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FROM CENTRAL AMERICA TO THE UNITED STATES: YOUTH MIGRATORY
PRODUCTIONS OUT OF EL SALVADOR AND GUATEMALA IN THE 2000s

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on Guatemalan and Salvadoran youth migrants to the United States and their representations of the migratory experience, their homelands, and the U.S. I argue that each of the pieces studied here offers a holistic understanding about young people and the representations that are formed. On the one hand, Guatemalan movies like Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (1983), Jayro Bustamente's *Ixcánul* (2015), and Diego Quemada-Díez's *La jaula de oro* (2013) show a historical continuity of civil war, genocide, and social injustice against indigenous populations in Guatemala. On the other hand, Salvadoran productions such as Oscar Martinez's *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*, the image of the migrant from Intipucá, and "Cuarto de Adolescente" demonstrate the resulting variation of emotion and motivation that can lead young people to leave El Salvador in hope of finding a better life in the United States. As a whole, the pieces tell us that young people leaving Guatemala and El Salvador are doing so because of historic instabilities created by the U.S. during the Cold War. They also explain how the historic oppression of people in these countries has led to conflict and fear that has continued to be perpetuated through gang violence and U.S. policies towards drug trafficking. The analysis developed in the chapters follows questions related to the intersectionality between language, race, gender, and sexuality as well, in order to display the complexities that migrant subjects exhibit. By underscoring these complexities, this thesis pushes against the imagined homogeneity of Central American migrants. At a time when Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are separating families and deporting young people to countries they barely even know, and xenophobic feelings appear to have reached a peak in the U.S., this

thesis is relevant because not only are undocumented immigrants at risk, but also Latinx populations who have been documented residents for generations.

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Introduction

The American Dream is something that every child in America is fed. The idea of social mobility is a large part of the dream. If you work hard, you will get a good education and good job; you will live in a nice house and good neighborhood and live out the constitutional right of the pursuit of happiness. This dream is not only shared by U.S. citizens, but is a wistful idea shared all around the world. So many people believe that the U.S. is a utopic land of destiny and prosperity. So many people look to the United States as a land of hope and freedom, yet are denied the opportunity to participate. ¹

Nevertheless, the U.S., the so-called land of immigrants, has become increasingly hostile towards those who choose to come to the U.S. to chase their dreams. It cannot alone be blamed on the rise of President Donald Trump because these feelings and animosity did not sprout up when he made his declaration to campaign. The feelings were always there but only drudged up when someone was willing to get up on stage and spread fear mongering stereotypes about undocumented immigrants². These undocumented immigrants who have been called “illegals,” “criminals,” “rapists,” and “murderers” are simply people trying to improve their circumstances.

¹ On the American Dream, and its history through different articles, see Clark (“In Search of the American Dream”).

² See Rosenberg (“‘The Snake’: How Trump appropriated a radical black singer’s lyrics for immigration fearmongering”) and Moreno (“Latinos Call Out Donald Trump for His Fear-Mongering Speech”) for insights into President Trump’s rhetoric and reactions to his speeches and policies.

One person trying to improve their circumstances is Fidencio Fifield-Perez. Fifield-Perez is an educator and Visual Artist from Texas. In school his teacher told him, “People like you don’t go to college.” He ended up being accepted to seven schools and graduated from high school with honors. In 2012, as former President Barack Obama enacted the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), he watched with tears coming down his face. He was the first in his family to graduate from high school. Many people he knew had already dropped out because they worked at jobs that paid under the table. DACA allowed Fifield-Perez to drive to work without fear. He went forward to pursue his Master’s degree and taught classes at the University of Iowa. He writes, “I instructed and befriended your children; I was your partner ... Are these words enough for you to acknowledge my existence or my humanity?” (Fifield-Perez). He continues to describe that he was smuggled into the U.S. at seven years old, and since the moment he was smuggled in, his body ceased to be his own. The struggle and the debates on immigration are not solely about status, but about policing the bodies of human beings. The repeal of DACA has put his body at risk (Fifield-Perez).

When Julia was 9, she and her family moved to the U.S. to find stability. They had tried to make their move legal, but ran into complications with a fraudulent lawyer. With an uncertain future, she decided to continue to work hard for good grades. She graduated 28th out of a class of 620. After DACA was passed, she raced to get papers in, applied for a social security card, filled out job applications, and got a license. In November 2014, she got into Teach For America³. DACA gave Julia independence and allows her to work and feel like she belongs. “Knowing I

³ Teach For America is a nonprofit organization with the goal of ending educational inequity in the United States (teachforamerica.org).

could lose all the freedom I've gained is a paralyzing fear. I've worked so hard, and my life was just coming together, and now it might fall apart again" (Verzbickis, Julia).

The reality is that "Dreamers"—a young person who qualifies for the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act—are hard-working individuals who only want to find their place in this country. However, Wendy Cervantes of the Center of Law and Social Policy (CLASP), a Washington-based anti-poverty nonprofit, in reference to President Trump's initiatives to increase deportations said, "The fear of immigration enforcement creates a chilling effect." President Trump's anti-immigrant policies are scaring away families from benefits such as food stamps out of fear of deportation. Policy changes and increased fear tactics will likely increase poverty and hunger in Latino communities (Lowrey). The Center for American Progress and the University of Southern California's Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration found that 16.7 million people in the U.S. live in a home with at least one undocumented family member (Lowrey). Almost 6 million children live in these homes as well. Harsh immigration policies victimize more than those who are undocumented, they affect entire families and households.

While President Trump wants to build a border wall and others advocate for decreased immigration, it doesn't change the fact that there are hundreds of thousands of people in the U.S. who are being left in limbo. It also does not change that countries like Guatemala and El Salvador are still facing violence and uncertainty for their futures. Those who choose to migrate to the U.S., whether legally or not, are still deserving of opportunities and a chance to feel safe and to provide for their families. After all, the U.S. has helped to create the situations these countries are facing, as I will demonstrate in this thesis.

More precisely, I will study six different materials showing the recent history (2010-2014) of migration from El Salvador and Guatemala to the U.S. movies like Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (1983), Jayro Bustamente's *Ixcanul* (2015), and Diego Quemada-Diéz's *La jaula de oro* (2013) show a historical continuity of civil war, genocide, and social injustice against indigenous populations in Guatemala. The lasting legacies of these events have created some of the precarious conditions that expulse young people from their homelands and lead them into migrating toward "el norte." Oscar Martinez's *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*, the image of the migrant from Intipucá, and "Cuarto de Adolescente" show the resulting variation of emotion and motivation that can lead young people to leave El Salvador in hope of finding a better life in the United States.

In each of my two core chapters, I ask what historically has occurred in both Guatemala and El Salvador to create inequalities and destabilization? How is the U.S. culpable in the destabilization of these countries? How have Cold War policies and neoliberalism negatively impacted Guatemala and El Salvador? How is immigration viewed through youth representations? What are the different motivations for leaving for "el norte"? How has historic racial and class discrimination affected the people in these countries? How has gang violence and the rise of the war on drugs continued to increase violence and mass immigration?

Guided by these questions, I focus on youth migrants and their representations of the migratory experience, their homelands, and the U.S. I argue that each of the pieces studied offer a holistic understanding about young people and the representations that are formed. The pieces studied create a complete image of Guatemala, El Salvador, and the young that are fleeing. Each piece studied tell us that young people that are leaving Guatemala and El Salvador because of historic instabilities created by the U.S. during the Cold War. They also explain how the historic

oppression of people in these countries has led to conflict and fear that has continued to be perpetuated through gang violence and U.S. policies towards drug trafficking. In the pieces, this continued violence is shown and creates representations of young people that are living in fear and in the shadow of the U.S.

In the first chapter, I will start by tracing the political histories of the countries beginning with Guatemala, its large Mayan population, and the ethnic violence that have occurred in the country. This section will also cover the context of U.S. intervention in the country, and political turnovers that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. The Civil War in Guatemala will also be contextualized in order to better understand the conflicts and violence in present day Guatemala. Next, El Salvador, its social disparities, and its own Civil War, and U.S. intervention in this country will be analyzed. Afterwards, the transitions into democracy will be evaluated by looking into challenges the countries faced, the role the Cold War played in U.S. policy toward Latin America, and how neoliberalism affected El Salvador and Guatemala. The final section of this chapter will move the discussion into more present times by analyzing the U.S. War on Drugs and the challenges that were facing Central American countries in the latter part of the 20th century. It will also finish by contextualizing the primary focus of the thesis by concluding with looks into migrant vulnerability.

The second chapter will be devoted to Guatemalan productions and their representations of the youth and their forced expulsion from Guatemala. The study of *El Norte* (1983), *Ixcanul* (2015), and *La jaula de oro* (2013) will show that young people in Guatemala are fleeing from violence and a lack of opportunities in the country. The films will also examine the female migrant experience and how the challenges young women face on the migrant trail can be even more perilous. These movies most importantly, will study how the U.S. is viewed a utopia. All of

the protagonists of the films have a desire to reach the utopia in “el norte.” This chapter will look at the films collectively in order to demonstrate how the different motivations to migrate can all come back to the pursuit of the American Dream.

In the last chapter, I will examine *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*, the image of the migrant from Intipucá, and “Cuarto de Adolescente.” This combination of materials will help me to gain a better understanding into the motivations of young Salvadoran migrants and their decisions to leave their homeland. I will demonstrate that young people are growing up with the intention to leave El Salvador. There is a culture of fear in the country that the youth are extremely aware of. The youth are conscious of the violence that surrounds them, which causes them to leave their lives behind through migration and even death.

This project is important because in the U.S. there is a pivotal moment occurring in regard to the future of young immigrants. With the election of President Trump, as the stories I have included in this introduction show, thousands of young professionals, parents, and children are being targeted because of the legality of their status. Every day Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are separating families and deporting young people to countries they barely even know. During the first 100 days since President Trump signed Executive Orders regarding immigration enforcement, ICE has had an arrest rate increase of 37.6 percent (“ICE ERO Immigration Arrests Climb Nearly 40%”). These arrests reflect known and *suspected* people. By known and suspected people, I mean individuals that they are either known or suspected of being undocumented in the United States. The increase in arrests spreads fear throughout immigrant communities, and also opens up the increased probability of racial profiling.

Xenophobic feelings appear to have reached a peak in the U.S. which is striking fear in immigrant communities across the country. Many immigrants are in the U.S. legally under the

protection of DACA, but now their futures are uncertain because of the program's termination. Thus, this thesis is important because immigrants in this country are being singled out and regarded as unlawful when they have been in the U.S. often since they were children. The perception around DACA recipients and Dreamers needs to be shifted into a much more empathetic light. The goal of this thesis, therefore, is to change the conversation around undocumented Central Americans by looking at their migration as a humanitarian crisis, rather than the popular perception that they are in the U.S. to consume resources and take jobs.

This thesis is also relevant today because not only are undocumented immigrants at risk, but also those who were documented residents like the 200,000 Salvadorans that have lived in the U.S. since at least 2001. This group of Salvadorans were given Temporary Protected Status (TPS) after the 2001 earthquake in El Salvador. While it was ruled that conditions from the earthquake had improved enough for them to return, it doesn't account for approximately 190,000 U.S.-born children of Salvadoran TPS recipients that are at risk of being separated from their families. (Miroff and Nakamura).

Instances such as these where children are at risk of having their parents taken away from them are why the research compiled in this thesis is imperative. All of this data supports the major claims of this thesis. People are every day dealing with the risk of losing their jobs, family, and the lives they have built. Through the collection of multiple productions, this thesis hopes to trace clear images about youth migration, their motivations, their journey, and their ultimate disillusionment with the so-called "American dream."

Chapter 1

Guatemalan and Salvadoran Historical Context

The history of Central America is as long as it is complex. From the rich history of the indigenous peoples to the modern-day conflict that is seen in the region, Central America has been through many stages and has faced intervention and conflict from a multitude of foreign adversaries. The different problems of Central America still bear the weight of this complex history. Another result is the large influx of immigrants that has to the U.S. These migrants have been fleeing their countries for the United States because the U.S. has had a hand in their countries' problems.

El Salvador and Guatemala have both experienced Civil Wars, large migratory patterns, increasing violence, transitions to democracy and intervention by the United States. Each country's history will be explained while leading up to their major conflicts and what led the U.S. to get involved. Along with the study of democratization in these countries, economic policy and Cold War ideologies will be discussed in order to understand the effect neoliberalism has had in these two nations. All in all, the purpose of this chapter is to make connections between El Salvador and Guatemala's histories and the current issues of violence, drug trade and human trafficking to the United States.

Guatemala, the Mayan Population, The United States, and the Long History of Ethnic Violence

Guatemala is a country of 10 million people and is the most populous country in Central America, yet it is a country in which the wealth is held by few land and business owners. This wealth gap further perpetuates large amounts of inequality in the country that have roots leading back to the Spanish conquistadors and the Guatemalan Civil War (“A ‘Killing Field’ in the Americas: US Policy in Guatemala”).

During the course of the Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996) more than 200,000 people were killed over the course of the 36-year-long civil war (Miller, Talea). The Center for Justice & Accountability has collected a history of the Guatemalan Civil War in which they reference this conflict as the "Silent Holocaust" and "Mayan Genocide" because of the huge losses sustained during this conflict. About 83 percent of those killed during the war were Mayan (Miller, Talea). The origins of this conflict date back five hundred years when the Spanish conquered and established a socio-economic order over the ancient Mayan civilization with a harsh plantation economy based on forced labor. The precedent of the conflict and violence was set by the conquistadors. The beginning of the violence and oppression indigenous peoples faced was systemic due to its long and lasting history ("Guatemala ‘Silent Holocaust’: The Mayan Genocide").

