider exploration of the ethical weight of the migrant in scholarly fields such as film studies, Latin American studies, and also exile and immigration studies places the migrant at the forefront of a global political discourse. Both *El camino* and *La jaula de oro* embrace this urgent call. And, in doing so, both films give the migrant a tangible place in the world.

Chapter 3. Precarious Animality: Ethical Interruptions in Gabriel Serra's *La Parka* and Ernesto Villalobos's *Por las plumas*

Death and the Dog

In August 2007, Galería de Arte Contemporáneo Códice, a Nicaraguan art gallery, held a controversial exhibit in Managua. The Costa Rican artist, Guillermo Vargas Jiménez (also known as “Habacuc”) displayed his *Exposición N°1* for three days. The exhibition consisted of an emaciated stray dog tied by rope to a wall in which the phrase: “eres lo que lees” (“you are what you read”) was written in dog kibble. As the dog remained bound, 175 pieces of crack cocaine and one ounce of marijuana were lit in an incense burner while the Sandinista anthem played backwards. A sign instructed the audience not to feed or free the dog. According to Habacuc, in addition to a stray animal, drugs, a written text and music, the exhibit incorporated a fifth element: the media (David Castillo Robinson). Inevitably, “Exposición N° 1” sparked an international media outrage after rumors about the dog’s pitiful state and intended death by starvation began to circulate. Photographs of the animal in a room filled with people also started to appear on Internet blogs (“Guillermo Habacuc Vargas: A Dying Dog as ‘Art’”). More than four million people worldwide signed an online petition demanding Habacuc’s dismissal from participating in the 2008 Bienal Centroamericana to be held in Tegucigalpa, Honduras the following year.⁴² Adding fuel to his own fire, Habacuc himself signed the petition.

The art gallery rose to Habacuc’s defense. Galería Códice was launched in December 1991 as a response to the lack of support for the arts caused by the end of the Sandinista Regime, which had sponsored artists during the politically turbulent 1980s

⁴² The biennale committee did not dismiss Habacuc and he presented another proposal.

(Galería Códice Website). Juanita Bermúdez, the director and founder, issued a statement. She attested to the dog's welfare during the exhibit. The animal had not been starved or left to die. On the contrary, he had been fed several times and untied when the gallery was closed. Early one morning, the dog ran away never to be seen again. In an interview with the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa*, Bermúdez defended the artistic merit of Habacuc's work stating, "Es una obra que deja un mensaje social, definitivamente es arte conceptual y a la gente le cuesta todavía trabajo digerir este tipo de obras" (Bonilla Ruiz). Instead of subjecting the dog to cruel and demeaning treatment, Bermúdez argued, "el artista dignificó al perro al llevarlo como arte a una exposición de su obra, para representar una realidad social" (Bonilla Ruiz). In doing so, then, Habacuc would seem to elevate the dog from a sad life as a homeless and unwanted stray animal—the artist had supposedly paid some local children to find him on the streets—to the sensational level of performance art with a social message. It remains unclear in this defense (especially from the use of the verb "representar") what exact social reality the dog represents.

What the exhibit underscores, however, is a cruel attempt at creating art out of a dog's unfortunate life, even if the animal's living conditions in the gallery could have been better than in the streets. Artistic representations of violence, regardless of the power of their message, need not rely on the suffering of an actual animal. Praised by its proponents and despised by many others, Habacuc's Exposición N° 1 provocatively registers the ethical limits of human-animal relations, that is, the problematic ways that humans coexist with other non-human animals. Habacuc, who received dozens of death threats, has said that the exhibit was meant to test the public's reaction, yet none of the

visitors to the art gallery did anything to stop the dog from suffering (Couzens).

Habacuc's work also poses a disturbing ethical quandary between art and politics: To what extent can politically-inflected art, if ever, justify animal suffering and violence? As journalist Rosa Montero argues in her editorial column for the Spanish newspaper *El País*, our relation to other humans relies on the way we relate to other animals. She asserts: "El caso Habacuc roza una cuestión aún más esencial, una de las fronteras de la civilidad del siglo XXI: la comprensión de nuestra continuidad orgánica con el resto de los animales, y la certidumbre de que no seremos capaces de respetarnos a nosotros mismos si no respetamos a los demás seres vivos" (Montero).

Habacuc's animal performance piece also stands in for—and calls attention to—a spectrum of violence of another sort. The artist claims that the gruesome death of Leopoldo Natividad Canda Mairena, an undocumented Nicaraguan immigrant killed in August 2005 in Costa Rica, inspired *Exposición N°1*. As discussed in this study's second chapter, Canda was killed by a pair of Rottweilers while several onlookers refused to come to his aid. Habacuc named the dog in "Exposición N° 1" after the victims's name: Natividad. This transposition inscribes a person's identity onto the physical body of a dog. As a multimedia performance, the exhibit reveals a network of violence across the region that sheds light on the problems inherent in contemporary Central American life. For example, the Sandinista hymn played backwards could evoke a song of disillusionment for a failed socialist revolution with its ideals gone hollow and a corrupt political reality. The doses of cocaine and marijuana signal the deadly transnational circuits of the drug cartels, regional mafias and urban gangs plaguing the region and its northern neighbor, Mexico. One can interpret the graphic text "you are what you read"

written in dog food on the wall as a criticism of media consumption. As for Natividad the dog, the cruelty inherent in keeping a starving stray animal tied up recalls the disproportionate amount of violence suffered by the immigrant poor and the less fortunate, such as the fate of the other Natividad and his lack of social recognition.

That such problems—drugs, corruption, failed politics, urban violence—circulate around a dog in “Exposición N° 1” places the figure of the animal at the center of an ethical debate on violence. These problems revolve around and go through the material figure of the animal. This raises important questions. Does an animal—in this case, the dog—stand in for the immigrant or the poor? Can an animal’s suffering express human pain? Or is this another form of violence we need to come to terms with? As Claudia Alonso Recarte argues, despite the artist’s efforts to allegorize Canda’s tragic death, “the metaphors are faulty if only because in assuming an ethical stance toward the dog, one must question whether his suffering is necessary for the sake of art. In other words, why would the deliberate suffering of an animal be *necessary* to conceptually reconstruct Canda’s anguish?” (21-22). In Habacuc’s exhibit, Natividad the dog stands in for Natividad the man while remaining a dog. At the core of Habacuc’s piece lies the disturbing conjunction of violence against nonhuman animals and the political animalization of human life. The exhibit humanizes the dog by giving him a name and situating him within a complex of social issues; however, in the same gesture, it turns the animal into a sign of violence against humans. In other words, the exhibit introduces the dog to the human sphere by turning the animal into a sign of animalization. By animalization, I refer to the process by which the humanist discourse of speciesism renders humans as animals and subjects them to what Jacques Derrida calls “a

noncriminal putting to death” (Wolfe 6). As Cary Wolfe argues in *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, the danger of speciesism is not limited to the violence against non-human animals since it may be mobilized against any human group. Wolfe writes, “[A]s long as it is institutionally taken for granted that it is all right to systematically exploit and kill nonhuman animals simply because of their species [...] then the humanist discourse of species will always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well, to countenance violence against the social other of whatever species—or gender, or race or class, or sexual difference” (8). For Wolfe, the violence inherent in determining which animals get to live or die by their species makes possible the violence against humans along other divisions that mark them as different. Species difference is not the same as gender, race, class, sexual or any difference to the extent that the logic of speciesism enables the persecution of all these categories.

This chapter explores how two Central American directors navigate the precarious borders—and ethical limits—between humans and other non-human animals in two debut films from 2013: Gabriel Serra’s Mexican biographical documentary *La Parka* and Ernesto “Neto” Villalobos’ Costa Rican comedy *Por las plumas (All About the Feathers)*. Both films propel and complicate the question of what constitutes being human and being animal. This chapter considers the two films alongside contemporary issues in the areas of critical animal or animality studies. As Kari Weil explains in “A Report on the Animal Turn”: “If animal studies have come of age, it is perhaps because nonhuman animals have become a limit case for theories of difference, otherness, and power” (3). The notion of the animal is a blind spot in philosophy, an unquestioned foundation upon which the

concept of the human has been constructed (Weil 16). In “Why Animals Now?,” Mary Ann DeKoven explains how the divergent terms animal studies and animality studies reflect different perspectives on the human-animal distinction: “In general, those primarily motivated by animal advocacy and by the human-animal relation favor *animal studies*, while theorists of the posthuman, who want to move beyond the human-animal distinction, often prefer *animality studies*” (386). I do not find it necessary to opt for one term over the other since this chapter examines issues highlighted in both theoretical schools.

I argue that the paradoxical figure of the animal in Central American cinema functions as an imaginary but also porous limit of difference among animal species, which allows for significant forms of violence, while also offering the possibility of conceptualizing another form of relation among species. These possible relations include a kinship, a companionship or a mutual self-dependency not contingent on violence. The films center around the complex relationships that two working-class men establish with animals—one for work and another for potentially lucrative sport—as they earn a living in contemporary Mexico City and San José, respectively. In *La Parka*, a man works at a slaughterhouse, killing bulls for years as a way to earn a living for his family. In *Por las plumas*, a security guard buys a rooster so it can compete in local cockfights forbidden by Costa Rican law. Whereas in *La Parka* the killing of animals ensures a family’s income, in *Por las plumas* the purchase of a rooster provides companionship in an otherwise alienating life. Both films lay bare an irreconcilable relationship of normative violence between humans and other animals in contemporary Latin America. By focusing on men who rely on animals to either earn or improve their way of living, *La Parka* and *Por las*

plumas suggest a mutual precarity that traverses both human and animal life. I consider this precarity along ethical lines that allows for the human to encounter and recognize the (animal) Other. Both films foreground a dream sequence that “interrupts” the narrative flow of their stories. I examine these interruptive dreams as an encounter—both as a pause and an aperture—between species by way of Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy on the Other. As I examine below, this mutual precarity depends on the subjection of other animals for human gain/profit at the same time that it problematizes such domination. The animals in both films are not a metaphor for (human) violence but rather highlight a shared, vulnerable existence across species.

Finding Death: La Parka, the Grim Reaper

La Parka is the debut film of Gabriel Serra, a Nicaraguan filmmaker. Born in 1985, Serra went to Mexico in 2007 to study film at the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica in Mexico City. He submitted his 30-minute documentary *La Parka*, shot entirely in Mexico, as a final project for a course on documentary film. *La Parka*, dedicated to Serra’s family (“A mi familia en Nicaragua”), was filmed in the very short span of eight days and produced in only eight months. Although *La Parka* does not take place in Central America, Serra’s documentary forms part of this study’s corpus of films made by Central American directors in neighboring countries. The film solidified its international acclaim on January 15, 2015 when it was nominated for a U.S Academy Award in the category of Best Documentary, Short Subject. Serra remains the first Nicaraguan—and also the only Central American—filmmaker ever to be nominated for

an Oscar. Among other awards, the film won The Golden Key at The Kassel Documentary Film and Video Festival in Germany in 2013.

La Parka takes place in the slaughterhouse in Los Reyes la Paz, a municipality in the state of Mexico, east of the capital but part of the greater Mexico City area. According to Samuel Lagunas, writing for the Barcelona-based film website *Cine Divergente*, Serra's impulse to make such a film rose out of one simple question in regards to the ubiquitous *taquerías* of Mexico: "¿De dónde sale tanta carne para tantas taquerías?" (Lagunas). In no other Latin American city, Serra claimed, had he witnessed so much public consumption of meat. The director describes the process in terms of a carnivorous journey: "Se me vino a la cabeza una imagen de 25 millones de cabezas de vaca y de 25 millones de habitantes comiéndose esas reses y empecé a preguntarme de dónde venía tanta carne. Y esto me llevó a buscar un rastro grande, estando en el rastro encontré a Efraín, La Parka, y con él encontré la muerte" (Lagunas). A surreal vision of voracious hunger—a human demand for animal meat—provides the inspirational groundwork for Serra's film.

Serra indeed finds death while filming *La Parka*. Efraín Jiménez García, (known as "La Parka" in the documentary that also bears his nickname), has worked in the Los Reyes slaughterhouse for more than 25 years.⁴³ During his long tenure at the slaughterhouse, rather than butcher the carcasses, Efraín's job has been to actually kill each bull at the start of the line; he has been responsible for the death of about 500 bulls a day, 6 days a week. Early in the film, he recalls how he had wanted the nickname Pinocchio when he started working but his coworkers named him La Parka, as he says

⁴³ To avoid confusion between his nickname and the title of the film, I refer to the protagonist by his given name, Efraín.

“por asesino,” and “that’s how it stayed, for murderer.” He carries the burden of animal slaughter in his macabre nickname. “La Parka” stands for many things. In Spanish, “la Parca” is a feminine proper name to designate Death, “la Muerte.” In this regard, it corresponds to the Western personification of Death: the Grim Reaper, the harvester of death associated with a black hooded robe, a skeletal frame and a scythe in hand. Efraín’s nickname befits his profession. In certain frames, Efraín’s thin and gaunt frame physically recalls the iconography of the Grim Reaper. In one early shot, the viewer can see his long, thin hand on an equally long metal lever. We then see his hooded figure as he pulls down the lever. His hooded sweatshirt is not black, the conventional color of the Grim Reaper’s garb, but red, evoking the color of blood. The metal lever has replaced the traditional scythe, but they are both mechanical instruments of death: the lever, like the scythe, rather than fertilizing the soil or harvesting crops, reaps death. Interestingly, if his nickname La Parka connotes a death harvest, his name Efraín stands for the opposite, since the Biblical name Ephraim means “fruitful” in Hebrew.

Efraín’s nickname also refers to the particular clothing he wears as something of a uniform both inside and outside the slaughterhouse. The word “la parca” (or “parka,” like the English equivalent) refers as well to a wind- and rain-proof jacket (an *impermeable*), designed to be worn in cold weather, and often with a fur-trimmed (or faux fur-trimmed) hood. Originally derived from the Canadian aboriginals, the Caribou Inuit, the word “parka” literally refers to the skin of a hunted animal from which the garment is made.⁴⁴ There are also some very specific references to La Parka in Mexican pop culture. The masked professional wrestler Adolfo Tapia was the first to adopt this ring name. After

⁴⁴ The word “parka” also has Russian and Finnish meanings, used to describe a poor or pitiful individual.

him, Jesús Huerta has been known as both La Parka Jr. and La Parka II. Working at a slaughterhouse, Efraín embodies his profession and his nickname in his clothes. Killing animals as a profession, he brings death to countless bulls. Although his face is not masked like a professional Mexican wrestler, Efraín is filmed wearing various hooded jackets as he goes in and out of the slaughterhouse. Given that a parka is also a form of animal skin, the constant presence of animal violence in his thoughts suggests an “animal skin” not so much on his body but on his conscience.

An Animal Dream

Efraín carries his profession on his person. After so many years at a slaughterhouse, his job is a form of second skin that he needs to wash off in the shower after the end of each workday. But the fate of so much animal flesh also permeates his dreams. He does not begin to share his life experience until after the viewer has a chance to see the process of labor and the various implements that make possible the daily uniformed mechanization of death. He performs his routines by rote, having acquired them years ago. After the viewer has the chance to see the tools of his trade, Efraín begins his voice-over narration about a disturbing animal dream he once experienced; though he had the dream more than 25 years ago, it remains close to Efraín’s thoughts. At night after his first day working at the slaughterhouse, he dreams that he is back at work and a bull speaks to him. As Efraín recalls the dream, a group of bulls run uniformly down the dark, wet corridor. At one point, their black silhouettes seem to blend into the darkness of the frame. As they advance towards their fate, Efraín states: “The animals were coming in and they kept staring at me, saying, ‘What’s up? Now it’s gonna be your

turn.' It's like they were looking at me as if I were an animal." As Efraín says this, there is a cut to a close-up of a bull's face as he lies on the floor. The image produces a disorienting effect as the camera is positioned on its side at ground level, in such a way that the floor looks like a wall to the right side of the frame. With his mouth closed and pressed to the floor, as if the bull were leaning against the wall, his right eye stares to the left. That the animal speaks in the dream suggests a prophetic or divine figure, a mythical or fabled species. This animal adopts a human voice to make itself be heard and understood. Efraín somehow heeds the bull's call or invitation to death. The viewer can see the animal's face move slowly as another bull lies next to it. As Efraín goes on to say "Those are dreams that one has. They must be for some reason" this close-up is followed by another disturbing close-up of a second bull with a look of terror in his eyes.

One can consider the bull's close-up in the narrated dream sequence in terms of what Gilles Deleuze calls in *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* an "affection-image," an image, such as the close-up, isolated from its particular context and raised to another level. As Deleuze writes, discussing Béla Balázs, "the close-up does not tear away its object from a set of which it would form part, of which it would be a part, but on the contrary it abstracts it from all spatio-temporal co-ordinates, that is to say it raises it to the state of Entity" (95-96). For Deleuze, such a close-up is not an enlargement, but an image extracted from its own time and space. In this sequence of *La Parka*, dominated by the dark movement of the bulls on their way to slaughter, Serra focuses on one particular image—a bull's almost still face—at the moment that Efraín shares his dream of an animal speaking directly to him. That the bull's face indeed moves indicates a conscious animal aware of its own entrapment before it dies. The unusual camera position from

which the viewer observes the bull's face, with the floor resembling a wall, displaces for an instant the physical space of slaughter. The bull's close-up, in Deleuzian terms, becomes an abstract image, deterritorialized from its context. What Serra offers the viewer is an affection-image of a bull's face that signals something radical, pointing elsewhere away from the killing and suggesting the sensation that for Balázs (via Deleuze) the close-up evokes: "Faced with an isolated face, we do not perceive space. Our sensation of space is abolished. A dimension of another order is opened to us" (Deleuze 96).

What otherworldly dimension does the animal's face open to the viewer in *La Parka*? The close-up gestures toward imagining another form of relation between humans and animals, not as a reversal of fate but as a shared mortality—that is, a shared knowledge of death. In a slaughterhouse film such as *La Parka*, in which the human laborers play the executioners to the animal-victims, this dream narrative does not turn the tables but instead places the human on the fateful side of the slaughtered animals. A particular shot of Efraín's white plastic boots reinforces this shared fate. The boots can be seen sideways as if they were dangling and then sliding downwards from a metal wall. They are labeled with his nickname "Parka" in black capital letters. The image of these disembodied boots sliding off the wall parallels the way the bodies of the animals slip and fall down to their deaths.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The visual staging of Efraín's disembodied boots emphasizes the physical labor of animal violence. One can recall here Martin Heidegger's commentary on the boots of Van Gogh's painting, *A Pair of Shoes* (1886). In *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935), Heidegger writes, "From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth" (Horton). Heidegger gestures to the "shoeness" of Van Gogh's boots by declaring that "out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself." Efraín's dangling boots, however, suggest an uneasy rest: a sliding-toward-death.

Efraín might dream about animals for many reasons. He is convinced that these dreams exist for some reason but is unsure about their meaning. The dream seems to imply that such a fate could befall anyone, any kind of animal or species, human or nonhuman, at the hands of someone else. Efraín's dream of a bull about to die also conveys the nature of the fear that Efraín has about death. Although he is surrounded by animals dying every day, Efraín fears the randomness of death, the fact that he can go home one day and simply never come back. He envisions death as someone lying dead on the street—unclaimed and unaccounted for by anyone—similar to the way that these animals meet their unchosen deaths randomly. The dream unsettles Efraín because it points to the possibility that he can die—alone and vulnerable—when he least expects it. The dream perplexes Efraín because it places him alongside the other doomed animals, as if he were one among their species. And he makes an evident effort to resist this equivalence. He maintains a very clear distinction throughout the film between the animals that he slaughters and the humans that he would never kill. Aware that he kills animals for a living, Efraín claims that he would never harm a human being. Near the end of the documentary, Efraín makes clear that his ability to kill is restricted to animals: "I would never kill a human being because it's not an animal." Although Efraín would never kill his fellow human, his words acknowledge the inexorable fact that pain and suffering are not restricted to the human but exist *across* species. At the moment of a bull's death, Efraín recognizes an animal's immense sensitivity to pain as something akin to what a human might feel. Although Efraín would not consider an animal a "person"—a status usually accorded to a human subject—the recognition of an animal's exposure to pain acknowledges the animal nonetheless as a sentient/suffering being. As Efraín also

confesses: “When I kill the animals, it’s like they even cry, I mean, like tears, you kill a bull, and tears come out. I think that a person’s the same, you know? And it’s pain that no one can stand, not the cows or the animals.” Efraín here seems to say that each living being suffers in their own distinctive way.

Efraín reflects on the contrived nature of invincibility when power is wielded over other, more defenseless, beings. He says that “you can be stronger when you’re up here but down there, they’re stronger than you. It’s because they’re in the little box, they’re trapped in there. In the little box, you can kill them and everything.” Efraín here uses the Spanish word “cajoncito” to refer to the small enclosed space—the little box—in which he kills the bulls. When an animal is trapped, the odds are stacked against the victim. That Efraín chooses the word “cajoncito” is particularly significant since the word has several meanings: “cajón” can be a drawer to hold things or a container, like a crate to store things and keep them from moving. But it also refers to a casket or a coffin, a physical space of death. And in Efraín’s case, the little box both restraints and kills the animal. The bull is literally put into its place as it were, trapped and contained, ready for slaughter but also—like inside a drawer—hidden from view. Efraín speaks here from the vantage point of the one “on top” who is stronger simply because he is not trapped down there. His statement suggests that the power to inflict violence depends on perspective. The one on top dominates the one below. Efraín can kill because there is someone weaker who can die. He admits that it is only because of the animal’s placement inside the small box that he can kill it.

Animal Encounters: Levinas, Ethics, The Other

In an epigraph to a book of poems, originally published in 1914 as *Responsibilities and a Play*, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats writes: “In dreams begin responsibilities.” Efraín’s animal dream, at the start of his many years of killing bulls at the slaughterhouse, asks that he take responsibility for his actions. I would like to consider the bull’s declaration of a shared mortality as a form of interspecies speech that interpellates Efraín, or rather, as an ethical encounter that interrupts the film’s narrative sequence. The bulls are, after all, moving toward their death in a darkened hallway. However, following Deleuze, the bull’s disorientating close-up points to a different set of coordinates, an affection-image of shared precarity. That we see the bull’s face on the ground as if he were leaning against the wall suggests the possibility of the animal in an upright position, of getting up, defying gravity—getting out of its little box—and standing up to speak to Efraín at eye level, face to face. One can consider this form of interspecies speech as a gesture of speaking out and acknowledging an awareness of death as an ethical interruption by way of Emmanuel Levinas.

Levinas addresses the idea of being forever in obligation to an Other in a relation that one never chooses but that is instead already always constituted beforehand. In *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Levinas constitutes a relation to the Other via the encounter of what in French he calls *le visage d’Autrui*, “the face of the Other.” For Levinas, this encounter with the Other’s face is but an approximation to that Other since “[T]he face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed” (194). For Levinas, such impossibility—of ever fully grasping the face of the Other—designates an encounter with the Other that is

always in the making and forever incomplete. The choice of verbs to describe this encounter underscores a kinship between physicality and knowledge—apprehension, encompassing, grasping. Considering that the Other’s face cannot ever be absorbed or subsumed by knowledge, both one and the Other remain sovereign unto themselves since “[T]he Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign” (194). The Other does not—cannot—yield to complete understanding.

Efraín’s dream serves as a Levinasian interruption, marking the (animal) Other as a vulnerable being whose mortal call cannot be entirely apprehended. The bull declares a shared vulnerability with Efraín from an imaginary—yet also very real—site of violence. By warning Efraín that he is the next in line to die, that his number will come up as with all other animals who have come before him, the animal acknowledges an ethical awareness of his own death and of Efraín’s. By doing so, the bull in the dream dissolves Efraín’s presumed human singularity by placing him on the same side of every other suffering animal awaiting slaughter. Let us recall here Jeremy Bentham’s famous dictum on animal suffering in Chapter XVII of *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* from 1789: “The question is not Can they reason? or Can they talk? but Can they suffer?” (144). For Bentham, the capacity for suffering—and not rationality, knowledge or language--determines the moral consideration an animal should be afforded. In this regard, Efraín’s animal dream dismantles the arbitrary boundary separating humans from animals. As Jacques Derrida explains in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, the term “animal” has been used as a catch-all phrase to include all animals—but not humans—as a category of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion that constitutes the human as unique (31, 34) and, in this context, as the only animal whose

suffering would matter. In other words, each non-human animal species may have their own name, but they are all rendered as animals whose suffering lacks a moral dimension. Regardless of whether the doomed bull in Efraín's dream stands in for all animals, or even all bulls, one thing stands out: the bull reconfigures Efraín's human mortality not as a precious singularity but as part of a banal progression toward a common fate. And after so many years, this dream continues to haunt Efraín.

Killing Animals, Eating Meat

A discussion of a slaughterhouse film such as *La Parka* would be incomplete if it did not include a reference to George Franju's postwar 1949 French documentary short about the Parisian abattoir, *Blood of the Beasts* (*Le sang des bêtes*.) Serra's documentary may not be a direct homage to Franju's iconic film about the institutionalization of animal violence but its spectral, aesthetic influence is worth recognizing. As Anat Pick states in *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film*, "This is the film to which most if not all subsequent cinematic images of the abattoir (very nearly a minigenre in its own right)...look back. In the history of cinema, *Sang des bêtes* holds a special, iconic, status" (132). *La Parka*, like Franju's film, forms part of this small but powerful collection of slaughterhouse films.⁴⁶ Franju was not the first to film animal slaughter but the first to devote an entire film to this main theme (Pick 132)⁴⁷. For Jeannette Sloniowski, the film is "one of the most emotionally grueling films imaginable"

⁴⁶ For Pick, other films include Frederick Wiseman's *Meat* (1976), Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *Our Daily Bread* (2005) and Richard Linklater's *Fast Food Nation* (2006).