In 1821, Guatemala gained independence from Spain, however, military dictators continued to rule the country. The military dictators had aligned with the oligarchy in the country, which meant that oppression and inequality were both still issues in Guatemala. ("Guatemala "Silent Holocaust": The Mayan Genocide"). Inequalities persisted because the ethnic and racial hierarchies continued after independence. The oligarchy and military regimes were conformed mostly by white people or *criollos*. In 1944, General Jorge Ubico's dictatorship

was overthrown by the “October Revolutionaries,” who were a group dissident of military officers, students and liberal professionals. A civilian government was elected on a platform of land reforms and a civilian was elected president: Juan José Arevalo held the presidency from 1945 until 1951 (Pike, John).

His successor to the presidency was Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. Arbenz allowed the Guatemalan Labor Party to gain legal status in 1952 and by the mid-point of his term, the communists controlled organizations, unions, and the governing party. In 1954 Eisenhower decided Arbenz had to go and the US State Department labeled Guatemala as “Communist”. Many disagreed with Arbenz’s policies and the army refused to defend him during the U.S.-initiated coup in June 1954. The coup was commanded by Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas because Arbenz had not only been considered a communist threat, but also because of his plans to nationalize the plantations of the United Fruit Company (Miller, Talea).

After Colonel Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán became president he invoked a land reform program involved in redistribution of land owned by United Fruit. The United Fruit Company, the largest of the U.S. companies, had obtained an enormous amount of influence in the country. Under dictator Jorge Ubico, the United Fruit Company had gained control of forty-two percent of Guatemala's land, and was also exempted from taxes and import duties. The other two large and controlling American companies were International Railways of Central America and Empress Electrica, but these companies too, were under the control of United Fruit (“A ‘Killing Field’ in the Americas: US Policy in Guatemala”).

Arbenz wanted to do this in order to break up large estates and help to foster smaller and individually owned farms. While this redistribution was taking place, United Fruit was compensated for their land, but going against United Fruit is like two states competing against

one another. United Fruit owned all of Guatemala's banana production and monopolized exports, it also owned the country's telephone and telegraph system, and a majority of the railroad.

Because of the kind of power United Fruit wielded, they used their influence to convince the US government to step in ("A 'Killing Field' in the Americas: US Policy in Guatemala"). The overthrow returned control to the U.S. government which they used in choosing a new president and in returning the United Fruit Company's land ("A 'Killing Field' in the Americas: US Policy in Guatemala"). This moment and the connection with United Fruit to the power players in the U.S. government would end up having monumental effects on Guatemala for decades to come.

The real power of the country is in the hands of the Army. The Army is a cruel regime that has resulted in displacement, disappearances and murders. The Army, however, is one of the reasons for the U.S.'s involvement because the U.S. has supported the regime and their policies. In the 1920s, after being involved for a century in agriculture, the U.S. established military missions in Latin American countries. Guatemala's military was tied to the U.S. military through training, aid, and commitment to protect U.S. economic interests. ("A 'Killing Field' in the Americas: US Policy in Guatemala"). U.S. economic interests is another important factor in the game of U.S. intervention because U.S. businesses and interests had a great deal of control and power in the country.

In "Preserving Hegemony: National Security Doctrine in the Post-Cold War Era," Patrice J. McSherry discusses NSC-68, the landmark policy in 1950 by defining an attack on the U.S. as any attack that attacks on an U.S. interest. Mcsherry is quoted: "It frankly portrayed the U.S. rivalry with the Soviet Union as a battle for world hegemony and state that "our overall policy at the present time may be described as one designed to foster a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish" and to develop 'a successfully functioning political

and economic system' in the non-Communist world, which required 'an adequate military shield' under which it could develop" (Toledo, Roberto). It is also argued that the opening of foreign economies by the United States, has only increased social disenfranchisement, which threatens the country's stability. This instability however can be seen as a cover and rationale to continue military involvement since the instability created the war on drugs and the dark side of free-market democracy. When justification was needed in the 1980s for continued intervention, the war on drugs was the perfect justification (Toledo, Roberto).

After the successful coup, General Castillo was declared president, but was murdered in 1958 by a leftist sympathizer ("Carlos Castillo Armas"). After his death, General Miguel Ydigoras became the autocratic ruler during which time the 36-year civil war began. The war began after left-wing guerilla groups began to combat government military forces (Miller, Talea). In 1960, a group of military officers revolted against Ydigoras, but when they failed, they went into hiding and established ties with the Cuban government. This group of dissidents became the primary forces that battled against the government for the next 36 years (Pike, John).

During the 1960s, the relationship between Guatemala and the U.S. was about building up the Guatemalan military. According to papers obtained by the Washington Post, the CIA retained close ties to the army in the 1980s as well while the paramilitary was massacring Indian villagers, and that the U.S. officials were aware of these killings. In a memo dated Jan. 4, 1966 from a U.S. State Department security official describing a "safe house" that had been set up in the presidential palace. This "safe house" could be used by U.S. contacts (Farah, Douglas). This "safe house" is a symbol of how deep the U.S.'s involvement in Guatemala really was; it also illustrates the level of complicity the U.S. administration had for war crimes committed as long as their agenda was being promoted.

More power turnover occurred in the 1960s and 1970s when civilian rule returned as César Méndez was elected president, but the civil war still intensified under his leadership. In 1970, the military-backed Carlos Arana was elected president and placed the country under siege. Under his rule, the military was given more control over civilians. This series of military-dominated governments only further escalated the conflict and violence perpetuated against both guerilla groups and indigenous populations (Miller, Talea).

The military dictatorship continued to rid themselves of political opponents and defeated different reform movements during the 1960s and 1970s as well. With the continued defeat of reformist movements, the leftist leadership became continuously militarized during this time period. Some of the Mayans had allied themselves with the left because they thought they were their only hope to end the oppression that occurred in indigenous communities. Mayans, in the eyes of the government, had become synonymous with guerrillas, which led the government wrongly believed that the entire Mayan population had become enemies of the state. This thinking is rooted back in the centuries old prejudice against the indigenous population. The government, after fixating on the Mayans, began to deliberately target them in order to 'starve' their support. In 1966, the use of forced disappearances began when a U.S.-trained death squad captured, tortured, and executed 30 leftists, and then dropped their bodies into the ocean ("Guatemala 'Silent Holocaust': The Mayan Genocide").

After the election of General Fernando Romeo Lucas, according to the historical Clarification Commission, there were over 10,000 cases of extrajudicial killings reported in 1981. As a way to protest the mass killings, a group of Mayan leaders occupied the Spanish embassy in 1981 as well. To stop the protest, Guatemalan forces raided the embassy and killed 36 people ("Guatemala 'Silent Holocaust': The Mayan Genocide"). Also in 1981, the Inter-

American Human Rights Commission released a report blaming the government on the killings and disappearances of thousands (Miller, Talea).

In the year 1982, Lucas García had been replaced by General Efraín Ríos Montt as the head of state. Ríos Montt not only enjoyed his new position of power but also his close ties with the Ronald Reagan administration and with U.S. Christian conservatives. The time period during the reign of Ríos Montt between March 1982 to August 1983 was the most violent period in Guatemalan history. The Guatemalan government engaged in a mass genocide killing or disappearing of an estimated 70,000 indigenous people. Ríos Montt also used a ‘scorched earth’ tactic to attack and destroy villages as well as, raping, torturing, and murdering the civilians. Because of brutal and vicious campaigns like these, between 500,000 and 1.5 million Mayan civilians fled to other regions or became refugees. Ríos Montt was overthrown in 1983 by yet another coup, but the damage to the indigenous people and the country had already been done. In 1985, a new constitution was drafted and democratic elections were held. Later in 1993, the then-President Jorge Serrano illegally dissolved Congress and the Supreme Court but was later forced to resign (Miller, Talea). A peace deal was eventually passed in 1996 (“Guatemala “Silent Holocaust”: The Mayan Genocide”).

After all of the horrible atrocities committed in the war, it seems as though trying to shine light on these crimes won’t ever come to fruition. Truth commissions examined and discovered unquestionable evidence of human rights abuses committed during the civil war and found evidence of genocide against the Mayan people. Those trying to unmask the perpetrators, however, have become targets. Myrna Mack Chang, a Guatemalan anthropologist, was shot to death by a military death squad. She was targeted in retaliation for her work in Mayan communities. Bishop Juan Gerardi presented a four-volume report of The Guatemalan Catholic

Church's REMHI project. Two days after the report's release, he was found beaten to death in his garage. Despite efforts of truth commissions, prosecutions have been obstructed, which is perhaps the most difficult aspect of this conflict to swallow is the lack of justice and closure on behalf of the indigenous population who suffered so terribly ("Guatemala 'Silent Holocaust': The Mayan Genocide").

Even in Guatemala today violence is continually perpetuated. Organized crime groups operate with impunity and the civilian and political life in Guatemala continue to be plagued by violence and intimidation. The Truth Commission's final report in 1999 recorded 42,000 human rights violations, 626 massacres, and an estimated 200,000 killings throughout the war (Pike, John).

El Salvador's Social Disparities, the United States, and the Long War

While there has been a long history of violence in Guatemala, another Central American country stands out with its amount of violence and warring, El Salvador. El Salvador is the smallest and most densely populated nation in Latin America, and is often described as one of the most violent. The majority of Latin American countries have experienced an increase in violence and crime since the 1950s. This trend has been associated with the expansion of urban areas and increased the gap between rich and the poor. By the 1990s, the homicide rate in El Salvador reached 139 per 100,000 inhabitants. This number has dropped in recent years, but the total number of violent crimes has not. Another disturbing note to be made about these statistics is that according to a study published in 1998 by the Institute of Public Opinion of the Central America University, "Violence is the general dominant orientation among Salvadoran citizens"

and “[a]pparently, many Salvadorans continue to accept widespread violence despite implementation of numerous violence prevention programs...” These sentiments discovered in this study lead Joaquín Chávez to ask, “Why is violence so pervasive in Salvadoran society?”

The roots of the conflict begin with the Spanish conquest in the 16th century and the resource that has dominated El Salvador: land. Like other Central American countries, El Salvador was treated like a giant plantation for luxury commodities. This system independence did not change often since Spanish rule transferred of Salvadorans of European ancestry. The indigenous peoples and mestizos who made up 95% of the population were held in serfdom, while a small minority of leaders called the “Fourteen Families” ruled through a long series of dictatorships (“El Salvador”). This inequality was an early sign of future violence to come in the country since the majority wasn’t included in decision making and the minority were the ruling class. The Salvadoran oligarchy of the “Fourteen Families” led to repression and oppression of the indigenous and mestizo peoples.

The cycle of political violence first appeared during the presidency of Rafael Zaldívar (1876-1885). During his presidency, the reorganization of the state created economic, social, and political reforms along with the creation of a hegemony. This hegemony confronted the growing social and ethnic conflicts with repression. The ruling oligarchy exercised its dominance through terror, social exclusion, racism and anti-communism. While the elite had privileges, the majority of the population were deprived of basic needs. Racism was perpetuated institutionally and egregiously through human rights violations against indigenous and mestizo cultures. Zaldívar’s regime also introduced coffee as the monoculture and created a repressive society with a permanent army, police and paramilitary forces. The social exclusion came in the way of privileges for the elite and deprivation for the majority of the population (Chávez, Joaquín M.).

In the words of historian Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, “To be Salvadoran, means knowing something tremendous happened in late January 1932.” This grim quote is in reference to a time in 1932 when a labor leader Agustín Farabundo Martí led a revolt against the dictatorship and the Fourteen Families. The revolt, however, did not cause a change or overthrow but was instead crushed by the military in what is called *la matanza*: the slaughter. It is estimated that 30,000 civilians were massacred, the majority of whom were indigenous people. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s more fighting occurred between the left and right wings. On October 15, 1979, a group of officers ousted the dictator Carlos Humberto Romero and formed the Revolutionary Government la Junta (“El Salvador”).

The other point of focus in this chapter is the history of U.S. intervention in El Salvador. In an article in *The Atlantic*, Benjamin Schwarz, details the "morally unsettling" site of America's most prolonged and expensive military endeavor in the period between the Vietnam War and the Persian Gulf conflict (Schwarz, Benjamin). This duration and extent of involvement is imperative to mention in the case of U.S. intervention in El Salvador. It is seldom spoken of the way Vietnam or other conflicts are in history books, but nevertheless, this was a conflict that the U.S. was waist deep in and this was an intervention that has had lasting effects on this country.

U.S. policy in El Salvador demanded nothing less than that the Americans effect fundamental changes in that country's authoritarian culture, its political practices, and its economic, social, and military structure. This project was of altering an entire identity of a country was called "nation-building." Schwarz contrasts this policy in El Salvador to intervention in postwar West Germany, where the United States had inculcated democracy, but before this inculcation the U.S. had rid Germany of its demons. This is in stark contrast to Salvadoran policy where the U.S. sought to transform the country while partnering with its

demons. According to Schwarz, it is indisputable that American policymakers in Washington along with American civilian and military personnel in El Salvador consorted with murderers and sadists (Schwarz, Benjamin).

There is no denying that El Salvador was ripe for revolution when the U.S. became an actor in the conflict. Their society was highly inequitable and the labor force was heavily exploited. Along with exploitation came bloody repression which is why there was hesitation in the Carter administration over interference and aid. Carter was unhappy with the human-rights record of El Salvador's regime but feared another Nicaragua, which is why he chose to assist the Salvadoran government. This assistance would later be carried on by the Reagan administration with alacrity (Schwarz, Benjamin).

Schwarz states that there are three reasons for the rigidity of U.S. policy: First, because of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, if El Salvador was lost it would be a national security crisis. Secondly, reform was to be encouraged but wasn't the priority as much as preventing and squashing revolution. And thirdly, in order to make aid to a harsh and cruel regime appear more acceptable, the human-rights progress of the country was to be exaggerated (Schwarz, Benjamin).

According to Noam Chomsky, the United States' complicity in the dark work of the Salvadoran Death squads is not an aberration. It is instead a representation of six different administrations and their commitment to guard the Salvadoran regime against the prospect of organizing in ways un-friendly to the regime or the United States. In the words of Truman's Secretary of War Robert Patterson, the idea behind the development of a paramilitary in countries they intervened in was to "lock the stable door before danger ever arises" (Chomsky, Noam).

Another ugly chapter of U.S. intervention in El Salvador has to do with the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. Monsignor Romero was shot in the heart while saying

mass, shortly after appealing to the US not to send military aid to El Salvador. Romero's appeal did not affect the US and for the next 12 years, the US became involved in its largest war against left-wing guerrillas since Vietnam. The Archbishop's death is a horrifying example of what happened to those who stood against the government since that was where U.S. aid was going. The irony found by Tom Gibb in his piece is that while writing it, George W. Bush was set to visit the country to celebrate the U.S. "success" story in the nation (Gibb, Tom). The idea of celebrating success near the anniversary of the Archbishop's death seemed simultaneously ironic a cruel, but at the same time sheds light on what the U.S. views as a victory in a country they intervene in.

President George W. Bush was to celebrate his father President Bush senior's policies, however, this "success" took 70,000 deaths, and massive human rights violations to reach peace. To defeat the rebels, the US equipped and trained an army that kidnapped and disappeared more than 30,000 people, and carried out massacres. A Bush aide, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, had sold weapons to Iran to pay for the CIA's wars in Central America. While U.S. officials may consider El Salvador to be a success, many would say it would take a serious re-writing of history for it to be portrayed that way (Gibb, Tom).

Another aspect of the war in El Salvador that has to be dissected is media influence upon the public attitudes toward the region. Intervention and interference in another country and the possibility of violating a country's sovereignty cannot continue without public support. The Vietnam War is a prime example of foreign policy being changed or affected by the amount of public outrage, which is why how the media portrayed the conflicts in El Salvador is necessary to analyze.

James Daniel, the author of *El Salvador: A Case History of U.S. Media Influence upon Public Attitudes toward Central America*, gathered more than 3000 pieces of varying forms including: news dispatches, news analyses, feature articles, background stories, etc. All of the pieces gathered were a part of the “Prestige Media.” The “Prestige Media” consisted of seven sources: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the TV networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC. The majority of the pieces he studied appeared in print media; the rest aired on television. The first note he made while looking over sources was that American television typically paid less attention to El Salvador than the print sources (James, Daniel).

Something else that James noted was the when there were reports done on El Salvador, the reporting lacked background or prior field work. There was also a general lack of knowledge of Spanish in the media (5). What James notes here is quite significant. The apparent lack of context and historical backgrounds done on the topic can create inaccuracies or incomplete pictures of El Salvador. A lack of knowledge of Spanish can create mistakes when reporting or could lead to a lack of interviewing of Spanish speakers which can diminish the complexity of the matter. If only English speakers are used for reporting and only current events are discussed without a contextual background a more singular image will be created which can affect the pluralism of the conflict.

The media’s ignorance of El Salvador’s history, culture, and language led to simplistic judgments. For example, the media repeatedly blanketed all Salvadoran history from 1932 to 1979 as a “half-century of repression.” A *New York Times* editorial went so far as to charge that it had left “a fascist legacy.” The adoption of such simplistic characterization by the “Prestige Media” created a basic perception of Salvadoran leadership in the minds of the American public (James, Daniel).

James also argues that the media led to the public's ignorance and confusion over El Salvador by in his mind mislabeling the conflict as a "civil war." He argues that the conflict isn't a civil war in a classic sense since it was originated with an insurgency launched and maintained by a small minority, aided and abetted by external forces (6). By not referencing the conflict as a civil war, James is truly contradicting years of teachings and reflections upon El Salvador. Did the media mislead the public? (20). Was U.S. policy influenced by the inaccurate reports, and would intervention have continued if the public was provided with a historical context? These questions are why the Salvadoran conflict or civil war is so complicated and why U.S. motivations for intervention should be questioned as well.

Also, in 1980, the five major leftist organizations combined to form the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front or the FMLN. The FMLN formed the guerrilla army that opposed and would be fighting the Salvadoran government for the next 12 years. The FMLN was supported by the Nicaraguan, Cuban, and Soviet Governments (Allison, Mike). Even though many war atrocities were perpetuated by the government, the guerrillas carried out kidnappings, bombings and bank robberies during the 1970s. During the 1980s, the FMLN killed mayors, informants and traitors. There is also evidence that the FMLN began to employ terrorist tactics (Allison, Mike). Though multiple violent acts had been committed by the guerrillas the one incident that garnered global attention, was a horrific incident in which four American churchwomen were raped and murdered by the right-wing government's military forces. As a response, President Carter cut off aid, but after Reagan came into office, the U.S. policy in El Salvador shifted. The Reagan administration viewed El Salvador's right-wing government in more friendly terms during Cold War times ("El Salvador").

These friendlier relations between the two governments served the Salvadoran government well when the FMLN launched an attack on the government on January 10, 1981. The United States came to the Salvadoran government's aid and provided advisors. Much of the aid even went to groups who the UN Truth Commission later identified as "the primary agents of war crimes." On November 16, 1989, another act of violence shocked the world. The Atlacatl Brigade, a right-wing counterinsurgency unit, entered the campus of the University of Central America and took six prominent Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter from bed and murdered them ("El Salvador").

These human rights violations finally got enough attention for the U.S. Congress to create a special investigative task force in 1989. The Moakley's Task Force concluded that 19 of the 26 officers responsible for the attack had been trained by the U.S. 1989 came with many revelations such as the Moakley Report, but also that the war was at a stalemate. The Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union had collapsed which meant the FMLN lost a crucial ally. After the Cold War, the U.S. had no further interest in supporting the right-wing Salvadoran government ("El Salvador"). On January 16, 1992, the United Nations Peace Accords ended 20 months of negotiations. As a part of the deal, the FMLN agreed to establish a U.N. appointed Truth Commission to investigate the abuses that occurred during the war.

Reinaldo Figueredo, who took part in the U.N. Truth Commission, stated:

In examining the staggering breadth of violence that occurred in El Salvador, the Commission was moved by the senselessness of the killings, the brutality with which they were committed, the terror that they created in the people, in other words the madness, or *locura*, of the war.

Nevertheless, similarly to the issues seen in Guatemala, there is an enduring problem of impunity in El Salvador as well. Five days after the report was released, the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly, adopted a blanket amnesty law. This law would protect all those military and guerrillas who participated in the war from prosecution for their war crimes (“El Salvador”). Throughout the civil war, 75,000 civilians were killed by government forces between 1980 and 1992, but many have never received justice for the crimes committed against them or their families (“El Salvador”).

An important note about the information gathered from the Truth Commission, which was supposed to be an impartial analysis of the civil war’s political violence, is that there was a glaring omission. The report is lacking any information regarding the U.S. involvement in the conflict. It does not mention how the United States’ armed, supported, and trained the Salvadoran Armed Forces (Chávez, Joaquín M.)

Through both conflicts, the Guatemalan Civil War and the Salvadoran Civil War, the clear and important actor that had pervaded both wars are the United States of America. Both wars cost thousands of lives and left hundreds of thousands more displaced. Both wars were also perpetuated and advanced further by the U.S.’s agenda and foreign policy.

For over two centuries, Latin America has been caught between empires. Spain, France, and the United States all have intervened and ruled over parts of Latin America. For Americans who wanted control over Latin America, it was a continuation of the idea of “manifest destiny” (Grandin, Greg). To understand the U.S.’s relationship with Latin America perhaps a quote from Richard Nixon is appropriate to begin with: “Latin America doesn’t matter,” he stated while advising a young Donald Rumsfeld, “Long as we’ve been in it, people don’t give one damn about Latin America” (Grandin, Greg). While these quotes are both ignorant and wildly

embarrassing advice to come from a U.S. president, it does shed some light on U.S. policy in Latin America and why there is such deep involvement. If Nixon is any reflection of his predecessors, party members, or congressional leaders, these quotes are an illustration of how little the U.S. foreign policy decisions are made with concern for Latin America in mind, but rather are created around the idea that they don't matter unless what they could have an effect on the U.S. or their interests. In another Nixon quote, the President presumed ownership over Latin America by saying, "We want to keep it. ... Latin America has had 150 years of trying at it, and they don't have much going on down there" (Grandin, Greg). These quotes show another reason the U.S. felt so comfortable and certain in their interventions. There was a clear feeling of intellectual, political and perhaps racial superiority over these nations. In the Santa Fe manifesto, Latin America was described as "America's Balkans," its "exposed southern flank," and its "soft underbelly" (Grandin, Greg). These descriptors are fears that have led the U.S. policy in Latin America for decades. It is as if these are in reference to the Monroe Doctrine and the entire Western Hemisphere is under U.S. protection, and Latin America since it "doesn't have much going on down there" is the weak spot for evils like communism and Soviets to invade. According to Linda Robinson, given the region's geographic proximity to the United States, the U.S. will be affected by problems there whether if the instability of the region leads to mass emigration, or by weak governments allowing drug-trafficking undeterred. She argues that the U.S. will continue to remain in Central America's backyard and they will remain in ours since long before the communist threat existed (Robinson, Linda).

Challenges to Democratic Transitions

As Guatemala and El Salvador transitioned to democracy during the late 1980s and the 1990s, they also transitioned into neoliberalism. Neoliberalism emphasizes the value of free market competition; is most commonly associated with laissez faire economics. Neoliberalism is also often characterized in terms of its belief in sustained economic growth as the means to achieve human progress. It also emphasizes on minimal state intervention in economic and social affairs, and a commitment to their freedom of trade and capital. The ideology of neoliberalism was picked up by the conservative parties in both Great Britain and the United States. The leaders during this time were British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and U.S. President Ronald Reagan (Smith, Nicola). Neoliberalist policies were brought to countries that the U.S. was involved in like those in Central America. Since President Reagan was a large proponent of these policies, the rise of neoliberalism in Central America corresponded with the rise of democracy in the 1980s and the ending or nearing the end of conflicts in the region.

According to Mark T. Berger in his piece on “The post-cold war predicament: a conclusion,” he states that the end of the Cold War brought about a new phase in an increasingly global, but highly uneven process of economic liberalization, deregulation and privatization that had been gaining momentum since the 1970s. The rise and spread of neoliberalism is at the center of a wider set of social, economic, political, cultural and technological changes that are identified as globalization, or more specifically neoliberal globalization. A key part of this globalization had been the transition of nation-states into neoliberal states in the context of the Cold War and its aftermath.

After the Cold War, a global democracy with a universal free market prosperity defines democracy in particularly minimalist terms and tends to downplay or ignore the connection

between uneven capitalist development, social inequality and political instability. While this reorganizing of nation-states is taking place, it is leading to a growing polarization between rich and poor and essentially widening the gap between them (Berger, Mark T.). This is a trend that has especially affected Latin American countries. In El Salvador and Guatemala, the inequality gap is quite large and the issues that stemmed from neoliberal policies have negatively affected the country by increasing polarization while decreasing state control over programs that aid those on the low end of the economy.

According to Dominic Corva, neoliberalization produces social and economic vulnerability; criminalization produces way to capitalize on that vulnerability (Corva, Dominic). This vulnerability he writes of is the perfect way to describe Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s. The neoliberal policies put in place weakened the state leaving it more vulnerable to continued intervention and the rise of drugs, which paved way for the U.S.'s justification of interference militarily.

Pentagon advisor Thomas Barnett sees a neoliberal vision of global space to divide the world into an economically "integrating core" and a "non-integrating gap." Barnett is using this portioning to justify the use of militarism in "gap" spaces. These "gaps" are countries like El Salvador Guatemala, and the rest of Central America (Corva, Dominic). The "gaps" as Barnett references are excuses for intervention. As Dr. Jaime Malamud Goti, former chair of the Presidential Commission on Drug Control in Argentina, observed,

The claim that national security is endangered by a vaguely defined threat to Western cultures opens the way to justifications for granting extraordinary powers to military and police forces. The portrayal of the drug problem as one of survival of Western society removes policy makers from normal legal restraints. It also justifies the argument that the

problem is too urgent to submit it to domestic and international debates. (Scott and Jonathan).