⁴⁷ Alberto Cavalcanti's silent film about Parisian daily life in forty-five minutes, *Rien que les heures* (*Nothing but Time*, 1926) uses documentary footage of animal slaughter (Pick 214).

with the extremely graphic sequences in the abattoir attaining the status of being “among the cruelest in the history of documentary” (159).

Blood of the Beasts, like *La Parka*, engages the viewer obliquely, specifically the meat-eating spectator, by focusing directly on the gruesome rituals of the slaughterhouse in under thirty minutes. What Sloniowski affirms about *Blood* also rings true for *La Parka*: “death is necessary if people are going to eat meat” (175). The Parisian butchers, like Efraín, earn their living and provide for their families by turning animals into profitable meat. Abattoir films pose a challenge for the (possibly carnivorous) viewer to extricate herself from a sense of complicity in the way, and to what ends, these animals are killed. Most likely Efraín suffers from both a physical depletion and a spiritual exhaustion after killing bulls for 25 years, as I explore further in the next section. In this regard, Efraín’s moral predicament—of working in order to provide, of killing in order to live—functions along lines similar to what Raymond Durgnat lays out in regards to Franju’s film: “it’s a reminder that what is inevitable may also be spiritually unendurable, that what is justifiable may be atrocious, that the best we can do will always be an organized butchery” (43).

Whereas *Blood* uses third-person voice-over narrators who talk about the slaughterhouse workers, *La Parka* allows a particular employee to talk candidly about his own life inside and outside the abattoir. In this regard, *La Parka* offers an intimate portrayal of Efraín’s life within this economic machine of death. The title of the film carries his nickname. If the title of Franju’s film (*Blood of the Beasts*) refers to the animals themselves and what these victims must relinquish—their own blood and flesh—

Serra's documentary on Efraín asks the viewer to consider what this particular man has himself relinquished or lost after so many years spent killing animals.

Death at the Table

A bucolic yet disturbing sequence in *La Parka* hints at the spiritual depletion that Efraín has had to endure. This section of the film highlights—to use Durgnat's words about Franju's film—some of that “atrocious justifiability” in what in fact resembles a very organized butchery: a family meal of chicken and rice. After a day of work, Efraín showers and heads home. Ironically, he passes a food stand (most likely a *taquería*) but he does not stop to eat there. The duration of his long journey home is unclear given that when Efraín is on the bus, the view outside the window turns from nighttime into daylight. Serra perhaps emphasizes the monotony of Efraín's routine, traveling back and forth from the slaughterhouse to his home, from night to day, and day to night. In the next scene, while his children play in a park, an overhead shot captures Efraín lying peacefully under the shade of a tree with one of his sons, accompanied by birdsong. The pair enjoy a sunny day looking happy and well-rested. Efraín no longer wears the red hood that he wears to work. Instead, he has a white and light blue hooded jacket, the colors of a sunlit day of white clouds and blue sky. He proceeds to play football with the rest of his family.

Back at home, however, Efraín seems completely detached from his family. Before they sit down to eat, we see him sitting alone in the living room watching something on the television while the rest of his family chats in the kitchen. His wife seems to be looking at him but they do not talk. The family sits down to eat. But, for Efraín, the simple but joyful act of eating with his family conceals an unsettling dread.

Gone from his face is the look of serene calm that the viewer witnessed as he reclined with his son on the grass. The children eat their chicken meal, tearing the meat from the bones. The camera lingers on Efraín's blank stare while flies can be heard buzzing around the kitchen. He is silent, looking at no one in particular, but he does look intently at one of his children's plate while the boy eats. Efraín's mostly empty plate—he seems to have eaten only a little bit of rice—indicates a complete lack appetite. The chicken, like the bulls that Efraín kills for a living, belongs to another species exposed to a terrifying farm factory process. What constitutes a family gathering is also a form of organized ritual at the expense of a dead animal. One could only surmise what Efraín is thinking about as the bones piled on top of the plates are all that remain of the small animal carcasses. Flies can be seen buzzing around since Efraín's family is eating meat from dead animals. The flies indicate a visceral linkage between food and trash given that animal meat can quickly decompose and be thrown out. The director also shoots several images of flies in the slaughterhouse. Early on in the film, flies hover around when a man opens the door of the factory and they are also against the wall and near the tools that the workers use. The omnipresence of flies in *La Parka* marks the places where death has taken place: in the trash, in Efraín's kitchen, and at the slaughterhouse.⁴⁸

The scene perfectly encapsulates the carnivorous dictum at the root of *La Parka*, *Blood of the Beasts*, and, by extension, all other slaughter films that may fall under the abattoir genre mentioned above by Sloniowski: “death is necessary if people are going to eat meat” (175). What also seems to be necessary—or rather inevitable—in *La Parka* is

⁴⁸ One can also see and hear buzzing insects in the previous scene in which the family plays before dinner. But perhaps since they were not around food, these insects could very well be bees and not necessarily flies.

Efraín's gradual desensitization to animal pain and death in order to survive at the slaughterhouse. And by survival, I mean the ability to continue working (that is, killing) so he can provide for his family. Both Efraín's blank stare and his numbed silence reinforce the grim truth that this father's responsibility for his family's livelihood depends entirely on animal slaughter. And he knows this very well as when he confides to the viewer: "Si no mato, mi familia no come." This slaughter constitutes a relationship fraught with violence without the privilege to abstain from it. Killing animals becomes a necessary evil. His family eats precisely because he kills. Efraín lies trapped within an economic cycle of violence in which an animal's death must take place to ensure the family's shelter and nourishment.

The ominous dream that Efraín shares with the viewer early on in *La Parka* haunts this family scene that might otherwise pass as a joyful gathering filled with hungry, energetic children. In his dream, Efraín was hearing the words of a prophetic bull. Silence replaces that animal speech in the kitchen. There is no live animal that speaks to Efraín from the table. Although he sees children eat, he does not talk to them. Except for his family, all the other animals are already dead. The animal dream overshadows this moment in the sense that speech has given way to silence. At the moment of its death, the animal in Efraín's dream was able to deliver a message to Efraín. Efraín's vacant stare suggests that silence is all that is left. There is simply nothing more to say at the dinner table.

In order to live—and for his family to continue living—animals must die and continue to do so. In this regard, Efraín's life straddles an ethical limit of life and death. This limit marks not so much the limit of life or death, kill or be killed, but rather the

limit between living and *not* eating; that is, between living and poverty—of not being able to provide for his family. That Efraín must not only kill but also endure a numbing exposure to animal violence constitutes a dehumanizing experience that never really ends. In this regard, Efraín may be the executioner but he is also something of a sacrificial figure in this machinery of death. He literally brings death to animals so that his own kin—and those of many others—can eat. His blank stare at the dinner table while everyone eats suggests the horrors he has seen so that others can live. In this regard, Efraín also embodies the other nickname he had wanted instead of La Parka, Pinocchio. This whimsical name originates from the Italian children’s novel—Carlo Collodi’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883)—and Disney adaptation, in which a wooden puppet (marionette) becomes human. Efraín’s silence seems to indicate a reversal of the process that Pinocchio undergoes. Efraín becomes quieter, using less speech to communicate. Efraín has also learned to accept his role as a puppet within the wheels of a dehumanizing meat industry. Bound by a father’s commitment to his family, Efraín has been pulled by the palpable “strings” that eat away at his humanity—the human demand for meat that drives profitability while also ensuring the very existence of the slaughterhouses. That Efraín cannot really enjoy eating with his children and looks as if he has lost his voice altogether while he sits at the head of the table—although his labor makes the meal possible—points to the blind puppetry at the center of the human experience.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Efraín’s animal dream also shares interesting parallels with the Pinocchio tale in terms of suffering and animal vengeance. Although the Pinocchio tale has been widely celebrated as a story of heroism—the puppet ultimately becomes a boy—Collodi had originally intended the story to be a tragedy in which his *animal* enemies kill Pinocchio. At the end of the original story, the Fox and The Cat hang him under a tree.

The communal meal does not offer a respite for Efraín before he goes back to work to kill more bulls. This family scene indicates that, even at home, a lingering sense of dread haunts Efraín's face. There are no words, just like there is no appetite for meat, much less enjoyment, with his family. Efraín has resigned himself to a fate that he has already chosen. Later in the film, Efraín confesses that there is no heaven or hell, and "There is no afterlife. Hell is what I live here." Killing animals has become his own form of punishment and, along with it, the loss of the joy of sharing food with his family. The family meal indeed suggests the presence of a community of loved ones, but a community founded on a specific distinction between the human and all other animals that can be killed and consumed. As a glimpse into Efraín's life both in and outside the slaughterhouse, *La Parka* reveals a community that completely excludes the animal, which is relegated to its status as a life to be killed. The bulls in the workplace, like the chicken that the family consumes, do not form part of a (human) community of the living. The second half of this chapter, as I mention below, explores a film in which a human community does not exclude but rather, includes the animal—despite its limited position—within its own membership.

By Way of Humor: *Por las plumas*

The comedy *Por las plumas* (2013) is Ernesto "Neto" Villalobos's feature debut. Born in San José, Costa Rica, Villalobos forms part of a young group of Costa Rican filmmakers who have made various films in the past decade. That group includes Paz Fábrega (*Agua fría de mar*, 2010), Gustavo Fallas (*Puerto Padre*, 2013) and Hernán

Jiménez (*El regreso*, 2012).⁵⁰ Villalobos graduated from the University of Costa Rica with a degree in Sociology and studied Film Direction in Barcelona. His work includes his second feature comedy, *Cascos indomables* (*Helmet Heads*, 2018) and the experimental short, *Jasón* (2011), based on a character that would later appear in *Por las plumas*. He has also made several video shorts and commercials. His documentary *Jamón* (made with the support of the Tribeca Film Institute) is in post-production. Villalobos won the Encuentros Award from the Miami Festival (2013). The prize, which came with a grant of \$10,000, enabled him to complete *Por las plumas*. The film competed in a number of international film festivals and has won several awards including Best Director and Best Film in Guatemala's Festival Icaro (for Central American films) and Best Script in the Santander Film Festival in 2014.

Por las plumas centers on Chalo (Allan Cascante), a lonely security guard who works at a warehouse in San José, and the friendships he forms: with Candy (Sylvia Sossa), who works as a maid but also sells Avon beauty products on the side; with Jasón (Marvin Acosta), a fellow security guard and born-again Christian; and with a friendly teenager Chalo befriends on a bus, Erlan (Erlan Vásquez). Except for Sylvia Sossa, the cast consists of non-professional actors. *Por las plumas* also highlights the friendship between Chalo and a non-human animal, a rooster he buys from the owner of a local store. In fact, all the other friendships revolve around the relationship between Chalo and the rooster, whom Chalo names Rocky.⁵¹ The film recounts a series of comic

⁵⁰ I have not included Ishtar Yasin, the Costa Rican director of *El camino* (2007) discussed in the previous chapter, since she has been making films for a longer period of time, with her first film dating to 2000.

⁵¹ The choice of "Rocky" for the future champion rooster most likely refers to the character of Robert "Rocky" Balboa in John G. Avildsen's American sports drama (*Rocky*, 1976) played by Sylvester Stallone. In the film, Balboa gets a chance to become a heavyweight world champion. If *Rocky* functions as something of a rags to riches narrative, in *Por las plumas*, Chalo hopes Rocky's cockfights will make him a

misadventures as Chalo embraces life as the proud owner of a rooster in the company of new friends. Chalo buys Rocky in hopes of grooming him to become a champion fighter. Near the end of the film, Chalo's friend Jasón accidentally shoots and kills Rocky while celebrating his son's birthday. The film concludes with Chalo and his friends discussing the possibility of Chalo buying another rooster while watching TV together.

A Priceless Bird, an Unusual Pet

The title of the film (*Por las plumas*) refers to the Spanish saying “por las plumas se conoce al pájaro” or “you know the bird by its feathers.” And Chalo knows exactly what bird he wants. The film begins with Chalo's desire to buy a rooster. Chalo haggles with a local store vendor, attempting to convince him to sell his rooster. Chalo is eager to buy it (“véndamelo, póngale precio”), but the owner initially refuses to relinquish the bird. The rooster is deemed invaluable; there is no amount of money that Chalo might offer to convince the owner to sell. Ironically, Chalo rents a room in a small motel located on the second floor of a local restaurant that sells both fried chicken (the sign outside the store reads “POLLO FRITO El Diamante”) and fried fish. Chalo is not looking to buy just any chicken—an animal one could fry and sell as food—but a particular neighborhood rooster, recalling the name of the local eatery, a priceless “diamond.”

Chalo is an amateur rooster connoisseur. Later on, while at a cockfight, Chalo tells his new teenage buddy Erlan that he has bet on a particular rooster because of its feathers: one can tell anything about a bird by inspecting the color and texture of its

lot of money. In *Rocky*, Balboa practices by chasing after chickens. In another scene, he practices by punching carcasses in a meat freezer.

feathers. The clandestine space of the cockfight actually makes the purchase of the rooster possible. Only when Chalo returns to the store vendor and insinuates that he has seen him at a local cockfight is the man forced to sell it. His wife, furious to learn that her husband continues to attend cockfights, is convinced that he takes his mistress along. Because cockfighting is an illegal activity in Costa Rica, it also seems to serve as a social space “under the radar” of the law in which other secretive activities (like cheating on a spouse) take place. The owner, who may have broken two promises—to stop going to cockfights and to stop seeing other women—finally sells the rooster to appease his wife. Thus, although the purchase of the rooster may seem like a negotiation strictly among men, a woman actually ensures the economic transaction.

Another animal—a dog—leads to the first human friendship in the film. Chalo becomes friends with Candy when he retrieves her boss’s dog, Brandy. Chalo’s friendship with Erlan is directly connected to Rocky. When Erlan meets Chalo on the bus, he asks if he can join him at the cockfight. Chalo and Jasón’s work relationship grows into a genuine friendship with the rooster’s presence. Rocky is not so much an unusual prized pet as Chalo’s perpetual companion who, in turn, enriches and widens Chalo’s previously limited social interactions. The film does not give any clues about Chalo’s family. When Chalo’s boss tells him that he can no longer keep Rocky at the warehouse, Chalo cannot find anyone to take care of him. Without friends or family, Chalo leads an isolated life. He rents a room at a small motel, working nights as a security guard and eating by himself. At the warehouse, objects that seem beyond repair—like a boom box with a broken cassette holder and the frame of a fan—fill the room. More specifically, Chalo finds himself surrounded by media equipment that does

not work. Chalo continually adjusts a broken television set that shows mostly static on its screen while the rain comes through a hole in the roof. When Chalo's cellphone rings, people have called by mistake, asking for the previous person who used that number. His social circle consists of a series of faulty transmissions preventing him from connecting with others. The assortment of broken media alienates Chalo's life of simple routines even further. However, his social circle widens—gradually becoming readjusted—as Chalo engages with other humans in the presence of animals.

When Chalo first meets Candy, he is standing on the roof of the warehouse hoping to fix the television set by placing an antenna. Although Candy calls out for help several times, Chalo only acknowledges her when she finally identifies him as “el muchacho de la antena” and even then he is reluctant to help. Even so, Candy and Chalo bond quickly. Later on, Candy helps Chalo change his phone's ringtone so he no longer has to hear the music chosen by the previous owner of the phone. She also teaches him to send text messages. The possibility that these communication channels can be fixed parallels the widening of Chalo's social circle. As he makes friends, he learns—as with his cellphone—to personalize these social connections. By the end of the film, the alienating atmosphere of broken media has given way to a close network of friends who are also family. The last two scenes (one of a funeral and another of the group sitting down to watch TV) emphasize this new familial camaraderie. While gathered at Rocky's funeral, Jasón offers a prayer for the rooster's soul in the afterlife while holding a large cross. He also reflects on all the joy and glory that the animal gave them while he was alive. Jasón's cross embodies the Christian message of a resurrection, but Chalo shares the good news of another form of communication. He tells the group that he has finally

fixed the TV antenna which has a similar shape to Jasón's cross. The film concludes with this new family watching TV together. Seated in a row, the group watch a TV show. The offscreen diegetic narrator from the TV program underscores their familial bond by announcing that the program is "por y para la familia." Rocky's death has indeed brought them together. In one way or another, the rooster's presence in their lives has been *for* and *by* the family.

Chalo's and Rocky's lives become intertwined early in the film in a way that suggests a complicated form of love or affection. The director shoots several images of Chalo and Rocky in motel rooms in a style more associated with filmic love/sex scenes between humans such as the use of high angles. For example, during their first night "together," the camera hovers over a bare-chested Chalo in bed with Rocky, gently stroking him as if he were a pet or more disturbingly, a (human) lover. Rocky crows while being caressed. Chalo's clothes and shoes lie on the floor. Chalo mutters something almost inaudible about Rocky becoming the best fighter. While he closes his eyes, Chalo says that they are also going to make a lot of money, "Vamos a ganar un montón de plata también." As if he were responding to Chalo's lucrative promise, Rocky crows again. For Chalo, Rocky might become not only the best fighter but also the best lover. But as soon as Chalo falls asleep and loosens his hold on Rocky, the rooster flies off.

To mark Rocky's new status as a family member/companion, Chalo arranges to have a portrait taken of them at a photo studio. In this scene, the rooster occupies an intermediary position somewhere between mascot, pet and child. The plush disneyesque animal toys to their right (Minnie Mouse and Donald Duck, but also Snoopy and one large stuffed horse), and the photos of children to their left visually accentuate this

ambivalence. The pair now constitutes a family, but the snapshot also memorializes a rooster and its proud owner. Rocky uneasily embodies what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call the Oedipal pet, a sentimentalized, individuated animal who is given a “petty history, ‘my’ cat, ‘my’ dog” (240-1). In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish among three types of animals: the “Oedipal animal,” the “State” animal of divine myths and the “demonic” animals pertaining to a pack (240-1). For Deleuze and Guattari, the Oedipal animals (the first category) “invite us to regress, draw us into a narcissistic contemplation, and they are the only kind of animal psychoanalysis understands, the better to discover a daddy, mommy, a little brother behind them” (240). However, in this case, the film suggests a lover rather than a family member. The family photo transforms Rocky into an Oedipal pet—the animal becomes Chalo’s rooster, his “cock.” Chalo finds in Rocky an affection that he has most likely not found among his family members, if he has any. The rooster does not really stand in as a surrogate for a child but may well fit into a family romance. Chalo’s community of peers becomes an alternative family at the end of the film. Chalo has become a father figure for Erlan. Late in the film, Erlan wants Chalo to teach him to train roosters but Chalo tells him—animal pun not intended?—that he is still “muy pollito” (too young). Jasón, for his part, has treated Chalo more like a brother than a coworker. As for Candy, although she may not be Chalo’s love interest, she becomes a sister to him and, to a certain extent, a mother figure to Erlan. As for Rocky, he inhabits all of the categories available to him simultaneously: pet, child, family member, companion, lover, prized trophy animal. But since he dies before the film ends, Rocky will not experience the family unit that he has made possible.

Rocky's Animal Interruption

As discussed above, Rocky does not conform to the conventional notion of what constitutes a household pet such as a dog, cat, fish or caged bird. To Chalo's chagrin, over and over again, the rooster refuses to be domesticated. Chalo and Rocky participate in that "odd symbiosis" that according to Jon Griffin Donlon (in his analysis of the culture of cockfighting in Louisiana) "develops between human beings and their 'pets,' perhaps even more so in situations when the animal with the human is not a pet, but not really food—or as in the case of cockfighters, not seen primarily as food" (6-7). A humorous scene in a restaurant accentuates Rocky's ambiguous position as an animal that is neither a pet nor food. After Chalo falls asleep after their first time together in bed, Rocky slips out from under his grasp and walks down the stairs to the restaurant below. Rocky interrupts a family eating fried chicken, landing on a man's lap and forcing them to leave the table. Although comedic, the scene makes the point that Rocky's female counterparts—hens—are routinely killed as farmed chicken and turned into food for human consumption. Rocky's free-flying agency creates a gastronomical commotion. Unlike other eateries which display "fresh" animals ready to be killed and eaten, such as seafood, an urban city restaurant is not the place for a live rooster, which serves meat from other dead animals. Such a scene requires an expulsion. Chalo seems to be kicked out of his rented room and forced to find another place to live. Ironically, Chalo passes by another fried chicken restaurant on his way to another motel, reminding the viewer that the commercialization of animal death can be found everywhere.

In another humorous scene, Chalo and Rocky are filmed once again as lovers, but with some religious symbolism thrown in. Wearing only his underwear, Chalo sits on a

motel bed, stroking Rocky. He tells him that they will find another better place tomorrow. The pair have rented a room from a friendly motel attendant who used to have roosters. While in bed, they hear some neighbors having loud sex. The picture of Christ with a lamb on a wall begins to shake. As the moans from the next room get louder, Rocky feels more and more agitated. He crows—calls out—at the same funny moment that the other lovers do. Although the neighbors are much louder than Rocky, Chalo and the rooster are once again kicked out.

Unlike the dying bull's declaration in Efraín's dream in *La Parka*, which I consider an ethical interruption from the animal's position of imminent death, Rocky's ethical encounter with Chalo arises from a different vantage point. Rocky's random and disruptive crowing announces to the world the full-fledged energy of an animal that cannot be contained. As Matthew Callarco suggests in his reading of Levinas in *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*, an ethical encounter need not always proceed from a site of violence. Callarco writes, "An ethical interruption could proceed from an encounter with the Other's kindness or vitality as much as from his or her destitution or finitude" (70). Unlike the bull in *La Parka*, who speaks from a point of vulnerability, Rocky encounters Chalo in all his affective vitality. Rocky interrupts the routines of Chalo's daily life, and in doing so, alleviates his loneliness. But the rooster also disrupts Chalo's life to the point that the pair is forced to move from place to place. At one point in the film, however, Chalo makes a drastic decision. He impulsively leaves Rocky at a playground, inside the Avon cosmetics box he has converted into a makeshift carrier. Chalo eventually goes back to retrieve him but not immediately. A series of static shots from behind portray Chalo's thought process—

although we cannot see his face—with a disorienting effect. He contemplates a series of isolating urban surroundings: a city street while cars pass by, the twinkling light of a bar across the street, a bus waiting for passengers at a stop. These scenes, which are all blurred out through selective focus, accentuate not only the contours of an alienating city but also the loneliness of a man no longer in the company of his rooster. After watching the bus pull away, Chalo dashes desperately into the night in search of Rocky. The increasing non-diegetic sound of drums or percussion underscores the energy of Chalo's mad rush back to the playground. Chalo's sprinting—as if he were finally feeling alive again—contrasts sharply with the silent inertia of the previous city shots with his back turned to the viewer. Chalo realizes how much Rocky has enriched his life. Rocky has brought a spontaneous energy into his quiet routine. Until then, Chalo was living, so to speak, on automatic mode. The camera lingers on Chalo's blank stares as he takes the bus to work, and answers phone calls that are mostly not meant for him. But with Rocky at his side, Chalo finds not only a companion but also a rooster that can make him money from cockfighting. During their first night at a motel, Chalo had fallen asleep next to Rocky thinking of the fame and money that they could achieve together. And although that lucrative goal seems like wishful thinking, Rocky makes that hope possible. And, perhaps more importantly, a community of friends forms around this particular hope, cheering Chalo and Rocky's success.

A Mobile Precarity

Por las plumas offers an extensive commentary on the distinction between home and housing but also on the forms of solidarity that rise in search of them. The filmmaker

does so by shooting several scenes that complicate the concept of shelter—for example, who gets to live in what, and for how long, and with what means. If Rocky's presence interrupts Chalo's life for the better, the rooster also underscores the precarity of the unstable life they now share. Rocky's temporary physical presence in social spaces destined primarily for human animals requires Chalo's permanent expulsion from places that offer shelter such as the motel in which he rents a room. Their union also signals the possibility of future rejections from other establishments that accept humans but not other animals, much less a rooster. He may now lead a less lonely life with Rocky at his side, but Chalo is mostly unwelcome for keeping an animal in a city that ultimately has no legitimate place for it. This double form of expulsion-rejection underscores a vulnerable nomadic situation in which the possibility of shelter is precarious at best.

A scene halfway through the film highlights an ambulatory existence that does not guarantee proper housing. Fed up with Rocky living in the warehouse—which is after all, a workplace—Chalo's manager tells him that he can no longer keep the rooster there. Unfortunately, no one else can take care of him. Chalo asks Candy but she cannot take Rocky in because her boss is sick at home. The sequence that follows shows Chalo walking through the streets of San José with Rocky inside his cardboard Avon box. The sequence can be divided into four parts showing four different spaces: a residential street with small houses, a street where a garbage truck passes, a local cemetery, and ultimately a motel that does not allow animals. These scenes illustrate the idea that shelter in *Por las plumas* relies on proper employment. Chalo's modest job as a security guard also implies that if he were to lose it both Chalo and Rocky could be one step closer to being homeless.