In a journal article by Roberto Toledo, he describes how the pursuit of U.S. hegemony in Latin America during the Cold War involved a strong military component. The U.S. Presidents during the 1950s and 1960s justified a number of military interventions in the region which led to a collapse under the weight of corrupt dictatorships, social upheavals, and countless human rights abuses. This in turn led to the promotion of democratization by Congress. This democratization was meant to facilitate a central aspect in the pursuit of U.S. hegemony. Toledo also makes a point to discuss the War on Drugs, but describes it as an attempt to cloak any further counter-insurgency military practices that began during the Cold War rather than a separate aspect of U.S. foreign policy. Despite any concerns over human rights violations in Latin America, Congress succeeded in diverting attention from the foreign counter-insurgency operations that were the main impetus for the drug war (Toledo, Roberto).

As detailed in prior paragraphs, one of the main motivations behind U.S. intervention was the desire to instill democracy in the countries they intervene in. But the transition to democracy is not smooth, especially in the cases of El Salvador and Guatemala. The fight for democracy was hard and at times questioned as to whether it has led to improvement in these countries or if economic policies that were attached to democratic ideals ruined them.

In Robert H. Trudeau's article "Understanding Transitions to Democracy: Recent Work on Guatemala," he focuses on the turnaround in Latin America's political institutions. He admits that this turnaround cannot be ignored since dictator after dictator has apparently yielded to the weight of democracy. Yet, he takes two stances about the turnaround. First, there is the stance that Latin American politics were moving toward democracy, but that this will be slow due to

obstacles. These obstacles include “dependency” through lack of suitably democratic attitudes through the overwhelming social and economic problems facing policy makers. The second stance assumes that the thrust of political life in recent decades has been to reduce democracy and centralize authority over key social processes rather than to diffuse it. Trudeau argues that democratic institutions could be fronts that are designed to mask or preserve a power structure (Trudeau, Robert H.)

For Trudeau, Guatemala makes an excellent case to study because it illustrates both of these stances of democracy. Guatemala has the harshest human rights record in the hemisphere, yet during the upheaval, a new constitution was adopted in 1984 and elections were held in 1985 and 1990, with civilians being elected on both occasions. In 1986, those observing Guatemala described the transition to democracy as complete while others dismissed it as a total sham (Trudeau, Robert H.). These questions about the legitimacy of Guatemalan democracy continue on into the 1990s when the civil war officially ended.

The "Law of National Reconciliation" is the end of the long three-year negotiation to finally put an end to the 36-year civil war in Guatemala. The end of the war, however, also meant that a new law would be put into place that would make it nearly impossible to prosecute anyone for any human rights violation. A "Truth Commission" had been appointed but it was denied the right to hold anyone responsible for war crimes. Its only job will be to report on who died or disappeared but the perpetrators of these crimes may not be investigated. In Guatemala, an amnesty instead had been passed forgiving the perpetrators of their crimes. For Francisco Goldman, Guatemala has opted for ignorance instead of the pursuit of the truth which is something especially hard to swallow for the indigenous population. Nothing had been gained through the peace treaty, and it is a surrender the eyes of Goldman (Goldman, Francisco). This

amnesty and peace that had been established began in ignorance for the country and has not allowed the country to heal or prosecute those who have committed horrible acts during the war. Yet, after controversy over amnesty and prosecution of war crimes, Guatemalans still elected a president in one of the most orderly elections in Central American history. Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo, the leader of the center-left Christian Democratic Party won the presidency. Cerezo Arévalo had run his campaign and career on demands that the military return to the barracks and stay out of government (Kinzer, Stephen). Obviously, having a candidate run on such a platform and win is a huge victory and step forward for the country.

The dramatic turn of Guatemalan politics was the product of anti-military sentiment that was becoming explosive and the recognition of the unpopularity of the military by officials. The process of choosing your candidate of course and knowing that whoever wins will actually rise to the presidency was thrilling for Guatemalans (Kinzer, Stephen). This excitement over free elections is a sign of hope for the future that the dreams of democracy can remain alive and well and that the people will continue to believe in the process, which is imperative for the survival of democracy.

In a more recent event in relation to Guatemalan democracy, Otto Pérez Molina, the resigned Guatemalan President, was arrested by the Guatemalan Justice Department who worked in collaboration with the United Nations International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala. Pérez Molina was a former Guatemalan Army general and intelligence chief, but he finally relinquished the Presidency after five months of protests that were staged. He was arrested during the probe into La Línea⁴, which he was believed to be a leader of. Dina

⁴ A corruption scheme, in which the Guatemalan customs agency offered importers greatly reduced tariffs in exchange for kickbacks that were shared among government officials (Goldman).

Fernandez wrote in *El Periódico* that "society had kept its mouth shut and put up with too much for too long. Now after thirty years of continual abuses, it demands that its officials respond as they are supposed to: in favor of the interests of the population..." The fall of the President is a large step for a country that has suffered from large inequality and social injustice for years. Pérez Molina is an embodiment of the role the Army played in Guatemala during the last half-century. His arrest and the celebration that followed was a demonstration of the joy felt after being silenced through decades of fear (Goldman, Francisco "From President to Prison: Otto Pérez Molina and a Day for Hope in Guatemala").

When Ellen Moodie, an anthropologist, arrived in El Salvador in 1993, she expected to learn about peace in the country. She instead encountered a, "fragmented postwar staging of frustrated hope," which when put in those terms does not appear to be a successful democratic shift. Moodie notes that she neither found peace nor war in the country but something more sinister. Instead of peace, there was increased crime, and in place of calm, anxiety (Moodie, Ellen).

Even before the war was over, El Salvador had been changing. The state had begun to implement structural adjustment policies to remake the economy. Banks were opening, there were more televisions and international airports, but exclusivity and walled up neighborhoods had also appeared. A postwar prosperity seemed to pop up seemingly from nowhere. Money seemed to appear invisibly through remittances sent by migrants' labor abroad, from foreign investments, and from rumored narco-trafficking and corruption. A correlation also occurred between the excess of wealth and organized crime (Moodie, Ellen).

When the United States intervened in the war, its aim was to do more than to defeat the guerillas or "save" El Salvador from communism. They wanted to remake the country as a model

of free-market democracy. According to anthropologist Julia Pale, “democracy, is now so deeply embedded in a prolonged moment of economic and philosophical liberalism that democracy is co-produced with market economies, a phenomenon neatly captured by the phrase, ‘free market democracies’” (Moodie, Ellen). The attachment of neoliberalism to democracy recast governing activities as *non-political* problems in need of technical solutions. It focused this governance on optimizing outcomes that maximized efficiency rather than expanded citizenship rights (Moodie, Ellen).

The Salvadoran transition to democracy and from war to peace occurred in two major socioeconomic transitions: the implementation of neoliberal economic policies and the collapse of the agricultural economy, starting in the 1980s into the 1990s. Neoliberal policies resulted in the reduction of the state apparatus which meant that there was diminished investment in key social areas, attempts to privatize health care and education, mass layoffs of public workers and privatization of the most important state assets which resulted in a deteriorated quality of life for Salvadorans (Chávez, Joaquín M.)

Neoliberal policies and the collapse of the agricultural economy generated two major transformations. First there was an exodus from the countryside to cities, the United States, and other countries. Second, a new financial oligarchy emerged which profited from the economic transition between the IMF and World Bank while also profiting from remittances of Salvadorans living abroad. The agrarian collapse, urbanization and neoliberal economics in the 1980s and 1990s pushed social exclusion to new highs. The state institutions that emerged during the transition to democracy have been unable to cope with the rise of violence in the country, as well (Chávez, Joaquín M.).

In 1995—just as the UN Security Council was making pronouncements about the Salvadoran success—the statistics showed a different story. El Salvador’s postwar violence levels matched, and possibly even surpassed the war carnage. When Salvadorans were asked about postwar violence, they themselves believed it to have increased (Moodie, Ellen). These statistics of crime are significant in the history of Salvadoran democracy. Democracy once instilled and maintained for some set period is supposed to mean a country is successful and moving up in the world, yet El Salvador was becoming more violent and the people were anxious and truly believed things had worsened in the country. These postwar instances of violence and struggle were disheartening to a population who had been fighting for democracy since the 1970s and 1980s and had revolted in decades prior as well (Moodie, Ellen). In El Salvador, democracy had also been a possibility but short of fulfillment. The low wages and limited opportunities postwar had quickly undermined the hopes that arose with the peace accords (Moodie, Ellen). The idea of their utopia had begun to dissolve postwar and disillusionment with democracy had begun to take effect.

The U.S. War on Drugs, New Challenges for Central American Countries, and Migrants’ Vulnerability

Though used now under the guise of further military intervention, the history of the war on drugs has a long history in the United States. Drugs first surfaced in the United States in the 1800s. Opium was very popular during the American Civil War; cocaine followed in the 1880s. Coca had also been integrated into health drinks and remedies. Morphine was discovered in 1906 and used for medicinal purposes. Heroin was a treatment for respiratory illness, cocaine was used in

Coca-Cola, and morphine was regularly prescribed by doctors as a pain reliever (“The United States War on Drugs”).

At the turn of the century there was a heightened awareness of psychotropic drugs and how they can lead to addiction. The abuse of opium and cocaine towards the end of the 19th century reached epidemic proportions. In 1906, the Pure Food and Drug Act required all physicians to accurately label their medicines. Also, near this time drugs were not seen as harmless remedies but something to be taken more seriously. The Harrison Narcotics Act, passed in 1914, and was the United States’ first federal drug policy. In 1930, the Treasury Department created the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. Harry J. Anslinger headed the agency until 1962 and was a large factor in the molding of U.S. drug policy. The Boggs Act of 1951 increased the penalties for marijuana use. The Narcotics Control Act of 1956 was repressive legislation that Congress adopted. The 1960s gave birth to a rebellious movement that popularized drug use. Marijuana was in fashion on campus. Other “hippies” used hallucinogens like LSD. Also, soldiers returning from Vietnam were found to have developed drug habits with marijuana and heroin. By the 1970s, President Richard Nixon declared war on drugs. He proclaimed them to be America’s number one enemy (“The United States War on Drugs.”) This war on drugs has played out and continued to be part of U.S. policy until present day, but this war has also hurt many Americans and Central Americans alike.

Not only is drug trafficking seen as a large conflict between the United States and Central America, but human trafficking as well has become a crisis. The neoliberal policies and conflicts in Central America have all culminated together to create a large migration from the countries. According to the Centre International pour la Paix et les Droits de l’Homme (CIPDAH), the number of refugees, especially women and children, fleeing Central America and seeking better

life is growing. The issue of trafficking in Central America of women and children has been brought more attention by international organizations. The UN Refugee Agency has recently called for immediate action "to help hundreds of people fleeing violence in Central America that has surged to levels not seen since the region was wracked by armed conflicts in the 1980s." The number of migrants moving from the U.S. has increased severely in the past few years, but very few of them gain asylum approval of the United States (CIPADH).

When children are attempting to migrate they are especially vulnerable to be taken advantaged of and abused. Many migrants have been taken by kidnappers and are tortured and forced into prostitution. Some others are enslaved working in marijuana fields. When children arrive in a different country, their vulnerable condition is an easy way for traffickers to exploit them. UNICEF reported that poverty is a main contributing factor to migratory movements and, thus, to children trafficking. The smuggling network is getting more organized through a number of different routes. UNICEF has reported 300 "blind spots" where people can cross the border to El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica (CIPADH).

The connection between the wars, intervention, implementation of democracy and neoliberal policies during the Cold War, the war and drugs and finally human trafficking might be confusing to look at separately, but a connection does exist and this context is important to understand the surge in migration that was seen and peaked in 2014. The wars and conflicts led to a destabilization of El Salvador and Guatemala and the violence of those conflicts is still perpetuated today in at times even harsher ways and more upsetting statistics. The United States' policy of implementing democracy and intervening in these countries in order to ward off communism was mostly led by concern over U.S. security rather than concerns over human rights violations. The democracy that the U.S. installed had neoliberal policies attached that

privatized programs and made it even harder for those who were suffering from the growing inequality in their countries. This discontent brought more violence and the lack of opportunity brought invisible funds that came from the drug trade. The war on drugs the U.S. launched was once again another justification for intervention and control in Latin America, meanwhile the people in El Salvador especially were becoming disillusioned with their utopia of democracy. With things still unstable, and violence still rampant, people are fleeing like never before. This migration is a mass exodus from the crime and instability that four decades of U.S. policy had perpetuated.

Chapter 2

Visual Embodiment of Youth Displacement and Desire through Guatemalan Productions

In this second chapter, I will analyze Guatemalan migration through three movies: *El Norte* (1983), *Ixcánul* (2015), and *La jaula de oro* (2013). These three movies represent different aspects of the migratory journey while also touching on the important themes of the north, youth migration, and the utopic myth of “el norte.”

My study will begin by considering *El Norte* because it is the oldest of all three movies and is based in an important time period during the Guatemalan Civil War that resulted in the mass migration of Guatemalans to the United States. This film gives historical context into the migratory history of Guatemala and specifically depicts youth migrants traveling to and landing in the U.S. In order to better understand the importance of migration and history of youth migration in the country, too, *El Norte* has to be presented first because of its important depiction of conflict and prejudice towards indigenous Guatemalans.