In the first part of the sequence, the image of uniform rowhouses underscores an architecture of conformity and Chalo's inability to fit within the social structures set in place around him that do not provide a place for an animal such as a rooster. Chalo's absent-minded wandering through various neighborhoods of San José reflects his loneliness and, by extension, his hopelessness at providing a real home for Rocky. Chalo walks down the sidewalk of a residential street carrying the box that holds Rocky. As he walks from the left side of the frame to the right, Chalo passes by a rowhouse consisting of small, uniform attached dwellings. Not only is each of them identical in size and shape to the next, but the style and color of the windows match the doors. All the windows and doors are painted green and brown. The square and rectangular frames of the windows visually align with the geometrical structure of the doors, also consisting of squares and rectangles. Furthermore, the horizontal yellow wooden siding contrasts not only with the horizontal lines of the doors and windows but also with the aluminum ridges of the roof. That each house looks almost identical to its neighbor emphasizes a uniformity accentuated by the matching grid-like pattern of the horizontal and vertical lines. The houses are modest dwellings that illustrate not a perfectly symmetrical construction but rather a crooked parallelism. The windows and door frames slant upward and downward in relation to the street. The uniformity of the houses reminds the viewer of Chalo's predicament, the need for finding a home for the singular animal kept inside another form of cardboard grid, the Avon box.

The rooster's cardboard home (the square Avon box) is not very different than the houses that they pass by on the street, houses that resemble other rectangular structures, other forms of domestic shelter, other "boxes" to live in. These boxes also suggest the

loneliness of urban life in a small capital city like San José. Although *Por las plumas* focuses on working-class characters, the director's particular filming of architectural spaces shows a preoccupation with social stratification. For instance, the house in which Candy works contrasts sharply from the way the row house boxes are filmed as if lumped together. In the scenes in which Chalo talks to Candy during her breaks outside her boss's home, the brick house takes up the entire immobile frame with its manicured shrubbery, stone walls and metal railings. Not a single row house is shot in this manner. In Chalo's walking sequence, the street is empty and quiet, almost as if it were abandoned. All the doors are closed tightly and every window is shut. The only other person in the shot is a woman sitting alone on the curb on the right side of the frame. Chalo passes her without any kind of acknowledgement or greeting, as if they were invisible to each other.

Chalo, still carrying the Avon box, looks for help but cannot find it. The Avon box underscores his itinerancy since that particular cosmetics firm relies on a door-to-door and word of mouth strategy, as the Avon employee moves from one client to the next in a neighborhood. Similarly, Chalo also moves Rocky, in his Avon box-cum-makeshift home, from one place to the next. In the same way that Rocky cannot fit into a caged domesticity, Chalo does not really "fit" into the forms of social membership associated with a particular line of work or with organized religion, as well as with residence in a specific neighborhood. For example, despite Candy's insistence that he get into the Avon business, Chalo has no interest in becoming a traveling salesman who could sell products to others. If anything, Chalo is more of a buyer than a seller—recall the clever way he managed the rooster's purchase from the store vendor at the beginning of the film.

Religion, like door-to-door salesmanship, is also not for Chalo. In a later scene, while Chalo walks through Jasón's neighborhood trying to find his house, he stumbles into an Evangelical Protestant church in the middle of a religious service. As the congregation sings and claps in worship, Chalo wanders around them with a blank stare. Although he could ask any of the several members dressed in the same pink T-shirt (a possible uniform for a church event) for directions, he stays silent. For Chalo, neither new job opportunities nor religion offer any alluring promises of community. Despite Jasón's Evangelical proselytism, he will not make Chalo a Christian. Chalo respects Jasón's religious conviction just as he politely listens to Candy's savvy business dealings but neither is worth pursuing. Both forms of solidarity come up short.

The other parts of the ambulatory sequence also underscore the feeling of going from one social space to the next. As Chalo walks in the middle of a paved street and a low-angle shot shows him lost in the horizon and visually trapped between power lines, a garbage truck drives by on the left side of the frame. The truck's rectangular shape and the square pattern on the back of the garbage receptacle indicate the removal of trash, collected and "squared" away from public view. In the third shot, Chalo passes by a local cemetery, still carrying the Avon box. Chalo observes the white above-ground burial structures without stopping. The small mausoleums, situated alongside each other uniformly along an incline, against the backdrop of grey clouds and an incoming storm evoke another form of stillness: the silence of the grave. The final stop for the urban dwellers that are buried there, they are boxes for human remains. Reduplicating the visual scheme of this sequence, each mausoleum is adorned with rows of square white tiles. Moreover, the geometrical uniformity is accentuated by the rectangular components of

the metal fencing that separates the plots from the passersby. Chalo ends up asking for shelter in what seems to be the caretaker's building on the cemetery grounds. But the caretaker will not allow it unless Rocky stays outside. The building with its large white-bricked wall resembles the mausoleums with their squared tiles from the previous shot. The visual motif of squareness permeates the entire film in the form of squares, tiles, boxes, rows, highlighting Chalo's squared life, *una vida cuadrada*.

The long walking sequence indicates urban captivity—the world offers only a series of boxes for Chalo (and Rocky). The world they inhabit consists of different boxes to work in, to worship in, and to sleep in—in life and possibly in an afterlife—but they are all ultimately cages. Physical objects and structures such as the Avon box, the uniform rowhouses and the city cemetery underscore this sense of entrapment. Chalo must work to earn a living, but he can choose to resist other types of social belonging that are foreign and unappealing to him. *Por las plumas* displays the suffocating consequences of a squared life—a life spent in boxes—reminding us of the boxed-in world that Efraín endures in *La Parka*. Efraín had referred to the small space in which he kills the bulls in the slaughterhouse as “cajoncitos,” which are also another form of box or cage. For Efraín, Hell did not mean punishment after death but what he lived through every day, putting an animal in an enclosed space before killing it. *Por las plumas*, like *La Parka*, offers a similar commentary on animal violence but around other types of little boxes—the cage and the pit where cockfights take place.

The Cockfight's Deep Play

As the walking sequence indicates, the city does not offer Rocky any space other than the cage or the pit of the cockfight, which is also a welcoming social space for Chalo—not surprising given that *Por las plumas* is about a man who tries his best to train a rooster to become a fighter. The cockfight is considered one of the oldest sports in human history, at least 2500 years old, originating in southeast Asia. The practice is believed to have spread to ancient Iran, India and China and from there to classical Greece and Rome and on to Western Europe and the “New World” Caribbean (Dundes 242). Put simply, “two equally-matched” roosters are raised exclusively for competition and fight to the death with metal spurs in a round pit (Dundes vii). These particular roosters are called “gamecocks” in English and “gallos de pelea” in Spanish. In *The Chicken Book*, Page Smith and Charles Daniel suggest that cockfighting might be “the oldest sport known to man” (quoted in Donlon 19); the cockfight has both a long history and a wide geographic extension. Most likely, the practice of fighting roosters coincided with the domestication of chickens, as early as 3000 B.C. The cock, like other animals, holds a long and revered place in ancient civilizations. The Babylonians, Syrians and Greeks worshipped the bird and the Roman Empire considered it “the symbol of courage in battle” (McCaghy and Neal 67).

As a bloodsport similar to the bullfight, the cockfight is inextricably linked to issues of ethics and legality as animal cruelty. The sport is now illegal in all 50 states of the United States. Louisiana—in which cockfighting had a prominent place because of its Cajun South heritage—was the last state to ban the practice in 2007. Throughout Latin America, laws regarding cockfighting vary widely. For example, both the Dominican

Republic and Peru allow the practice while Mexico City forbids the practice but tolerates it throughout other Mexican states.⁵² In Costa Rica, the country in which *Por las plumas* takes place, the cockfight has been illegal since 1922. However, despite an almost century-old ban, cockfighting continues to be popular in towns and rural areas as well as in the outskirts of San José. According to the National Animal Health Service (SENASA), every year Costa Rican police conduct about a dozen raids on clandestine gatherings, and the country has a network of cockfighting zones including the city of Cartago to the east of the capital, Alajuela to the northwest, San Carlos at the Northern Zone and the region of Puntarenas in the Central Pacific (Levin). In *Por las plumas*, Chalo travels some distance to participate in the cockfights. These clandestine activities most likely occur in the outskirts of the capital since he has to take at least a bus to get there.

A 2012 editorial in the Costa Rican newspaper *La Nación* characterized cockfighting as “una práctica minoritaria y clandestina” that nonetheless continues. In that year, La Asociación Nacional de Criadores de Gallos proposed the legalization of the practice in the country. The organization argued that the Bible condones it, and also offered to donate a portion of its winnings to various charitable associations (“Prohibición de las galleras”). The complex issue of immigration in Costa Rica also aligns itself with the ethical and moral dilemmas of cockfighting. In many cases, the roosters are smuggled illegally from countries such as Nicaragua, Panama and the Dominican Republic. An argument supporting prohibition contends that such “illegal” roosters, who are always euthanized after a raid, may carry diseases and contaminate

⁵² Although now legal in Cuba, the act of gambling on matches has been illegal since the Cuban Revolution (1959).

national poultry (Levin). Roosters form part of the clandestine circuit of animal trafficking within Central America not so much as an endangered species but as illegal aliens with the potential to contaminate the national (animal) politic. The age-old xenophobic fear of foreign immigrants endangering the citizens of a country—still quite potent across the world—extends here to non-human species. The mercy killings of smuggled roosters who have crossed the border into Costa Rica suggest a disturbing nexus between animal welfare, speciecism and (animal) eugenics. The birds are killed not only because they are live contraband but because they are roosters and, thus, unwanted and unwelcomed. In short, the weight of law, inscribed on their animal bodies, seals their fate.

Cockfighting is tied to cultural pride and national feelings in regions beyond Latin America as well. Clifford Geertz's seminal study, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (1972), based on his fieldwork in Indonesia in the 1950s, arguably still stands as the most significant text on the practice of the cockfight. Now regarded as a classic piece of anthropology, Geertz's essay marks the "the turning point" in cockfight scholarship (Dundes 247). As an anthropologist, Geertz employs the strategy of thick description to read the cockfight as a cultural text from which he derives his ethnographic commentary on Balinese social structures. For Geertz, the cockfight functions as a social barometer, allowing the participants to identify with particular groups. Geertz frames this in terms of a discovery: "In the cockfight, then, the Balinese forms and discovers his temperament and his society's temper at the same time. Or, more exactly, he forms and discovers a particular face of them" (Dundes 123). Geertz describes this encounter as a form of faciality—participants come "face to face" with their previously unacknowledged

social temperament. The cockpit, becomes as it were, the place for an ethical reckoning, where men play out and reconcile their social standing by participating in animal violence.

Vincent Crapanzo argues that, despite Geertz's rich interpretive analysis of the Balinese cockfights, it remains a product of his own imposed subjectivity, with little empirical evidence to support it. Unconvinced by his interpretation, Crapanzo faults Geertz for offering "no understanding of the native from the native's point of view" (quoted in Dundes 247). Nonetheless, Geertz acknowledges that the cockfight is but a particular social practice among many for the Balinese and not their most defining feature. What is worth pointing out is that, for Geertz, at the root of such a spectacle, lies a crucial social structure of affect: "its use of emotion for cognitive ends" would go unrecognized if it were regarded as a mere pastime or ritual (Dundes 121). As Geertz writes, "What the cockfight says it says in a vocabulary of sentiment—the thrill of risk, the despair of loss, the pleasure of triumph. Yet what it says is not merely that risk is exciting, loss depressing, or triumph gratifying, banal tautologies of affect, but that it is of these emotions, thus exemplified, that society is built and individuals put together" (Dundes 121). Thus, argues Geertz, a lexicon of feeling constitutes the social make-up of a member within a group.

Following Geertz, the spectacle of the cockfights in *Por las plumas* functions as a visual text in which issues of masculinity are "deeply played" out, celebrated and negotiated through a cultural form of violence. Much scholarship on the subject supports this view. Ondina Fachel Leal, one of the few female scholars to write about the sport, envisions cockfighting as creating a homosocial and masculine space "where men,

through their cocks, dispute, win, lose, and reinforce certain attributes chosen as male essence” (quoted in Dundes 249). Alan Dundes goes as far as to suggest that cockfighting embodies sex and power as a “a thinly disguised symbolic homoerotic masturbatory phallic duel” where the virile winner triumphs over a humiliated, castrated and feminized loser (249). Despite the appeal of this psychoanalytic reading, I am not as much interested in the erotic affirmations of masculinity but rather in the disruption of the boundaries between the human and animal that inheres in this animal violence, which makes visible a precarious animality within the human. As in *La Parka, Por las plumas* foregrounds a dream sequence central to its narrative structure. Chalo, like Efraín, also dreams of a precarious animal scenario played out through violence.

An Avian Nightmare

“Dreams recover what the world forgets.”—James Hillman, “Going Bugs”

The epigraph above is drawn from the work of Jungian analyst James Hillman, a figure in archetypal psychology. In his 1983 essay “Going Bugs,” Hillman contemplates the “bugs” of human souls. Recalling Hillman, if dreams recover something lost, what has the world forgotten? In the film, a brief but significant dream sequence—which only lasts for 30 disorienting seconds—highlights a structure of violence running across species, traversing both humans and other animals.