I will proceed to examine *Ixcánul*, which is set at a later time than *El Norte* and displays an expanded look into indigenous life within a modern-day Guatemala. *Ixcánul* also plays on the feeling of desire and uncertainty when considering the choice of migrating with its strong family dynamics that are represented. This film also depicts a life in which the entire family has chosen to stay even though their lives as indigenous farmers are difficult and they are marginalized within their own country still years after the war has ended. While migration is not the explicit focus of the film, one character did migrate but their fate is left with uncertainty. This film offers

an interesting contrast to *El Norte* because the protagonist cannot leave and is forced to make a life in Guatemala while wondering what could be out there for her.

La jaula de oro, which shares the same temporality as *Ixcanul*, will be the last one that I will analyze. *La jaula de oro*, similarly to *El Norte*, depicts the migrant journey but provides a much more complex and nuanced vision of the migrant journey that takes place in modern-day setting. The entirety of *La jaula de oro* is focused on the journey and offers a grimmer depiction of the dangers and challenges youth migrants face. This film following *Ixcanul* is important to offer a contrast between the decision to stay or leave.

The main idea that runs through the three movies is the desire for the north and the illusion of the utopia. All three movies feature young Guatemalan protagonists that have a desire to make a new life for themselves in the U.S. In *El Norte*, the protagonists make it to the U.S., but find life there to not be the vision they had imagined. In *Ixcanul*, the protagonist, Maria, never leaves Guatemala but wonders what lies beyond the fertile land beneath the volcano. *La jaula de oro* has only one of the protagonists make it to the end which offers a feeling of disillusionment to the idea of migrating because of everything that was lost along the way. The three movies offer nuanced manifestations of the migratory desire that when analyzed together give a clearer image of the migrant journey, the hope that migrants have, and the deconstruction of the utopic illusion of the north that they believe is ahead of them.

El Norte: A Broken Utopia

During Guatemala's civil war (1960-1996), a mass migration occurred because of the conflict; and these migrants traveled through Guatemala, Mexico, and the U.S. in order to get to safety. The majority of Central American migrants traveled to U.S. cities like Los Angeles, New York, D.C., Miami and Houston. This mass migration created a 90% increase in the migrant population. The movie *El Norte*, a classic and canonic movie today, depicts the migratory struggle through two young indigenous Guatemalans within this context, specifically in the 1980s.

In an interview in the *New York Times* with Gregory Nava, *El Norte*'s director, spoke about his film and his northern outlook. He said that the U.S. appears like a foreign and exotic place; it is a traditional place of promise instead of the center of reference. The central point of the film, instead, is on the migrant. Through a migratory observation, according to Nava, we can see the importance of this utopia and the north through conversations the family have with one another and the characters fleeing to the U.S (Insdorf).

El Norte challenged the idea of what a utopia is and how it can be broken. For the characters Rosa and Enrique, the utopia is "the north," which is representative of the U.S. Both Rosa and Enrique want to create a new life in the U.S., because they held the belief that this was a place of dreams. This dream consisted of work, an excess of wealth, bathrooms in homes for everyone, technology, and a place where everyone owns a car. An important thought that they had was the attainability of this wealth even for the poor: they believed that the U.S. would allow for anyone to rise in the class system. As such, they believed in the American dream, but soon discovered that life in the U.S. is very difficult, especially for migrants. They went to Los Angeles, which was seen as a romanticized city where dreams come true. Nevertheless, Rosa and

Enrique are very poor and carry little money with them to the U.S. Their lack of money in combination with other factors created a difficult and dangerous situation for the protagonists. For example, an issue with new migrants that is displayed early on in the Los Angeles's scenes in the movie is their inability to communicate. Statistics show that Central American migrants are less likely to speak English (Lesser and Batalova, "Central American Immigrants in the United States").

But where do these utopic ideas emerge? At a family gathering, their godmother likes to talk about the north; she makes jokes about how even the poor have toilets. Their father, however, had different ideas about the north that contrasted with the godmother's fantasies. Enrique's father told him, "For a rich man, a peasant is only a pair of arms, arms for work" (*El Norte*). His attitude of the north is that the peasant and migrant are merely tools for the rich rather than people. The father sees the U.S. as a country of exploitation. He represents the disappointment an idea like a utopia can cause someone. When something is not how it was pictured, the utopia shatters like an illusion. The godmother on the other hand is an example of someone who has not had the illusion broken. She believes in the American dream that she saw in her American magazines. This image however is two-dimensional and lacking the nuanced difficulties and challenges that someone can face in the U.S. The magazine depicts a very mediated image of America. They are superficial images that romanticize American life as ideal.

Moreover, before they set off for their journey, the siblings spoke with a man in their community who had gone north but returned. This character adds an interesting aspect to the film because he had supposedly reached the utopia yet returned to Guatemala. This returning seems to be a unique aspect in the film to make a statement that the U.S. is not a paradise or a dream.

In contrast to the idea of returning, a Guatemalan migrant named Elvina, was quoted saying, "We cannot go back to Guatemala." She described the crime and danger in the country and how many people leave looking for a place to feel more secure. For her, the U.S. is a safe haven. But also like Enrique and Rosa, she had experienced disappointment in the U.S. She finds her future uncertain and difficult because of a language barrier and employment struggles (Moga, "We Cannot Return to Guatemala.") Therefore, in examining *El Norte*, two other important questions are: How is this movie a good representation of the migrant experience? How can Guatemala's history and conflicts affect the flow of migration?

As stated in the previous chapter, there is a long history of violence and conflicts between the indigenous populations and the government. These conflicts turned into war, which later resulted in a mass migration. Rosa and Enrique represent two young indigenous people fleeing from violence. In the film, Rosa and Enrique's father was murdered by the military for his involvement with the guerrillas. The father, like many Mayans, worked with the guerrillas or sympathized of their actions because of the marginalization they have been subjected to at the hands of the government. This marginalization, harassment, and systemic genocide created enough fear in Enrique and Rosa to run away. In *El Norte*, specifically, this genocidal cleansing can be seen through the retaliatory killing of Rosa and Enrique's mother. It can also be seen through the military's pursuit of Enrique, a teenager (Jones, "Guatemalan Migration in Times of Civil War and Post-War Challenges.")

A desire to return to Guatemala happens for the siblings near the end of the film. Rosa misses her traditions and mother. She feels almost stifled in her job with new technology that she is required to use. She has visions of her old life but realizes she cannot return. This realization for Rosa is important because it highlights the expectations of assimilation for migrants. They

must become a certain version of American rather than incorporate their past and traditions. At the end of the movie, Rosa becomes ill and ultimately dies and Enrique is left without a job. Enrique had an opportunity for a job in Chicago but declined in favor of remaining with his sister. The decision Enrique is a harsh reality check. Being in America does not mean you can have everything. Both Rosa and Enrique dreamed of having cars, jobs, bathrooms, money and a family. Rosa did not achieve any of her dreams because of her premature death. Enrique lost an opportunity for a great job and lost his last remaining family member. Before Rosa died, she says that there is not a home here. The illusion of the utopia has broken in the clarity she received before death. After her death, Enrique is alone still looking for work. A car drives up asking who has strong arms. Enrique enthusiastically shows off his arms saying they are very strong. This moment of the film is cyclical coming back to the words his father spoke to him. What Enrique's father had said was true; Enrique was only a pair of arms.

El Norte represents the migrant experience through an indigenous youth perspective that offers an authentic observation of their experiences. The movie, then, challenged the idea of what a utopia represented and how this representation can be broken apart by reality. The film does not end happily which again is a nod to the theme of disillusionment. Through their experiences, Rosa and Enrique discovered the utopia doesn't exist and that the American dream is not a guarantee.

Rosa's illness and Enrique's impossible decision to choose between having work and his sister, the siblings are left disillusioned and yearning for what they left behind. As a viewer, you are left wondering about what would have happened for the siblings if they had chosen to stay in Guatemala. Precisely, in *Ixcanul*, the protagonist, a young indigenous woman, similar to Rosa and Enrique, has a desire to go north but cannot escape her circumstances or family. She is a

representation of those who could not or chose not to migrate leaving her to desire to travel beyond the volcano and start a new life.

Ixcánul: A Desire Beyond the Volcano

Ixcánul is both an equally moving and important film that depicts the life of a young Guatemalan peasant girl growing up in the shadow of a volcano. The movie's setting moves from the volcanic dirt, to the coffee fields, and to the city below, but never leaves Guatemala. *Ixcánul*, which roughly can be translated to in the Mayan language of Kaqchikel, has obtained success both domestically and abroad, while boasting a cast of nonprofessional actors. The movie, then, portrays a marginalized and underrepresented indigenous population, and in fact, the plot's popularity among Guatemalan audiences has elevated the movie's stars to a status reserved for lighter-skinned and Spanish speaking women.

This film was both groundbreaking and appealing to critics, while sharing an important message. For example, in a review from the *LA Times*, Justin Chang praises the movie and the lead actresses. Chang also offers praise for director, Jayro Bustamante, by noting the respect he has for the subject matter. Another point of praise for the film comes when Chang mentions how the film had premiered at the Berlin Film Festival where it won the Alfred Baure Prize for "opening new perspectives." In a quote from the article Chang writes, "Bustamante has made a film that sits astride the age-old clash of tradition and modernity, and casts a harshly appraising glance in either direction." Also, in an article for *Huffington Post*, Nick Pitney writes about the critical success of *Ixcánul*. According to Pitney, it is currently holding a 100 percent critics'

rating on Rotten Tomatoes. This rating is extremely significant because it means that every critic who has seen the movie has liked it. On the Rotten Tomatoes site, the critical consensus for the movie is, “*Ixcánul* opens a window into a little-seen corner of the world—and finds universal truths about the human condition that should resonate with patient viewers” (Pitney). Another point of significance is the impact this film has had in Guatemalan popular culture. The actress who plays Maria, María Mercedes, made the cover of a fashion magazine in Guatemala, and it was the first time that an indigenous woman has ever been on the cover (Pitney). This movie also had multiple release periods in Guatemala because of the popularity.

The universal truths about Guatemala to which Pitney refers, and the high importance and vivid depiction of a young indigenous woman growing in Guatemala are why this movie is critical to my thesis. *Ixcánul* comes at an important time when indigenous peoples in Guatemala continue to suffer from poverty, inequality, racism, and marginalization 20 years after signing the Peace Accords. Racism in Guatemala is still prevalent and directed towards the indigenous population. Bustamente, the director, is mixed. He remembers growing up and being taught Kaqchikel but being told not to speak it in public. His family didn’t want him to be bullied for not speaking Spanish. The fact that this film is in Kaqchikel is meaningful for the marginalized indigenous population. As Bustamente has said, “[People] feel the language is part of the past and not part of the progress we have made in the country.” Bustamente’s quote hits on an important point that the movie also focuses on, Guatemalans think that their indigenous history is part of the past when in reality it is Guatemala’s present (Pitney).

Another reason this movie is important is because of its depiction of a young Guatemalan woman. The protagonist of the film, Maria, is a young indigenous woman who lives with her parents on a Guatemalan plantation. She feels stuck in her situation and has dreams beyond the

volcano that surrounds her home. Precisely, the omnipresent volcano that looms over her home is a symbolic obstacle to Maria, who wants to go beyond those hills (Bons). She tried to leave for the U.S. with a boy, Pepe, but he left her behind. She later tried to escape but was caught by her betrothed, Ignacio (the man in charge of the plantation), on the road. Maria is pregnant with Pepe's baby and is treated like an outcast by the men in her life. Maria represents, then, the difficulty that exists for Guatemalan women. She is only expected to marry and have children for her husband in order to ensure her parents' security, but she has dreams beyond her parents' wishes. She wants to know what is beyond her volcanic home, and she yearns for something more. Nevertheless, being a young woman, Maria is deprived of the chance to dictate her destiny. In this sense, *Ixcánul* highlights realistic struggles of indigenous women everywhere through vision and a wonderful cast (Cardova).

Even though the film is extremely critical of Guatemala's socioeconomic and political circumstances, it also avoids the cliché of a young woman being left pregnant by focusing on the strong mother-daughter relationship, while facing the enduring myth of "el norte" (Gemunden). In fact, the U.S. is not often spoken of in *Ixcánul*, but throughout the film there are migratory undertones to the actions of the characters, specifically of the young people, Maria and Pepe. Specifically, the scene that begins at 17:00 is about the U.S. and the utopic ideals that Pepe shares with Maria. Maria and Pepe are talking while Pepe picks coffee, and the shots in the scene are going back and forth between the two characters. The shots on Pepe are medium shots while the shots on Maria are close-ups. Having the shot further away from Pepe creates a distancing between him and the audience. Maria's close-ups allow the audience to feel and be more sympathetic with Maria. You can see her expressions which are the focus of her shot, while Pepe's medium shots show him working. The variation of the shots can also be representative of

Pepe leaving, while the close-ups of Maria can signify her remaining in Guatemala. Another aspect of this scene is the diegetic sound from the nature around them and Pepe's whistling, which plays into the rurality of the scene. At the same time, the natural lighting, as it comes through the leaves, plays in shadows on the characters' faces and emphasizes the rural setting, too.

It is through this reinforcement of nature and the rural that the idea of "el norte" appears. Maria asks, "What's the United States?" Just like the utopic ideas circulated in El Norte by Rosa and Enrique's godmother as well as their neighbor, Pepe responds by saying there are big houses with gardens, cars, electricity, street lights, peeled fruit, and English speakers. Maria tells him he should learn Spanish before he learns English, to which Pepe retorts, "It's because of people like you this country is stuck." This scene's dialogue demonstrates how the imaginary of the North is represented. Pepe has a utopic image of the U.S. in his mind. He also speaks about electricity and that everyone has it, even the streets. In fact, he looks at the U.S. as the opposite of Guatemala. Guatemalans pick the fruit in their country, but in the U.S., it is already peeled. His ideas about the North are very much imagined because he seems to think that all of his problems will resolve and dreams will happen for him in the U.S. Moreover, this scene shows Pepe's indignation toward Guatemala. Pepe's line, "It's because of people like you this country is stuck," is a stab not only at Maria but at indigenous culture. Maria is a representative of what Pepe is running away from. She is a young indigenous woman doing what her family wants by not leaving and filling her obligation to marry and bear a child.

Nevertheless, when Maria asks Pepe about his fear of going to the U.S., he shakes his head no instead of answering her verbally as he did with every other question she asked. Pepe shaking his head no rather than answering her could signal the uncertainty or fear he does have

in going to the U.S. Pepe eventually leaves for the U.S., though his fate in his migration is unknown. The absence of Pepe's fate is symbolic for the unknown that faces migrants heading north. The lack of closure of his story is purposeful in order for the audience to be able to imagine multiple scenarios with Pepe. Did he make it the north? Did he die along the way? Will he eventually return to Guatemala? Pepe represents the what if. By not telling us the details, the audience also gains understanding of into what Maria may be thinking. There is concern over whether or not he made it, and curiosity and hope when thinking about the possibilities that could be waiting for him.

While the result of Pepe's attempted migration is never discussed and is left an unresolved plot point, in the film *La jaula de oro*, the focus will be on the migratory journey rather than having migration as an unspoken undercurrent of the film. The entire film centers on the journey of young Guatemalans leaving their lives behind to make it to the U.S. While Pepe's journey was never explored, *La jaula de oro* depicts the harsh reality of migration that many young Guatemalans face.

La jaula de oro: A Dream Unrealized

From the outset, Diego Quemada-Diez's *La jaula de oro* even in its metaphoric title, displays ambivalence toward the value and the promise that the journey holds (Moralde). Quemada-Diez's film focuses on child migrants in their journey through the perils and cruelty received by the majority of adults they encounter. His approach is far more nuanced and slow moving while displaying sweeping landscapes, and emotional connectivity through touch rather than words.

This can especially be seen in the interactions between Sara and Chauk, and in the opening sequence where we are introduced to the young characters without hearing them speak, but learn a lot about them through watching them prepare for their journey.

Quemada-Diez's script was created out of the personal testimonies of near 600 migrants (Delgado). The movie's main critical perspective is that of the youth migrant experience and the intersectional⁵ perspectives that can increase the difficulty of the journey. The film follows a group of children on their way to the U.S. in order to leave their impoverished lives behind in favor of a life full of opportunity. Samuel, Sara, and Juan are the three Guatemalan teenagers that are being followed initially. After entering into the Mexican border, they join up with another young immigrant, a Mayan boy named Chauk, who does not know any Spanish and is at many points in the movie left on the fringe because of his indigenous identity. Chauk, however, is able to form a friendship with Sara. At the same time Sara is posing as an immigrant boy (under the name of Osvaldo) during the movie. She has her chest taped and her hair cut short in order to attempt at passing as male. Juan is the alpha-male of the group and is the most antagonistic towards Chauk, especially after the latter and Sara form a bond. Samuel is a garbage picker in Guatemala.

After entering Chiapas in Mexico, they are rounded up by Mexican Immigration agents who steal from them and threaten the children before sending them back to Guatemala. Nevertheless, they soon leave again for the north, except for Samuel, who stays behind. Now, on the second bout at crossing into Mexico, the dynamic is between Sara, Juan, and Chauk. The three are riding the train through Mexico with thousands of other immigrants. At one point in

⁵ "Intersectionality" refers to the intersections between categories such as race, gender, and class that combine to create different experiences of discrimination and challenges. See "Word We're Watching: Intersectionality," an article on the Merriam-Webster website for further explanation.

their journey, they are stopped by drug traffickers, who begin to capture the females. Sara is recognized as being a female and is taken. After unsuccessfully fighting to retrieve Sara, Juan and Chauk move on. Nonetheless, both of them end up in two more perilous situations with a group of criminals and traffickers who take them across the border. After being left in the desert, Chauk is shot down by a hunter. Only Juan manages to cross the border and he ends up working in a meat factory in the U.S.

The movie has received critical acclaim while also depicting the important scenes of young Central American migrants. Stephen Holden says that, “it is a compelling social-realist drama” that “unblinkingly observes the hardships endured by these vulnerable children,” and therefore, observes the world through the eyes of those who have yet to be calloused by experience. Stephanie Merry similarly echoes praises of the film and its young cast noting that the film had won two awards at the Cannes Film Festival in 2013 most notably for its ensemble cast. Merry, also has praised that the movie does not tip into melodrama with the combination of the shaky camera and amateur cast that included extras who were actual immigrants. Rather, the critic notes that the feeling the movie gives places the audience in a hopeful complacency just to end in a heartbreaking manner.

For me, the most important contribution of *La jaula de oro* is how wonderfully it captures the additional difficulties that characters inhabiting intersectionality face throughout their displacement towards the U.S. By hiding her gender identity, Sara is showing a consciousness to the realities of the difficult circumstance of her femaleness. Another important aspect of the movie is the separation and isolated manner in which indigenous immigrants are treated. Chauk is not truly included by other migrants in their groups and he is considered more of an outsider than any other character. Chauk does not have English (or Spanish) subtitles, unlike the rest of

the characters. I believe that this omission is a conscious choice by the director to provoke the exclusionary feeling Chauk experiences.

A scene that stands out in the movie is the opening sequence with all of the characters. It begins with Juan walking through what looks like a slum. There are diegetic sounds coming from the neighborhood where other children are playing. Two children are focused on in the scene even after Juan exits it. They are playing with guns, pretending to shoot at him, which could be a foreshadowing to the fate of the characters. Another shot takes a medium angle camera perspective and pauses on a small child holding another small child. The young boy who is being held is mimicking the facial expression that was earlier present on Juan's face. The moment portrays the universal discontent and sadness that living in impoverished conditions has on children.

The next portion of the scene is panned to Sara where she goes into a ladies' restroom. Without saying a word, she looks into the mirror and begins to cut her hair. The mirror in the scene reflects the consciousness she has of the peril she is about to endure and the seriousness of her passing as male. The shot moves to a close up of her hands stroking her hair on the sink before it moves to another close up of her now, with short hair. Next Sara is topless, wrapping her breasts up tightly before putting on a t-shirt. She then pulls out birth control and takes one in another close up. All of these close-up shots are lending themselves to the discomfort of invading Sara's privacy. As she changes her appearance with short hair and different clothes, the camera still trains on her face unchanging and stoic. Sara exits the bathroom in her new identity.

The scene later returns to Juan as he is packing up his things. He, like Sara, demonstrates an awareness of what is to come by sewing a hidden compartment in his pants to hide his American dollars. Juan's bedroom appears to be shared with another person. There is a small TV

in the room and the walls are made of rusted metal. The contrast of Juan with his backpack and the bedroom is an illustration as to why he is leaving Guatemala: he is living in complete poverty. Moreover, as he stops to look at the other bed, the audience realizes that Juan is leaving people behind. His quick glance is an important reminder that he is probably leaving without his family's knowledge or permission. In a wide shot of Juan a few moments later, you can see the slum that he lives in from afar and its magnitude on top of a hill. The juxtaposition of this slum next to a garbage heap is symbolic. The people are living in such poverty that they live with (and out of) garbage. Precisely, the camera goes closer to Juan as he enters the garbage heap to meet up with Samuel, who is a garbage picker. The landfill is filled with people sifting through it in order to make a living. When Juan and Samuel are face-to-face, you can see the possible indifference or sadness on Samuel's face, which explains why, later, he returned to Guatemala.

Finally, around 6:00, the opening turns to a wall of photos for missing persons. Non-diegetic piano music begins to play in the background and it continues as the children ride the bus and begin their journey to the Mexican border. The images on the wall could also be a foreshadowing to the fates of the characters, that they too may disappear. Throughout this sequence, not a single word was spoken. This silence speaks for the enormity of the seriousness in this film. I interpret the silence, too, as a way in which the director is allowing these images to guide us, rather than dialogue, because these strong scenes are enough to deliver an emotional and informative opening.

This opening scene though never mentions the North explicitly, nor provides imagery and understanding into the desire to migrate. Because these children are living in complete poverty in a slum where there are no opportunities beyond picking through trash, migration is viewed, supposedly, as a way to prosperity and an escape from their lives into a new and better one. The

portion of the scene is also very significant with Sara cutting her hair. Women migrants are subjected to terrible violence along their migration, and are often raped, attacked, or kidnapped. By cutting her hair, she is attempting to remove a symbol of her womanhood in order to increase her chance of survival. Yet, it is a startling and sad moment to see such a young person taking new birth control pills in order to protect herself from what she suspects is coming for her. Sara is going into this journey with her eyes wide-open, but her representation of a young migrant is upsetting because of the greater amount she must do to prepare to possibly increase her safety. There are no guarantees however, which is why she takes the pill.

La jaula de oro demonstrates the complex and nuanced intersections that affect the youth migrant. This film, compared to the other two, more effectively portrays the migrant experience through the dynamic group relations that focus on gender, race, and identity. Through these multifaceted portrayals, a realistic depiction of youth migration is created that includes the aspects of violence against women and racism. The character of Sara provides the audience with an important look into the lengths that women have to go to try to protect themselves while migrating. Sara also represents the increased danger female migrants endure. The character of Chaulk introduces the prejudice that Guatemalans have towards indigenous people, as well as the increased prejudice and indigenous person has to withstand in order to migrate.

La jaula de oro's nuanced display of youth migration brings in the optimism and naivety of children and combines it with the harsh reality of migration. The children in this film, like many migrants, represent the hope in the utopia of *el norte*. They dream for the future ahead of them and the opportunities that await them, yet are met time and time again with challenges and violence. *La jaula de oro* doesn't end happily with Sara's kidnapping and Chaulk's murder, but this unhappiness is an authenticity that is needed in order to convey the true dangers and

challenges that face migrants, specifically child migrants. This film also offers an eye-opening look into the lengths people will go in pursuit of their utopia.

La jaula de oro is a very important film for my thesis because of its depiction of the youth migrant. This film provides an intersectional view on migrant experience through the inclusion of Sara and Chaulk, as well as an important look into someone who doesn't want to leave in Samuel. This film deals with racism, the violence towards women, and the way children go into situations naively and with bright eyes not realizing the dangers that are in front of them. This film offers a great perspective on youth immigration and depicts the state of their poverty in Guatemala well enough to gain understanding into their hopes for a better future ahead of them in the U.S.

Together *El Norte*, *Ixcánul*, and *La jaula de oro* provide a rounded depiction of Guatemalan youth migrants by focusing on different parts of the journey. *El Norte* portrays migration during the civil war period and centers on young indigenous migrants who are not only leaving because of their desire of the north. Rosa and Enrique's departure was caused by the death of the father and their need for survival. While *El Norte* develops some of its plot in both Guatemala and along the migrant path, the majority of the film is spent in the U.S., which differs from the other two films as well. *El Norte* targets the idea of the north through the three settings. It also examines the idea of nostalgia and disillusionment with the imagined north. The U.S. is not everything they dreamed of and in some ways, leads to their demise through Rosa's death and Enrique's loss of integrity and opportunity.

Ixcánul focuses on the young indigenous girl, Maria, who is struggling between her proper duty as a daughter and her other desires. Unlike the other two films, *Ixcánul* is solely set in Guatemala. It goes in depth into the indigenous experience within Guatemala. It specifically

studies the challenges of a young woman who is both navigating her culture and tradition, while dealing her desires to escape and go beyond the volcano. *Ixcánul*, also unlike the other films, is not explicitly about migration, but it is rather implicitly understood through the character of Pepe, and Maria's attempted escape that the desire to migrate exists as an undertone.

La jaula de oro centers on the migration of three young Guatemalans. Unlike *El Norte* and Pepe's migration in *Ixcánul*, however, there are more detailed depictions of the violence and danger that face migrants. *La jaula de oro* follows the young migrants from their village through Mexico and also portrays the infamous "Beast" train that carries the migrants through Mexico. *La jaula de oro* provides the details of the migratory journey that are not as explored in *El Norte*. The film also touches on the significance of racism towards indigenous people and the amount of violence towards female migrants. These aspects which make up a large part of *La jaula de oro* are not discussed or displayed as explicitly in *El Norte*.

While all three of these films differ from one another there are still underlying themes that connect them. In all three films, the female migrant experience is featured prominently. In *El Norte*, Rosa's journey and her new life in the U.S. are depicted in detail including the type of work she did when arriving in the U.S. Rosa is a figure of vulnerability and represents that various ways danger can manifest along the journey. In *Ixcánul*, Maria, while not a migrant, represents the desire a young woman has to forge her own path separate from her family traditions. Sara in *La jaula de oro* shows the progression of a female migrant navigating through the dangers in her path. She also, however, serves as a warning to the violence that can occur for women including rape and kidnapping.