After the fade in from a black screen, the nightmare begins with a point of view shot from inside an individual chicken cage forming part of a larger coop. A flashlight serves as the only source of light in the room. As the flashlight moves from right to left from the perspective of the chicken possibly inside the cage, one can see a dark square

with wire and two plastic feeders. The POV shot from inside the cage gives the impression that the view is not looking in but looking out from the cage to the coop. The flashlight continues to move, illuminating a uniform row of other empty wooden cages with plastic feeders. These cages look as if they were stacked on top of each other like wooden crates. There are some other successive shots that are taken from inside the coop while others are from the outside perhaps from the point of view of the person—presumably human but never seen—holding the flashlight. A low angle close-up reveals an imposing rooster in chiaroscuro staring straight at the camera. The light from the same flashlight hits the rooster's body from one side to the next. Given that the rooster lies in an enclosed rectangular space, a reverse shot indicates that the previous shot conveyed the rooster's point of view; the rooster had been staring out into the other cages from his own cage. The blurred background accentuates the rooster's features: the sharp beak, tiny eyes, thin legs, golden brown feathers and the red and black crest on top of his head and the folds of wattle under his chin. The rooster's screeching crows produces a grating sound. The animal's piercing voice echoes and blends into the non-diegetic music consisting of an increasing ominously beat. Various shots of other roosters looking toward the flash light follow, including shots of particular body parts such as the flapping of wings, feathers rustling and their thin, long legs moving around. A particular external shot of the empty cages gives the impression that either all of the roosters have escaped or there were none to begin with. Rocky could be any of them. The musical beat accelerates as the shot length begins to shorten and the flashlight passes back and forth across the room more quickly. The scene transforms into what seems to be a cockfight between two roosters, fighting to their death with razors tied to their legs in an enclosed

makeshift pit. No human spectators are present, as if the fight were being carried out solely between two animals in a dark room. As the camera appears to lunge forward, it cuts to Chalo waking up in alarm at the place he works. Finding the Avon box beside him empty, he runs outside into the rainy night. He goes back in carrying a flashlight and makes clucking sounds hoping to retrieve Rocky. He finds him in a corner surrounded by pieces of discarded objects.

The nightmare alludes to both the horrific violence of factory farming and the deadly spectacle of a cockfight. The dark room in which the dream occurs resembles both a farm's chicken coop and an abandoned facility that could double as the site where clandestine cockfights take place. Since Chalo is a security guard, we can associate him with the point of view of the person that carries the flashlight in the dream. There are after all several images of Chalo walking around the premises with a flashlight throughout the film and that is exactly what he is doing when he finds Rocky. But the dream also situates Chalo within the chicken's point of view. The empty cages suggest the fate of chickens who were caged and then killed. Chalo's dream illustrates the terror of a caged animal's perspective as if Chalo, like Rocky, were the victim trapped inside. This "animal gaze" in the dream is the only time in which the film takes an animal's perspective. This animal perspective, like that of the bull that speaks to Efraín in a dream in *La Parka*, serves as a rupture in the narrative, offering an alternative view to the story being told. In this regard, the avian dream also serves as a visual ethical interruption that renders visible the fact that the affective bond Chalo forms with Rocky remains grounded in a relationship of violence, notwithstanding the man's care of the bird. After all, Chalo buys Rocky so he can kill other roosters and, in doing so, reap a large profit. The bird

dream renders tangible the subjugation of other animals despite Chalo's caring intentions. The dream horrifies Chalo because it abruptly plunges him into the traumatized life of a caged animal, as if *he* were that animal. At this moment in the film, the parallels between Chalo and Rocky's lives—vulnerable, precarious, solitary—converge. The disorienting use of perspective in the dream gestures toward a terrifying animality at the edge of human consciousness. The dream suggests several frightening possibilities: Chalo may be dreaming that he is Rocky; Chalo might be another rooster trapped in a cockfight; or in a reversal of his profession as a security guard, Chalo might be a bird locked up in a cage by another watchman.

Recalling again Callarco's view that an ethical encounter need not be rooted in violence, that "sometimes an ethical response might involve simply leaving the Other alone, or perhaps joining with the Other in celebration or protest," this animal dream interrupts the film's narrative as both celebration *and* protest (70). That is, the dream would seem to celebrate the maddening, spectacular force of a cockfight but it actually protests the violence that makes it possible. The nightmare is utterly ambiguous in terms of who participates in this ritual of murder. The cockfight in this dream scenario, unlike other cockfight scenes in the film, lacks the characteristics of human camaraderie. That is, no one is cheering for the victor or booing the opponent. The nightmare strips down the cockfight to a gruesome essence of spectacle—one animal trained to kill another. This brief dream diverges stylistically from the rest of the film, which mostly consists of static long takes of people standing or sitting together, sometimes staring at the camera as if they were being interrogated or sitting for a portrait.

Animal Art Objects

The scene that precedes the nightmare exemplifies this style, and serves as contrast to the stylistic choices in the nightmare. In this scene, which takes place outside the factory, Chalo is talking to Jasón, his *mae*.⁵³ Both are staring at an “art” piece—in their Costa Rican slang, they use the word *vara* which means “the thing”—made of dried-up tree branches and tangled-up pieces of yarn and string. Jasón thinks the piece has something to do with the structure of a prehistoric animal like a dinosaur that may have served as inspiration for the artist. Chalo, however, thinks it looks more like an altar of a temple or a church and that it may serve as a (subliminal) message of some sort. That the artwork may have something to convey is significant since Chalo’s horrifying dream in the following sequence also functions as something of a message for him, albeit unconsciously. Chalo, after all, dreams not only about empty bird cages but also about other birds caged elsewhere and made to fight with each other.

While gazing at the artwork, with their backs turned to the viewer, the duo resembles a pair of observers at an outdoor art gallery or museum, speculating fantastically about what the piece might be or mean. The scene signals visual mastery, as if the piece has been laid out in front of them so they can observe it. This power to behold something beautiful—to contemplate its existence while being unable to divine its meaning—could be considered in terms of what Immanuel Kant calls “purposiveness without purpose” in his aesthetic theory of beauty in *Critique of Judgment*. According to Kant, through the act of aesthetic judgement we can appreciate an object but cannot properly subsume it within a concept; thus, a beautiful object can suggest a purposiveness

⁵³ “Mae” is Costa Rican slang for dude, buddy, comrade, etc. and can be used for either gender.

but lacks a purpose (64-65). For Stuart Dalton, “What differentiates the purposiveness associated with an aesthetic judgement from other forms of purposiveness is the fact that its reflective moment never arrives at a concept” (7). Thus, the beautiful object transcends comprehension. Interestingly, the artwork resembles an animal, more specifically the head of a bird with a long beak, as if it were reclining on the ground. The artwork could also stand in for a large bird cage (an aviary) or a bird’s nest since it attracts birds and provides something of a home for them. The scene evokes pastoral tranquility; some birds can be heard chirping while the pair shares their thoughts, surrounded by a lush greenery of trees and grass. In a way, the wooden structure is for and *about* the birds. As Jasón comments, the mysterious piece is somehow just there at the service of the little birds, “sirviendo como para los pajarillos.” That the art piece might stand for something about animals—an animal purposiveness whether provided for by humans or not—contrasts with the actual space of the cockfight, which revolves around a very specific purpose. Reduced to its basic terms, the cockfight relies on a violent competition between two animals and depends on the inevitable death of one of them.

An episode involving a piñata marks another social celebration around a bird figure. Chalo and his friends attend the birthday of Jasón’s son. Just after Jasón accidentally kills the rooster, Candy, unaware of the tragic occurrence, announces happily that the piñata has arrived. The piñata, in the shape of a chicken (or rooster), resembles the art piece discussed above. As a festive component of Latin American birthdays for children, piñatas are made to be destroyed in a celebratory way. If the mysterious art piece that Chalo and Jasón contemplate seems to exist for the pleasure of the birds, the

animal piñata must be beaten down for the amusement of children. In this case, the rooster piñata that Candy promises to take to the party loses all of its celebratory power for the adult group of friends since Rocky gets shot right before she arrives. Instead of foreshadowing Rocky's death, the rooster piñata becomes a figurative object of animal death after the fact, instantly reminding everyone of the sudden real death of the animal.

The piñata scene illustrates another form of animal violence where the inanimate figure stands in for an actual victim or scapegoat. In this regard, the animal piñata embodies a paradoxical site of celebration and brutality.⁵⁴ The children learn to both commemorate and take part in violence at an early age. And, as adults, they pass on this tradition of ritualized "killing" to their own children who, in turn, continue the practice. The event presents a challenge and a reward: to enjoy sweets and other treats, the participants must destroy the piñata. The person who wins is the one who destroys the piñata, allowing for the bounty to be distributed among others. Joy and the desire to destroy are inextricably linked in this ritual, to the extent that they are indistinguishable from each other. This imbrication of joy and violence is at play both in the piñata scene and its counterpart, the cockfight. But given that real animals are killed in the cockfight, the piñata would seem to represent—or is at least made to look like—a less violent, more innocent form of communal gathering. But Rocky's death, right before Candy delivers the piñata, interrupts the festivities. A real animal death has taken the fun out of destroying the piñata. The celebration of a fake bird, instead of serving as an ecstatic point in the birthday party, dissolves into an anticlimax. Nonetheless, both social rituals

⁵⁴ The practice itself has a long history most likely originating with the Chinese, passing into Europe in the 14th century and into the Western hemisphere with the Spanish missionaries. Although the Spanish used the piñata as a tool to attract converts, indigenous groups in Mexico already had their own similar traditions. The word piñata comes from the Italian word *pignatta* which refers to a "fragile pot" (Devlin).

in *Por las plumas* suggest a dangerous ethical blind spot, a normalization of public violence across all ages. And, in doing so, this ritual also points to the animalization of a human community in which its members are permitted to access more primeval urges of destruction and joy.

Humor: Violence, Denial, Animality

Violence is inextricably linked to Rocky in *Por las plumas*. Chalo buys Rocky with the hope that he will become a champion fighter in the pit. Thus, his success will depend on the death of other animals. In one episode halfway through the film, Chalo is awoken from his nap at the warehouse by the sound of two men arguing. While Jasón holds Rocky, their boss tells him to put the rooster down as he points a gun. When Jasón refuses, the boss accidentally shoots Jasón, startled by Chalo who comes running in. This scene with guns and bullets, unlike the one with the piñata discussed above, foreshadows Rocky's untimely death. Jasón shoots Rocky with his gun while he practices his skills with Chalo. Startled by the commotion of a crowd when Erlan says that the rooster has escaped, Jasón shoots Rocky by mistake. Rocky serves at least a two-fold purpose in the film. One, the rooster encourages social cohesion. Chalo's friends come to form a community precisely because of the animal. And second, Rocky's presence provokes humans to act violently, threatening the unity of the group. In this way, Rocky's animality serves as both a catalyst and a cipher for human violence. The bird is celebrated by the group but unwelcomed by many others who would prefer to do away with him. Rocky is a catalyst in the sense that his mere existence in public areas seems to warrant dangerous expulsion. But Rocky also serves as a cipher in the sense that he stands in as

an animal placeholder for human violence, that is, as an excuse for humans to act violently. In short, Rocky reveals the violent side of human character that often goes disavowed and unrecognized.

Rocky becomes, as it were, also the messenger of his own death in *Por las plumas*. His role in the film only seems to exacerbate an already impending violence that is ready to explode with the sound of a gun at the sight of a rooster. If the figure of the rooster holds a special mythical place in classical Antiquity, the bird also plays an important role in Christianity. The symbolic equivalence of a rooster with a prophetic announcement has a Biblical origin to which the film makes reference. In one scene, Jasón recounts for Chalo the story of Peter's three denials of Jesus from the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) of the New Testament. During the Last Supper, Jesus predicts that his disciple Peter will deny knowing him three times before the rooster has crowed the next morning.⁵⁵ When they arrest Jesus, Peter betrays him three times. And, as Jesus predicted, the rooster crows after Peter's third betrayal. In this Biblical story, the rooster plays the herald of ill news, sealing the prophecy as true with his morning call. If the Biblical rooster announces betrayal, Rocky's call in *Por las plumas* serves a similar purpose, albeit in a dramatic and humorous fashion simultaneously. The bird's call proclaims its presence to others, provoking an alarming recognition while startling others: people eating at a restaurant, a couple having sex in the next room, children at a birthday party.

⁵⁵ There are several images of Christian symbolism throughout the film. A prior section mentioned the painting of Christ hanging in Chalo's motel room. In another scene, the iconic painting of Jesus's Last Supper with his twelve disciples hangs on the backwall of the room where Chalo and Jasón take their certification exam.