The three films also examine the idea of the north and of a utopia. All three movies portray the desire for a new life in the U.S. and the length that young people are willing to go to

in order attempt to escape their reality in favor of their hopes of a utopic north. Though *Ixcanal* remains in Guatemala, migration and change of circumstance are themes that are recurrent. *El Norte*, *Ixcanul*, and *La jaula de oro* represent the ideas of the north and the broken illusion that occurs throughout their separate journeys. In all three films, the protagonists are left unhappy and dissatisfied with how their lives turned because of the losses sustained along their separate journeys.

Overall, the three films add interesting insights into the migratory experience. While these experiences appear as nuanced representations, they also appear as authentic and thought-provoking. The migratory journey is a complex issue from understanding the reasons for migrating, the conditions in the country, and what the path is like. The combination of these three films, however, sheds light of these experiences while offering enough variation in order to grasp a fuller picture of the Guatemalan youth migratory identity.

Chapter 3

Forms of Escapism in the Violent Climate of El Salvador

The third chapter shifts away from Guatemala to focus on its smaller neighbor, El Salvador. This chapter will analyze, productions from three different sources: the book *The Beast* by Óscar Martínez, two images from the Salvadoran town of Intipucá in an article by Jimmy Alvarado, and the image of the painting “Cuarto de Adolescente” by Catalina de Cid in an article by Tania Pleitez, which exhibits a darker aspect to migration. All three of the pieces are different in their embodiment of the Salvadoran migrant experience, yet the three of them together offer a holistic view into the motivations of displacement. They also display the effects that both movement and the inability to leave can have on people, specifically young ones.

In all three productions there are consistent themes of movement and escape. *The Beast* focuses on the journeys of displacement, and on the motivators of flight such as fear and violence. The statue and murals in Intipucá signifies a contrasting feeling that is associated with the trek, pride, as they depict the very interesting tradition of a town that believes they are destined to go to the United States. Fear is not something that is seen in the statue, mural, or in the description of the town, which is in stark contrast to the image of “El Cuarto Adolescente,” where the fear and violence of El Salvador is condensed into the bleak imagery of an adolescent bedroom. The theme of escape that is exuded in the other two pieces exists in the painting, but the escape is darker in order to represent the theme of death.

Fearful Flight from El Salvador

The Beast features a foreword by Francisco Goldman⁶ that describes the initial pushback in the publication process of the novel in Mexico, whereas Goldman suggests, “perhaps because it holds up a mirror to Mexico almost too depraved, grotesque, and heartless to believe.” Goldman continues to say this mirror holds up similarly in the U.S. and Central America. This book is not only a narrative of the migrant experience, but a painful tour de force of the failings of these countries and the violence that continues to run rampant.

Óscar Martínez is a young Salvadoran journalist that works for the online newspaper *El Faro*. In order to write this book, Martínez spent a year traveling with migrants across Mexico along with photographers and filmmakers. Throughout the year, he made eight trips aboard the dangerous freight trains. *The Beast* is a compilation of stories he wrote and had published in *El Faro* during his journeys along the trail (“The Beast (Book)”). Martínez being Salvadoran adds a level of authenticity to this novel, but this authentic character is better achieved in the book because Martínez does not just report on what he sees, but he lives these experiences and shows concern for those he travels with and interviews.

Having Martínez work and publish his works in *El Faro* is also a point of significance because of the publication’s importance in El Salvador and the rest of Central America. *El Faro* is an online news site that was founded in 1998 by Jorge Simán and Carlos Dada. The publication claims to be the first exclusively digital newspaper in Latin America. The goal of *El Faro* was to renovate Salvadoran media by making room for different political ideologies and attracting contributions from an array of personalities in El Salvador and Latin America. *El Faro*

⁶ Francisco Goldman is an American novelist, journalist, and Professor of Literature and Creative writing at Trinity College.

in Spanish means “lighthouse” or “beacon,” which is a fitting name for the site. The journalists involved investigate and pursue the stories of ignored crimes, human rights abuses, and drug violence. It shines a light on the horrid abuse and violence in El Salvador and the rest of Latin America (“El Faro”). It is also a site that pursues bravery in light of the violence and threats that are made towards journalists in the region. *El Faro* is the type of journalism that is necessary for people to read because like Goldman’s description of *The Beast*, it holds up a mirror and forces people to look at the violence and crimes while giving a voice to those who are often forgotten.

In an interview with the *Texas Observer* Martínez discussed *The Beast* and his motivation behind his writing. When asked about his decision to write *The Beast* Martínez explained:

I could give you a bunch of different reasons and say it’s because I’m from Central America, etc., but I really wrote it because I felt like I had a journalistic obligation. When I worked as a freelancer in Mexico, I did an investigation—with my brother, who is also a reporter and works at *El Faro* with me—for a magazine called *Gatopardo* and we were working on an article about undocumented people who cross Mexico. When we saw what was happening to them—I’m talking about six or seven years ago, but especially when we saw that no one was doing anything, that there were no reporters in the area writing about it, we realized it was necessary to do something. (Del Bosque)

What Martínez mentions in this quote is significant because he points out how badly mistreated and ignored migrants were while attempting to get to the United States. Martínez, through his journalism, had taken up a call to action in order to not simply write articles but an entire book dedicated to telling stories of those on the fringe of society. In the interview, Martínez also explains what it means to him to have the book published in English and the lesson

he hopes Americans will take away from the book. He believes the ultimate fate of his work was to be published in the United States in order to provide perspective into the hardships their workers, gardeners, and factory employees faced in order to come to this country. He also hopes that *The Beast* will change the conversation around migrants by viewing this displacement as a humanitarian crisis. He believes the worst tragedies along the trail—the rapes, the mass kidnappings, the torturing at the hands of Los Zetas, the border crossing fee—are things that the migrants do not even tell their own families (Del Bosque).

The terrible crimes that occur on the path to the United States are often unspeakable. Many of the abhorrent acts of violence and moments of tragedy occur on the freight train that as many as a half a million Central Americans climb on known as “La Bestia,” or “the beast.” This train was the inspiration for the title of the novel and is also a primary figure throughout the different narratives. The cargo trains, which carry products north for export, are climbed upon by immigrants on their journey to the United States. The rail lines cross Mexico from the Guatemalan border in the south to the United States’ border in the north (Dominguez Villegas, Rodrigo). To reach the depot in Arriaga, Chiapas, migrants walk for days avoiding immigration checkpoints. The United States’ border is two weeks away on the train (Aridjis, Homero). Since these trains are meant to hold cargo, there are no passenger railcars which leads migrants to ride atop the moving trains. The migrants face physical dangers of amputation or death if they were to fall or be pushed off the train.

The first chapter of the book is titled “The Road to Oaxaca” and it is going to be specifically highlighted because of the narrative’s focus on three Salvadoran brothers, the Alfaro brothers: Auner, Pitbull, and El Chele. Additionally, it features one of the most compelling narratives throughout the entire novel as it breaks down the conditions inside of El Salvador and

the motivations for the Alfaro brothers' escape. According to Martínez's report, the Alfaro brothers did not know who they were fleeing from: "There are those who migrate to El Norte because of poverty. There are those who migrate to reunite with family members. And there are those, like the Alfaro brothers, who do not migrate. They flee" (Martínez 1). These lines set the mood of the anecdote about the brothers as well as that of the chapter and the book in its entirety.

Auner is described to be a quiet brother while El Chele is noted for being boyish and light-skinned. Pitbull is described with the face of an ex-con. The three brothers are different not only in looks but lifestyles and choices. What they have in common is their flight from danger (2). Each one of the Alfaro brothers had their own reason for leaving El Salvador. They also had different upbringings. For example, the first time Martínez asked Auner why he was running, he said that he wanted "una vida mejor," a better life. His response changed however when he was away from his brothers and alone with Martínez. Auner said that he was running away, "so I do not get killed" rather than trying his luck with migrating (1). Looking for a better life in the United States is something common to hear from migrants, but the fear of being killed is something all too common as well. Martínez continues to ask him if he will be returning to El Salvador. Auner replied, "never." He then amends his response by saying he would return if something happened to his wife or daughter in order to kill "them," even though he does not know who "they" are. But that is a characteristic of this chapter, fleeing from those you do not even know. There is a lingering danger, and whisper of threats, but the source is unknown, which creates an omnipresent feeling of danger.

For Pitbull, the danger found him and his friend Juan Carlos Rojas in 2008. Pitbull witnessed his murder right in front of him. He was close enough for his friend's brain to land on his shirt (4). Being young and witness to his friend's murder, Pitbull chased down the killers and

attacked the man holding the gun. The police showed up and pulled Pitbull off the man while the man's accomplice got away. Because of Pitbull's appearance as a rough looking kid on the street, he was assumed to be a gang member (5). Pitbull was only seventeen years old when he was called to come down to the police station to look at a line up. Pitbull identified the killers, but wasn't behind a screen or glass to protect his identity as he pointed them out. As he pointed out the killers, the assassins got a good luck at him as well. The assassins recognized Pitbull because the Chalchuapa slums are "a small world." (6). They also knew that Pitbull was the son of Silvia Yolanda Alvarez Alfaro and that she owned the shop next to the *pupusería*. They even knew his real name, Jonathan Adonay Alfaro Alváñez (6).

Martínez notes that in February, the month Juan Carlos was killed, nine other men between eighteen and twenty-five were just killed in the Alfaro brother's hometown of Chalchuapa alone (7). By the time Pitbull was eighteen years old, he was running away into the possibility of death even though he is running away from El Salvador. After all, nothing is certain when you are riding the beast. Yet, the uncertainty of the trails has become more appealing to these young men than to perhaps face the certainty of death in their country (8).

El Chele worked as a mechanic in an attempt to save money for El Norte. His father told him, "Nos vamos al Norte, hijo, verás cómo ahí sí hay chamba, buen jale, buen dinero" (8). Like we saw in the movie *El Norte*, this kind of thinking is what motivated thousands upon thousands of Central Americans to leave for the United States. There is a utopic mindset that everything they want and need is in the north. These thoughts—along with unstable conditions in their country—are what keep people like the Alfaro brothers going. They are leaving everything behind because they see so much in front of them. El Chele spent his time working and chasing

girls. He had some success because he did not look like the “typical delinquent” (8): he was fair-skinned with boyish brown curls. Unlike Pitbull, he looked innocent and trustworthy.

Race in El Salvador plays a part into the success or failure of someone. Both El Chele and Pitbull are of similar age, neither had been in gangs; however, El Chele had received breaks because of his skin color. Pitbull being darker was an assumed criminal and gang member. That is, Pitbull did not look so innocent because he was lacking a whiteness that El Chele possessed. The assumptions around Pitbull are probably why he did not hold onto jobs as long. Society pushed him on the fringe because of his outward appearance and left him with little to no options. While in between work, Pitbull considered joining a gang. He started stealing bicycles and taking purses. He was arrested and put in jail for three months. He did not try to tell the police he was not a gang member. In fact, Pitbull had not been in gangs before he went to prison (12). Nevertheless, a racial hierarchy along with the institution of police and the prison system had all condemned a young boy who had never been involved with gangs and put him in a situation where it was join or be killed.

The mother of the three boys, Doña Silvia Yolanda Alvárez, warned her children to get out of town. She sensed that violence was coming closer in their neighborhood. After work, as Auner was walking home, his uncle told him the news: Doña Silvia had been killed at age forty-four from two gunshot wounds to the head (16). Doña Silvia was right to sense the danger around her, but unfortunately like many Salvadorans, was unable to escape the violence herself. “Death is not simple in El Salvador. It’s like the sea: you’re subject to its depths, its creatures, its darkness. Was it the cold that did it, the waves, a shark? A drunk, a gangster, a witch. They did not have a clue” (19). That’s how violence works in El Salvador. It works anonymously and quietly. The Alfaro brothers never

found who killed their mother or if her death was payback for something they did. Doña Silva had just become another victim of one of the countries with most inequality and impunity in the world, and her boys were desperately trying to escape her same fate. As the journey north continues, talking to Martínez Auner expresses: “God. Just hoping those threats against us do not turn against them [the family]. Those people are damn crazy. They did not even say who they were coming for. They only said, *for the family*” (18).

Therefore, by the point the brothers are in Ixtepec, in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, Auner repeats to Martínez that they must escape no matter what. They have to get north. Oaxaca is a common starting place with migrants, and as Martínez explains, it opens choices for Central American migrants. One option is to travel through the Oaxaca jungle that is off of the usual migrant trail, but this route needs the use of a guide. Another one, traveling by train, would have the brothers going into the territory of Los Zetas⁷ in Veracruz. The decision of which route to take is a considerable thing to weigh. After all, even before starting their journey through Mexico, “Of every ten migrants from Central America, six are apprehended and mugged by Mexican migration authorities” (3). If the brothers are apprehended, they would not only be losing their money or possessions, but potentially their lives on the way back to El Salvador (3).