Recalling the Biblical story of betrayal, what the figure of Rocky announces in *Por las plumas* is the denial of the animal within the human, as it pokes fun at the delusion that humans are not animals. The use of humor allows the film to straddle the artifice of the human-animal divide. In a grim film such as *La Parka*, no humor alleviates the inexorable truth behind animal consumption, namely, that humans are complicit in the slaughter of countless animals. However, in a comedy like *Por las plumas*, animal violence can be disavowed with a matter-of-fact hilarity. People are shocked, surprised and even shot in funny situations, but only an animal—the rooster—actually dies in the film. Animal violence is simply disregarded. Chalo trains Rocky to be a prized fighter without having to consider the animal’s safety. Rocky dies and the group give him a dignified burial but he will be replaced with another rooster for Chalo to train. A cycle of violence, for another animal—alongside human disavowal—will begin.

That human disavowal is carried out in a comical way in *Por las plumas* suggests a crucial relation between humor and human-animal relations in the film. For Simon Critchley, humor lies at the core of a fundamental limit of what constitutes the human. As Critchley argues in *On Humor*, if humor is something characteristically human, then “it also, curiously, marks the limit of the human. Or, better, humor explores what it means to be human by moving back and forth across the frontier that separates humanity from animality, thereby making it unstable” (29). In this light, humor marks a tenuous and porous frontier where the human becomes a comical animal. Critchley characterizes the process of humans laughing, and laughing at themselves, as “a form of *liberation* or *elevation* that expresses something essential” to what the German philosopher and sociologist Helmuth Plessner defined as “the humanity of the human” (italics in original,

9). Critchley's concept of humor acknowledges the anthropocentric nature of humor while also recognizing the animal within the human. Critchley argues that what makes us laugh is the "reduction of the human to the animal or the elevation of the animal to the human" by way of literary texts with comic genres described in animalistic terms. For instance, "cock and bull" stories—such as Laurence Sterne's novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759)—and "shaggy dog" stories like the grandfather's old ram in Mark Twain's travel narrative, *Roughing It* (1872) (29). Bestiality in literature, Critchley reminds us, is prominent across Western literature as early as Aesop's *Fables* in ancient Greece and Chaucer's Chanticleer—another prophetic rooster—in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* from the 1390s. That humans find something of themselves within animal characters in literary texts—or that these animal figures seem to act more human—illustrates a simultaneous process of recognition and misidentification that, for Critchley, defines the human.

In this regard, humor serves a double function in a comedic film such as *Por las plumas* since humor encourages human identification with animals at the same time that the characters misrecognize themselves in the animals. Several of Chalo's mishaps with Rocky consist of animal humor. Chalo's wholehearted attempt at training Rocky falls under this category. In one scene at a soccer field, Chalo tussles with Rocky around his legs like a football and chases after him when Rocky refuses to participate. Chalo, more than Rocky, looks like a foolish bird running around a field before he falls to the ground. The way Rocky shocks, disrupts and interrupts people in restaurants—as if he wants to eat too!—and in motel rooms—he also gets excited when hearing people have sex!—are genuinely funny. At the same time, not all of the film's humor relies on animals. Jasón's

religious fervor is both genuine and iconoclastic as when he feels remorse after tearing a page from the Bible for lack of toilet paper in an outhouse. He conveys his religious feeling without asking for converts. Jasón's religious idiosyncrasies may explain why Chalo does not find his friend's conviction, which sometimes borders on fanaticism, offensive. These humorous situations provide humans the possibility of not taking themselves too seriously, allowing them to laugh at themselves with a devil-may-care attitude similar to the one that characterizes Rocky precisely because he is a nonhuman animal.

Jasón may be the best example in the film of the self-effacing comical human-animal that laughs at himself, embodying what for Critchley is true humor, a humor that "does not wound a specific victim and always contains self-mockery. The object of laughter is the subject who laughs" (14). Earning a living humbly and modestly while caring for several children, Jasón offers his friendship generously. Jasón delivers the final and funny line about a possible name for a new rooster. As the camera lingers on their four faces—the group watching the screen as the viewer watches them—Jasón faintly smiles. According to Critchley, the smile is the highest form of humor, revealing its essence. As Critchley states, the smile is "the *risus purus*" which "does not bring unhappiness, but rather elevation and liberation, the lucidity of consolation" (italics in original, 111). Consolation here suggests not only the comfort of being disappointed with our imperfection, but also the acceptance that we are animals that laugh, laugh with each other, and are also laughed at.

Jasón's smile leave us with the possibility that humor may provide another way of relating between humans and animals that does not deny or hide violence, but makes

more apparent both the misery and the joy that binds humans with other animals. The birthday party, which celebrates a piñata but then mourns Rocky's death, exemplifies this double feeling. This bond does not deny the terror of the slaughterhouse of *La Parka*, occlude the human hand in the machine of murder, or offer a release from the burden of complicity. Humor in *Por las plumas* gestures toward both violence and laughter or, more precisely, laughter alongside animal violence. Humor provides a comic layer to the grim truth that animals die all the time in the presence of humans by also suggesting that humans are probably the most foolish of animals. In that regard, Chalo is the most foolish—and the most stubborn—protagonist of this animal tale since he tries so hard to turn Rocky into something that he is not.

An Open Community of Animals

In whichever future way humans might make peace with their animal selves, *Por las plumas* reveals a human nature inextricably linked to animal violence. Efraín from *La Parka* will most likely continue to slaughter bulls until he is unable to work. Chalo in *Por las plumas* might buy another rooster who also gets killed in the pit, a second bird they might also have to bury. In one early scene at his work, Chalo unsuccessfully tries to tune into a TV show in which two characters discuss the impossibility of rebirth. A pair of male voices—possibly action figures in an animated show—say that they will not come back to be reborn. Chalo moves the antenna around and only static appears on the screen. While eating a chicken leg, Chalo flips the channels but seems to return to that same show since one of the male voices heard previously indicates that “nacimos con un instinto asesino y que no es fácil de apagar y encender como un armario.” The choice of

TV show reinforces an underlying premise of *Por las plumas*, that is, the animalistic urge of humans to fight one another while also making other animals kill each other. The male voice from the TV screen talks about a deadly instinct that cannot be “turned on and off” as if it were some kind of cabinet, an *armario*. The choice of “armario” is doubly appropriate if we recall in *La Parka* the way Efraín discussed killing bulls in a “cajoncito.” In a cockfight, the roosters fight and die in the confines of a pit, not unlike the claustrophobic way the bulls are trapped before getting killed in the slaughterhouse. Therefore, this inherent urge to kill is channeled in *Por las plumas* through the spectacle of the cockfight. Instead of men killing each other, roosters stand in for them and carry out that violence.

Let us recall James Hillman’s elegant quote about how dreams recover what the world forgets. Both films suggest—if at least in dreams—how to imagine another form of communal relation with our fellow animals despite ultimate human failures and inextricable violence toward them. Giorgio Agamben offers us a glimpse into a future relation with animals that might finally dismantle the arbitrary divide between humans and other animals. An enigmatic section of Agamben’s *The Open* encapsulates something of this future-to-come or even of a communal past that we have long forgotten. In the brief opening chapter called “Theriomorphous,” Agamben describes a Hebrew Bible from the 13th century housed in the Ambrosian Library in Milan that contains priceless miniatures.⁵⁶ The Bible holds an illustration of a regal messianic banquet consisting of the righteous. However, instead of depicting the participants communing as humans with human heads, the miniaturist has represented them not with human *faces* but with animal

⁵⁶ Theriomorphous is from the Greek *thēriomorphos*, “possessing or depicted in the form of a beast.” Derived from *thērion*, “wild animal” and *morphē*, “shape.”

heads: an eagle's beak, an ox's red head, a lion's head, as well as a donkey and a leopard. Agamben employs this spectacularly brief example at the beginning of his book-length contemplation on what separates the human from its animality in both life and philosophy. For the Italian philosopher, the depiction of the righteous—the remnant of Israel—with animal heads predicts a future form of relation between animals and humans no longer contingent on exploitation and violence. I would also add that this illustration points to a debt to the Other that is finally complete. This debt acknowledges the legitimacy of pain that runs across all bodies regardless of species. Agamben writes: “It is not impossible, therefore that...the artist of the manuscript in the Ambrosian intended to suggest that on the last day, the relations between animals and men will take on a new form, and that man himself will be reconciled with his animal nature” (3). And indeed, after Rocky's death in *Por las plumas*, Jasón wants to give Chalo's next rooster a prophetic name, Apocalipsis—which is another name for “Revelation,” the final book of the Bible, announcing the end of days and humankind's final judgment.

The interspecies banquet found in the miniature book of art also reveals a humorous layer to this animal gathering—be it divine or prophetic, the image is also funny. The chosen few eat like animals and with other animals. It is worth mentioning here that each chapter of Critchley's *On Humor* begins with one of Charles Le Brun's beastmen drawings from the 17th century. The Milanese bestiary illustration, like Le Brun's drawings, seems to have surpassed the alienation—the hell of modern life—that comes with living a complicated relationship with animals, as both films of this chapter suggest. Neither *La Parka* nor *Por las plumas* promises a future time in which humans will be reborn into another animal self, but the dreams in both films reveal the wide

chasm of violence that runs between humans and their fellow animals. This deep fissure suggests the human failure of fully recognizing ourselves as animals and the immeasurable harm this inflicts on those that are weaker and more vulnerable. And as long as that violence remains unacknowledged and disavowed, the distance between humans and other animals remains uncrossable and irreconcilable. Habacuc's starving dog exhibit, *Exposición N°1*, also reminds us of this inexorable abyss of interspecies violence that marks contemporary life in Central America. As in the case of Rocky, violence against Natividad the dog is not exhausted in its symbolic power to stand in for violence against other human animals. It is not surprising that Habacuc himself signed the petition to expel him from the 2008 biennial. His decision might help us appreciate the comedic structure of our outrage.

Coda. The Tiniest New Place: Tatiana Huezo's *El lugar más pequeño*

To conclude, I would like to draw attention to an extraordinary documentary from El Salvador, Tatiana Huezo's debut film, *El lugar más pequeño* (*The Tiniest Place*) from 2011. The film encapsulates many of the issues that this dissertation has explored by way of an ecological meditation on the violent legacies of war. The documentary highlights the case of El Salvador, one of the smallest countries in Central America, with a cinema that has not been discussed in the course of this study. However, the political history of the country parallels that of its neighbors. Like Guatemala and Nicaragua, El Salvador also suffered a brutal war during the eighties and the nineties.

During El Salvador's Civil War (1980-1992), more than 80,000 people died and 20% of the population was displaced. The war was fought between the military-led national government and the left-wing groups that made up the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front). According to the United States Institute of Peace, the FMLN was responsible for only 5% of the violence while 85% was committed by Salvadoran armed forces and paramilitary death squads in predominantly rural areas ("Truth Commission: El Salvador"). The roots of institutionalized state violence against its citizens—especially against indigenous peoples and *campesinos*—can be traced to the notorious massacre decades earlier known as "La Matanza." On January 22, 1932, the national government under President Maximiliano Hernández Martínez brutally crushed a peasant-led rebellion in four western departments of the country. Between 10,00 and 40,000 peasants and indigenous civilians were killed. Although military violence was nothing new for El Salvador before the 1980s, the year 1980 marks the official beginning of the war. On March 24, 1980, the country's Archbishop, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, was

shot and killed while saying Mass at a church in San Salvador.⁵⁷ Later that same year, on December 2nd, four American Catholic women—3 nuns and 1 lay missionary working in the country as part of an international humanitarian aid mission—were raped and murdered by the National Guard. On January 16, 1992, the Chapultepec Peace Accords in Mexico City formally ended the war.

El lugar más pequeño shows us the lives of the inhabitants of Cinquera, a mountain village in central El Salvador, which was completely destroyed during the war. Like many other towns, it ceased to exist in the official national maps. As a stronghold of the FMLN, Cinquera was particularly targeted. The film is dedicated to the survivors of the war who returned to their town and rebuilt it, giving it a new name, Nuevo Cinquera. Huezo, like other Central American artists and filmmakers, forms part of the diaspora brought on by war and migration. Born in El Salvador (1972), she was raised in Mexico and makes Mexico City her home. She studied film at the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica (CCC) in Mexico City and obtained a Master's in documentary filmmaking at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. Huezo was only a child when the war broke out. *El lugar más pequeño* is particularly personal since Cinquera was her grandmother's native village and the director spent two months there while making the film. Huezo's film first premiered in Ambulante, Mexico City's documentary festival. Her following documentary, *Tempestad* (*Tempest*, 2016), concerned with the violence affecting the lives of two women in Mexico, went on to win an Ariel, the country's highest award for film; Huezo was the first female director to receive the prize.

⁵⁷ Pope Francis, the leader of the Catholic Church, recently canonized Archbishop Romero on October 2018.