As the chapter nears a close, so does Martínez’s travels with the Alfaro brothers. Auner asks Martínez, “Why do you want to help us? Why do you even care?” (24). Martínez struggles

⁷ Referred to by the DEA as, “Mexico’s most organized and dangerous group of assassins,” Los Zetas are a gang formed in 1999 by narco-trafficker Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, who was also the founder of the powerful Gulf Cartel. Los Zetas was formed to act as the armed wing of the Cartel. The original Zetas were composed of thirty-one elite Mexican army deserters—some of whom had trained at the US-led School of the Americas. By 2001, the group had already added to its brutal repertoire by mass kidnappings of undocumented migrants for ransom money. In 2007, it had officially become autonomous from the Gulf Cartel (Martínez 3).

with the questions, and his first response is that he wants to write their story, but he realizes that it is more than that, because the brothers also want to know why their story matters and who will listen to it. Martínez makes attempts to keep in contact with the brothers after they separate. They had texted back and forth for a while, and the last message he received from them was that they were about to board the train. Martínez keeps sending messages without response. He then reads about a massive kidnapping conducted by Los Zetas, and still hears nothing from the three brothers (26).

Martínez's loss of communication speaks so loudly about the danger and unknown that faces migrants. The journalist had grown to care about the brothers after hearing their stories and traveling with them. The Alfaro brothers' stories are like thousands of others. They are trying to escape their country and the violence in hope of a better life that they may never reach. The unknown result of their journey is unfortunately the normative outcome for migrants. They might have made it to the United States, or have been turned around to El Salvador. They might have been killed or kidnapped along the way as well. They could have fallen off the train. The train itself is not the only danger that migrants face atop; Central American migrants are subjected to extortion and violence by gangs that control the routes north (Dominguez Villegas,).

The Migratory Pride of Intipucá

While the Alfaro brothers fled El Salvador from the violence and threats made against them, there are others who leave out of pride instead of fear. Migration is not always a life or death situation, but instead can be viewed as a tradition such as it is viewed in the town of Intipucá, El

Salvador. Intipucá has a population of 8,400 residents, but this number is constantly declining because of the mass amount of migration. The town is unique for many reasons, the main street of the town is named after former U.S. Ambassador William Walker, which symbolizes the town's strong connection to the United States. The other unique artifact is the statue at the center of town, which shows a man walking away with only a backpack. This statue is representative of the first man to migrate from Intipucá to the United States (Alvarado).



Figure 1. Statue representing the first migrant from Intipucá.

The statue is meant to represent Sigfredo Chávez the first of the village believed to leave for the United States. In the image, it can be clearly seen the migrant dressed in plain clothing and carrying nothing but a small backpack with him. The man is looking back over his shoulder as well as to look back on what he is leaving behind, yet his expression is not sad or conflicted.

The head appears turned as to get one final look because the rest of his body is squared toward the north.

The statue of the man with the backpack is an example of the cult-like feelings the Intipucacanos follow as the custom to leave the town. Chávez and his story have spread throughout the town folklore, changing depending on who is telling the story. Some argue he is not the first one to arrive to the United States because the descendants of the first people to leave argue about who the first migrant was. They all want to claim their families led the migratory charge (Alvarado). The rumors about the first migrant began in the year 2000, the same year the monument was built in the central square. The statue was meant to represent the Intipucacanos and what made the town unique. The first thing that occurred to everyone was that leaving is what defined Intipucá (Alvarado).



Figure 2. The faces of those who followed Sigfredo Chávez: Alredo Arias in 1967, Maximiliano Arias in 1968, Ana Medina Jiménez in 1969(...) all came to Washington D.C. from Intipucá.

The mayor of Intipucá estimates that nearly 50% of the population now lives in the United States (Alvarado). This town though unique in its imagery, shares something very similar to other Salvadoran migrants. They all share the same belief in the migratory myth. The town truly believes in the utopia in the United States and that they are destined to go there. The Intipucueños' stories are in extreme contrast to the Alfaro brother's because even after they leave, they return once a year: from February 28th to March 10th, the migrants return in celebration. Everything is reopened and people return to their homes, but after the 11 days, everything closes up again and remains that way for eleven months (Alvarado).

Intipucá is truly a unique town that plays heavily into the mythology around migration. Even the families fighting over the history of migration shows how much pride they all have in it

and how each family wants to claim the tradition as their own. While many each year in Intipucá celebrate the fulfillment of their migratory destiny, there are still many Salvadorans who are unable to leave.

Youth Consciousness of Violence and the Inability to Escape

Many in El Salvador see migration as the only escape. Those in fear run away and take their families with them. But what about those who cannot leave? Not everyone is like the Alfaro brothers who by being male and having trusted traveling companions, had decent odds of making it to the United States. What about those with no money? Or, as we saw in *Ixcánul* and *La jaula de oro*, women who cannot or are afraid to travel? What about the youth in El Salvador? Often, the very young ones are left behind because they cannot escape by migrating. The fear many teen Salvadorans have manifests itself into a far more permanent escape.

Tania Pleitez, a writer for *El Faro* writes about a story she had read by Augusto Magaña, a Salvadoran, who studies and writes in Barcelona. Magaña's writing introduced Pleitez to the voice of young people inside the climate of violence in El Salvador. There are many young people who are on the fringe of society. They are marginalized based on their youth or darker complexion similarly to how Pitbull was stereotyped. This leaves many young people in a very vulnerable state inside of El Salvador with the appearance that they do not possess many options. Magaña, in his piece, refers to a report from the Institute of Legal Medicine. In the report, it stated that between January to June 2015 there were 270 suicides in El Salvador, and the age range with the highest number of suicides was 15-19 years old with 41 suicides. Overall between the ages of 15-29, there were 120 suicides (Pleitez). This is the same age range as the Alfaro

brothers. There are hundreds of young people in El Salvador that found their escape through death. Young people are often the biggest victims of the violence in El Salvador, and many could not handle the consciousness of their violent climate.



Figure 3. *Cuarto de Adolescente* (2012) by Catalina del Cid. Acrylic on Fabric, 57 x 104.5 inches. Photography by Eleonora Salaverría.

Pleitez continues her post with the discovery of the painting, “Cuarto de Adolescente.” The piece manages to capture something as intimate as a teenager’s room and use it to illustrate the larger context of youth awareness in their violent society. By having the image feature a bedroom, there is something almost secretive about it as though we should not be looking in. It’s a tight and small space with cinder block walls that represent the social class the child lives in. There is also a lack of color in the room with it being most black, white, and shades of grey. The colors seem to have drained which represents a lack of humanity in the room. There are just things. Where is the teenager? The walls are covered with posters of sports teams with hints of American popular culture. There is an image of Tweety Bird and a figure of Winnie the Pooh on

the wall. Both can represent the yearning and interest the teenager has in America, but its unattainable because its only up on the walls. Right next to the technology in the room, a television and videogames, are the English words “I’m not Stupid.”

It seems fitting that the bold declaration painted on the wall is put next to such distracting devices like a television. The teenager is screaming out that they know what is happening around them. The television shows and video games cannot distract them from what is really going on in El Salvador. They see the pain and violence. They see people leaving but they are stuck inside their bedroom and treated as though they do not understand. But the violence and the fear is all around them and it is overwhelming, which is why so many young people have ended their lives.

Young people in El Salvador are fleeing or are growing up with the intention to leave. The Alfaro brothers fled an unknown violence that had already taken their mother away from them, yet they may have found more trouble along the way. The townspeople in Intipucá grow up and tell their children with pride about the United States and how their future is about leaving, while there are children in El Salvador who have the acute awareness of what is happening and perhaps do not have the means or will to leave. If they do leave, it could be by suicide.

All three sources add important perspective to the discussion on Salvadoran migration. While *The Beast* offers a very detailed view inside of El Salvador and on the migrant trail, the other two sources including the images from Intipucá and “Cuarto de Adolescente” shape the way migration is viewed in El Salvador. Both the image of the statue and mural provide a view of migration that is both positive and optimistic, which is in stark contrast to the Alfaro brother’s experience. “Cuarto de Adolescente” shows the darker aspect of migration because not everyone, specifically young people have the ability to leave yet are left in the intense violence that so

many flee from. Overall, these cultural productions give impactful meaning to what it means to be a Salvadoran migrant, and type of experiences those in El Salvador are facing.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, different artistic productions have been analyzed. The artistic productions have been: *Ixcanul*, *La jaula de oro*, *El Norte*, *The Beast*, the Intipucá images, and “Cuarto de Adolescente.” While these productions differ in medium and country represented in them, they share similar themes. All of the productions’ subjects are about immigration and the youth migrant experience. The three movies all feature young protagonists, *The Beast* interviews young migrants, and the Intipucá images and “Cuarto de Adolescente” feature reasons for young people to leave or flee their countries.

Another theme that appears across the productions is the feeling and desire for a better life. The adolescents in *La jaula de oro* and *El Norte* left Guatemala in order to create a better future. In *Ixcanul*, María desires to leave her home with Pepe and desires to flee her the circumstances of her pregnancy. The Alfaro brothers in *The Beast* have the desire to live out their lives without fear. The citizens of Intipucá are motivated to reach the U.S. in order to fulfill the tradition of their village, and the in “Cuarto de Adolescente” there is a need to escape from their lives of violence.

All of the subjects in this thesis feature the underlying search for the utopia. Unhappiness is consistent across all the artistic works. The U.S. in many of the productions is explicitly mentioned like in *The Beast*, *La jaula de oro*, and *El Norte*. The U.S. is pictured as a place where their dreams can become true and where they can pursue a better life. In *Ixcanul* and the “Cuarto de Adolescente” painting influence of the U.S. is more subtly seen in the artwork on the wall of

the room and in the mystery beyond the volcanos. Another aspect of the utopia that is shared among multiple productions is the shattered perception of the utopia and what it represents. A fracturing of the utopic vision occurs in all of the Guatemalan productions and in the painting. All of the protagonists in the film face the disillusionment of “el norte” throughout their journeys.

While these productions all share similar messages of migration and displacement, they are also contrast in aesthetics. All of the Guatemalan productions are films that beautifully illustrate the struggles of the young migrants. *El Norte* is the oldest of all the collected pieces, but provides an important visualization of the struggles to cross the border and the difficulties undocumented migrants face in the U.S. The Salvadoran productions of the images and painting also create powerful figures to embody the contrasting feelings of pain and honor in migration.

All of the pieces collected for this thesis are effective, yet there are productions that are better than others in illustrating the trials of young Salvadorans and Guatemalans that are migrating to the U.S. Overall, *La jaula de oro* and *Ixcánul* are the most effective pieces in the thesis. *La jaula de oro* manages not only effectively recreate the migrant trail, but also recreated the pain and suffering that women and indigenous people can face on their journeys. Sara and Chauk are compelling characters that display the important intersections of migrants. *Ixcánul* while its setting remained in Guatemala, was compelling and effective in its storytelling of a young woman that has unattainable dreams. Its effectiveness similarly to *La jaula de oro* stems from the fact that its protagonists displayed a young female indigenous woman. Migrants and their struggles are often forgotten are not spoken of, but women and indigenous people especially are excluded from narratives. “Cuarto de Adolescente” is extremely effective as well

because the painting and the article that accompanied it presented a grim view into the lives on young Salvadorans that are unable to escape their circumstances.

Overall, the collection of productions provides a holistic view into the circumstances of young migrants. While immigration policies in the U.S. are changing to become harsher and more restrictive, it is important to remember the events that led to thousands of young people's displacement. Often, those who choose to come to the U.S. are fleeing terrible violence in their home countries or are attempting to escape poverty caused by massive inequality. The mass migration seen in the 2000s should not be viewed as an influx of aliens, but rather, the arrival of refugees due to humanitarian crises in their countries. While fearmongering and politics attempt to use devise rhetoric to create an us versus them situation, it is important to remember the U.S.'s culpability in these crises. It is also important to remember that those coming to the U.S. are human beings that should not be labeled as illegal due to their undocumented status.

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Academic Vita

Shannon Reinke

Education: The Pennsylvania State University

Graduation: May 2018

The Schreyer Honors College

B.A. in Spanish, B.A. in Global and International Studies, minor in Latina/o Studies

Paterno Fellows Scholar

- Honors program including advanced academic coursework, thesis, study abroad and/or internship, ethics study, and leadership/service commitment

Universidad Iberoamérica, Puebla, México

- Took 9 credits of advanced Mexican literature, history, and art
 - Immersed myself in Mexican culture during homestay experience
 - Traveled to multiple locations in Mexico including Oaxaca, Cuetzalan, and Mexico City
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Work & Leadership Experience:

Teach For America

Campus Campaign Coordinator

- Work 5-10 hours a week on various events and weekly objectives
- Facilitated interview prep and information session for potential applicants
- Hosted events with numerous organizations across campus to speak about TFA

Liberal Arts Envoys

Student Ambassador

- Lead campus tours for prospective Liberal Arts students and their families
- Assisted with the facilitation of Liberal Arts Career week through promotional events and active event attendance
- Collaborated with other College leaders to facilitate and staff fall and spring student orientations

Centre County Democrats

Volunteer

- Worked to elect Democrats in local, state, and Federal offices
- Volunteered at Bernie Sanders rally as a member of the crowd control
- Canvassed door-to-door during 2016 election in order to provide voting information and location literature to students

Liberal Arts Undergraduate Council

Secretary

- Served as an elected college representative
- Maintained meeting minutes and attendance records through a points system
- Managed and updated social media account and created the official council website

Penn State Dance MaraTHON

Committee Member

- Helped raise over \$15,000 to support the Four Diamonds Fund for pediatric cancer research
 - Organized and hosted fundraising weekends
 - Served as the on-call chair during the 46-hour dance marathon
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