El lugar más pequeño moves back and forth between the daily lives of various townspeople as they recount the memories of the war that they lived through. Huezo avoids the conventional use of talking heads by showing present-day footage of the subjects with little dialogue. The images are accompanied by their voiceover narrations of the past. This sensitive choice gives the film a particular intimacy without feeling voyeuristic or intrusive, allowing the inhabitants to share some of their most private thoughts with the viewer. Although their names are acknowledged in the final film credits, they are not identified onscreen. Instead, we learn the names of those they lost to the war but not their own, suggesting that their names are not as important as their relationship to the dead. For example, a woman who lives alone talks about how she lost her only daughter. She is the mother of 15 year-old Aída, a catechism teacher and guerrilla fighter who was tortured, raped and killed by the military. An older married couple aided the resistance with the help of their eight children. Several of them died during the war. Their children's names appear in their recollections like ghosts that the viewer never sees. One of their surviving daughters, an artist who wishes there were a pill that could prevent crying, finds solace in painting. She remembers how her parents relied on so many different aliases that she could not remember their actual names when her teacher asked for them at school. Another young man talks about the father he lost when he was a child.

Huezo's documentary technique also complements the film's visual exercise of memory, conveying the simultaneity of the "doble imagen" that the older man who loves to read (the painter's father) indicates near the end of the film. The man speaks of memory as a form of screen in which people from his past incessantly walk through.

“Right now I’m talking to you,” the man says, “and I’m eating with my comrades in Azacualpa who died, right now.” This double-image consists of the present existing alongside that *other* image, the past “which appears and doesn’t fade.” Huezo uses more synchronization of the townspeople’s speech with their actions near the end of the film when we see them speaking and interacting with each other. These images convey a hope for a brighter future. In one scene, a group of young musicians, most likely a school band, practice in a field. In another scene, a group of elderly women gather to make *tamales* while Aída’s mother shares a story of a French man wooing her in English from a car while she sat in the park.

For a film about a place that has faced so much death and despair, *El lugar más pequeño* focuses lovingly not only on the relationship between the living and the dead, but also on the delicate balance between humans and animals. A cowherder who hid in a nearby bat cave with others for three years goes back to see what has become of his shelter. He worked as a lookout for government soldiers and suffers from nightmares. At the end of the film, he watches over his pregnant cow as she gives birth. Aída’s mother buys fresh eggs with a special purpose. Using a wooden crate as a nest, she coaxes a hen to incubate eggs that are not hers. When they do hatch, she proudly proclaims herself the grandmother of the chicks.

The townspeople not only share a bond with the animals they care for but also cultivate a strong attachment to the land that has provided for them in times of war and of peace. The forest surrounding the town became a place of refuge and of escape when war came to Cinquera. The film emphasizes the townspeople’s deep gratitude for their physical environment. A man from the village says “For me, the land is like part of a

family.” For Aída’s mother, the forest “was like an ally, a blanket” during the war. When she speaks lovingly to her plants, she expresses both affection and reverence for the flora under her care.

The film begins with the story of the townspeople’s return after the war, noting how they were welcomed by the sound of animals. Aída’s mother recounts how they found bones as they cleared the forest and heard the echoes of so many dead souls. She explains how the frogs and toads stayed behind when they left town but began to sing again when they returned. It is unclear how long the townspeople have been away, but the film ends—like it begins—with another story of their return to the town, a story that also features animals. Aída’s mother talks about the fireflies that led the way. These insects, which she calls “the souls of children,” are beings who have offered their guidance and their light. The film concludes with a joyful reflection. Aída’s mother felt at peace coming back to her town because it was as if she were finally reuniting with her daughter’s spirit. And the fireflies suggest that happy reunion. Her mother says, “My daughter could be a firefly because she was a light.” She perceives the presence of her lost child here and everywhere—through the light of the insects, the sounds of the trees and the ground on which she walks. For her, the child she lost has been found again. She can now mourn Aída by celebrating her spirit and, in doing so, find the strength to live on. Her mother takes fresh flowers to her grave on the Day of the Dead (“Día de los finados”), lights a candle next to her portrait, and in her bedroom at night, asks for her forgiveness—she had punished her for joining the guerrillas— and prays that she watch over her while she sleeps. Both early and later on in the film, her mother shares how she had contemplated suicide but she has realized that it was because “I found no ground to

this life,” or, more evocatively in Spanish, “yo no le hallaba fundamento a la vida.” And she would have died already, she admits, but “in the end one has to get an angle on life.”

Aída’s mother recovers a foothold in life, what she calls “un fundamento.” She learns to situate her grief—mourn her child—within the physical environment that surrounds her. As she talks to her chickens and plants, she appreciates the forms of life flourishing around her. The townspeople in *El lugar más pequeño* defy the ecology of violence that has traumatized Cinquera by sustaining a life-affirming philosophy that respects the dead among the living. In doing so, they uphold an ecology of life against violence. This way of living embraces an ethics that acknowledges a shared place for both human and non-human forms of life. The people express their gratitude in a tangible way, taking care of a physical location—Cinquera—rooted in a local environment. This new community enacts an ecological reclaiming of history and place for Cinquera. This ecological reclaiming envisions ethics as an obligation to an Other in a tiny place where ethics has fallen apart. But it also allows the possibility of reclaiming a place that has been forgotten or erased; in this case, the town of Cinquera itself. The word ethics, after all, shares a relationship to place, coming from the Greek word *ethos*. *Ethos*, which has come to embody a characteristic spirit or character, originally meant “an accustomed place” for the Ancient Greeks and was later adopted in Latin to signify the word for ethics.⁵⁸ By razing Cinquera to the ground, the military sought to destroy the town’s

⁵⁸ There is also an ancient relation between *ethos* and animality. In *The Iliad*, the word *ethos* refers to the place of the horses of Paris: “haunts and pastures of mares” (6.511). *Ethos* forms the root of *ethikos* meaning “moral, showing moral character.” Late Latin borrowed it as *ethicus* and the feminine (*ethica*) is the origin of the modern English word, “ethics.”

ethics altogether. The enemy hoped to erase the accustomed place that was Cinquera—known and appreciated by its inhabitants—from official memory.

But Cinquera, filled with its dead, comes back to life after the war. As they rebuild from the ruins, the inhabitants restore the town they had lost. In doing so, Nuevo Cinquera becomes a re-accustomed place. That the town can rise again suggests that a damaged but unforgotten place can become familiar in a new way. The town's name Nuevo Cinquera points to a novel reality but in the same physical space. Unlike other “new” places such as New England or New York—which reimagine an older place set in a new world—Cinquera becomes a new community, Nuevo Cinquera, within its same geography. The beautiful way that Aída's mother celebrates her child's short life on Earth suggests a form of gratitude that covers this physical place while also suggesting something beyond Cinquera. Her mother finds comfort in believing that her daughter continues to live on in another form somewhere across time and space beyond death. Could the light of the stars help us find the dead?⁵⁹ To people searching for the remains of their loved ones in other countries ravaged by other wars, *El lugar más pequeño* offers a small but comforting hope: The dead are already with us *as* light.

El lugar más pequeño helps us to think of an ecological reclaiming of history and place precisely because it highlights a town's physical erasure while also calling for a responsible sustainability that makes possible the town's reconstitution. If war can

⁵⁹ *El lugar más pequeño* shares a kinship with Patricio Guzmán's Chilean documentary, *Nostalgia de la luz* (*Nostalgia for the Light*, 2010). On the driest place on Earth—the Atacama desert—families continue to search for the remains of those they lost under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (1973-1990). In Guzmán's film, at the foot of one of the world's largest telescopes, a woman named Violeta Berríos who searches for her brother wishes that the telescopes would not only point to the sky but could also pierce the ground. In Spanish she says, “Ojalá los telescopios no miraran solo al cielo pero pudieran traspasar el suelo.” Her choice of the verb “traspasar” suggests that the telescopes perform a kind of passage or even a form of required trespassing.

obliterate a town from the cartography of national politics and borders—as it erased Cinquera in El Salvador—an understanding and respect for natural resources can offer its renewal. For this Salvadoran village, the new Cinquera has embraced a revitalization in the 21st century. A message on a wall greets visitors to the town: “Nuevo Cinquera: Símbolo de Vida y Esperanza.” This welcome sign is partly concealed by the lush vegetation that always threatens to take over some of the town’s human-made structures. According to *Lonely Planet El Salvador*, the town has become an example of sustainable, grassroots tourism. The community has enacted a series of projects emphasizing the town as a place of life that has come to terms with the horrors of its past as it looks to the future. The town has erected a war museum where ex-guerillas share their experiences. A forest park offers hiking and swimming, and travelers can visit an ecologically responsible iguana farm (“El Salvador: Cinquera”). In this regard, Nuevo Cinquera constitutes a modest success story of the local in a more globalized world. The town affirms a new beginning by continuing a responsible way of life that respects the physical environment. The film suggests that the grateful townspeople have always known this because the land itself—like the forest—protected them during the war. It is fitting that, near the end of the film, rain falls on the town. This afternoon rain, common in the rainy season in Central America, suggests a sense of renewal but also continued nourishment and protection for Cinquera.

Like *El lugar más pequeño*, the Central American films discussed in this dissertation put forward the possibility of envisioning the region by way of a new ethical terrain. That is, instead of a topography drawn up by political boundaries, the films point to a different set of ethical coordinates by which to consider the violent legacies of

Central America: the body and illness; the migrant condition; and the fraught human-animal divide. I do not use the concept of an ecological reclaiming to define or limit Central American cinema. My analysis of these films does not claim to do so.

Geopolitical boundaries do not confine the region's cinema. On the contrary, these Central American films emphasize the ecological layers of political violence that cut across nationalities, species and physical environments. These layers mark the contours of a regional cinema defined by disappearances, silences and migrations.

As the previous three chapters indicate, the films under consideration show the challenge of thinking cinema along the lines of an ecology of violence that puts humans alongside other animals, objects, and physical environments. Chapter One illustrated the logic of autoimmunity in Julio Hernández Córdón's cinema—in terms of the asthmatic body in *Gasolina* and the suicidal body in *Polvo*. Both films depict the limits of a damaged anatomy—the sick body—and its failure to defend itself against illness. Chapter Two considered the vulnerable figure of the Central American migrant as she navigates a migrant geography—an itinerant state of exception—and contends with the remains of a damaged, bare life. In this case, the migrant finds herself at the limits of politics and the law—her existence unacknowledged and under constant threat of violence. Finally, Chapter Three explored the ethical limits of the human-animal divide. This interspecies spectrum of violence speaks to a precarious animality that binds the human to other animals.

Placed alongside the other films of this study, *El lugar más pequeño* propels us to think of the future of Central America despite the legacies of damaged memories and lives. The man who hid in the cave during the war admits near the end of the film that he

spent several years unable to trust anyone after he relinquished his weapons. But he feels different now, freed from those thoughts that plagued him. He is also at peace with his nightmares; he has learned to live with them. He ascribes these recurring dreams, which he says, “siempre se mantienen,” to the likelihood that his mind might still suffer from a lingering sickness: “la mente todavía tiene un poquito de enfermedad.” This man’s incurable dreams recall the heavy weight of memories that the painter’s daughter also endures. But for this father who lost several children, those memories—what he calls the double-image referenced above—are not so much a disease as a delirium that has lost its power to inflict suffering. Those images of past and present existing alongside each other, he says, no longer torment him because they have come to form part of his life.

In terms of an ecological reclaiming, it is worth recalling the way Juan’s mother in *Polvo* alludes to the memories of her village’s destruction during Guatemala’s Civil War. When Alejandra, the director’s girlfriend, asks her if she and Juan would move to Xetmanzana, if they were to find it, she responds: “Vamos a ver, para mí todos los lugares son tristes.” This study underscores the burden of sad places: the destroyed village in *Polvo*; the highway where an indigenous man is run down and then burned in *Gasolina*; the garbage dump and brothel of *El camino*; the unrelenting desert and borders of *La jaula de oro*. It is not only human pain that abounds in these sad places. Both the slaughterhouse of *La Parka* and the pit of the cockfight in *Por las plumas* are also sad places where countless acts of animal violence take place. These are perennial places of sadness. The inhabitants of Nuevo Cincuera from *El lugar más pequeño* know that, despite their town’s renewal, it will always be a sad place. But as the film also shows, hope and dignity can still thrive even in the smallest place convulsed by despair.

A transisthmian network of filmmakers continues to produce a rich cinema both within and outside of Central America that challenges its own geographical limits. In doing so, these directors rethink and reimagine images by giving them other possibilities of life beyond sadness—in a region that is still experiencing violence. These film directors are offering complex and richly-nuanced visions of Central America beyond the straitjacketing metaphor of a hopeless and tiny place. These artists help shift the prevalent cultural image of Central America—and by extension, of its Latin American neighbors—as largely defined by topography, a turbulent history and its physical proximity to the United States. As these filmmakers continue to film Central America, the region can be understood and acknowledged as contributing to new approaches of conceptualizing the urgent problems of the human alongside other forms of life.

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