

*Homelessness, Subjectivity and Nation-State in U.S. Central American*

*Narratives*

By

Abel Arango

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This dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Rubén Medina, Professor, Spanish

Paola Hernández, Professor, Spanish

Steven Hutchinson, Professor, Spanish

Alberto Vargas, Associate Director, Latin American and Caribbean Studies

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## **Introduction: A Homing Desire in U.S. Central American Narratives**

“The question of home, therefore, is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion and exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of ‘belonging’”. -Avtar Brah

The word “homeless” and those that find themselves under this category clearly grapple with the term’s negative implications. From the perspective of local authorities that look to address this social ‘ill’, being homeless communicates a condition, a syndrome that creates a dichotomy between the housed and un-housed. In public discourse the issue is how to handle homeless populations that find themselves in virtually every city. Where are they to take residence and engage in everyday activities if they confront daily prohibitions that keep them from occupying a position in society? Most local solutions are about finding temporary housing that is separate from residential and commercial zones. Correspondingly, the homeless find themselves forcefully removed in order not to subvert cities’ aesthetic. Propositions that address the ‘homeless problem’ come up short leaving these bodies perpetually out in the cold. City officials are reluctant to integrate these figures into the rest of the population, given that citizens regard them as a threat to civic order and keep them at an arm’s distance. According to the sociologist Rodney Fopp, homeless subjects, in the eyes of many, are unhinged,

deviant, criminal, undisciplined, inadequate and at the absolute bottom of the social hierarchy.

While the term homeless applies to individuals that find themselves without housing or social support, I intend to use the term within a context of national belonging. That is, I argue that Central American diasporas' find themselves as homeless and profoundly troubled on account of nation-states that reject them, leaving them without a territory to call home or a sense of community. Despite the condition of displacement, I contend that a position of homelessness also advances an emancipatory potential that redefines national belonging, making space for Central American communities that find themselves banned from the "house" that is the nation and from constituting a part of the body politic and its imaginary. As such, in my project I advance what I call a "trope of homelessness" as a productive prism that articulates and contests Central Americans' liminality.

Sociologist's definitions of homelessness serve as a starting point for my own study. In his article "Homelessness and the Meaning of Home: Rooflessness or Rootlessness?" Peter Somerville posits that homelessness has four dimensions: the physical, the psychological, the personal and the communal (533). The physical refers to a concrete space, the shelter and protection of having a roof over one's head that gives one peace of mind. This structure results in the psychological comfort of having a place of one's own that implies protection and privacy from an outside that can be menacing. Having this safeguard allows one to cultivate and develop the self. In this way having a home is fundamental in serving as a source to the construction of identity. A wall decorated with family pictures, or a small corner covered with paintings, serves as an

extension of one's personal history and idiosyncratic tastes. This space communicates an understanding of one's selfhood and in turn constantly reminds its inhabitants and visitors who the subject is. In this sense, the microcosm of home as a place regenerates one's identities, given that one sees images and symbols of oneself in the surroundings.

From an ontological point of view, having a hearth and shelter offer an understanding of one's footing in the world, of one where belongs and who constitutes one's communities. Without the assurance of having a definitive home, homeless subjects grapple with a sense of exclusion from the social fabric. In "There's No Place like Home: The Discursive Creation of Homelessness", Celine-Marie Pascale contends that, in contrast to homelessness, having a home is not merely inhabiting a private space of one's own, but more importantly signifies a rhetorical space of community and a sense of belonging (259). By contrast, homelessness not only conveys a lost home, but rather the lack of place or community to which to return to (259). Correspondingly, the homeless suffer a profound cultural rejection and contend with a form of Otherness that defines them and separates them from the social fabric. Drawing on Pascale, I argue that Central Americans face repudiation as both the "home" and host lands frame them as a cultural and national Other.

During the 1980s until the present Central Americans, largely from El Salvador and Guatemala, fled civil war and its aftermath only to deal with anti-immigration policies in the U.S. (that I will detail further ahead). Unable to return to the homeland and denied official residency in the host land, these diasporas find themselves without a permanent residence. Since then, shutting out these diasporas from the U.S. has only intensified. Migrant caravans and detention centers, with their inhumane living

conditions, serve to highlight the U.S.'s response to keep these subjects outside of the national "house". As such, Central Americans' experience the upheavals associated with communal and national removal.

Despite a history of national displacement, sites and positions of homelessness have gone largely unexplored, or received little attention. One critic who has briefly mentioned national homelessness is Arturo Arias who claims that Central Americans have a history of rejection from the alleged "home" country. As indigenous communities and progressive-minded groups posed a threat to oligarch's visions of modernization during the 1980s, the state rejected and banned these subjects, denying their presence. The state particularly viewed peasants and indigenous communities as formless and an unaesthetic people incapable of constituting a subject. Consequently, they came to represent the threat of national destabilization (Arias 181). Arias sustains that because of the traumatic experience of displacement, coupled with a history of colonization, Central Americans do not reimagine themselves in the U.S. Such trauma impedes their drive for representation, making them fundamentally invisible.

Drawing on Arias, in *Latinizing America: Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies* (2013) Claudia Milian argues that on account of their cultural Otherness, figured in their association with Communism, dark brownness and indigeneity, Central Americans are outside of the *latinidad* construct and larger national U.S. imaginary. She traces a series of writings that personify Central Americans as abject, repulsive and illegible bodies, distancing these subjects from the social fabric in the U.S. Expanding on this scholarship, my project proposes a new approach to explore Central Americans' challenge for representation, place and a sense of belonging within

the U.S. Particularly, I place a social discourse of homelessness in relation to Central American diasporas and their representation as territorially and nationally displaced subjects. I elaborate a metaphorical meaning of homelessness based on a series of novels that confounds the national, territorial and cultural divisions between the U.S. and Central America. In this dissertation, I particularly concentrate in analyzing novels that underscore manifestations of homelessness, namely, *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998) by Héctor Tobar, *The Ordinary Seaman* (1997) by Francisco Goldman, *Frontera Street* (2002) by Tanya Maria Barrientos, and the Romilia Chacón detective series by Marcos McPeck-Villatoro. My focus on sites that dramatize homelessness and deterritorializations is significant as collectively these instances form a claim to belong in the U.S. As opposed to Chicanos/as that have a claim to U.S. territory through the construct of Aztlán (affirming that the U.S. Southwest is Mexican territory), and Puerto Rican and Cuban Americans that have citizenship status, Central Americans lack these bonds to the U.S. As such, these narratives engage in the construction of new communities and highlight a connection to U.S. territory while also challenging the status quo of the U.S. and Central America as isolated from each other.

As a dominant characteristic that defines the characters in these works, I advance homelessness as a fundamental area in the discussion of Central American's call for a place in the national body. The plight of intransience that I trace in this study forms part of a reality for Central Americans (such as crossing the U.S.-Mexico militarized border, occupying refugee camps, and living in the U.S. with the constant threat of deportation). Drawing on this corpus of novels, I argue that homelessness is another category of Otherness imposed upon Central Americans that has gone unaddressed and



undertheorized. As a recurring image we need to account for how it excludes these diasporas and at the same time frustrates and resists the reproduction of monolithic national identities.

Based on the novels that I analyze, I advance what I call the “trope of homelessness” as a prism that helps us interpret Central Americans’ reality that is undergirded by national rejection. I argue that homelessness foregrounds the unsettling confrontation between displaced Central American subjects, the stray landscapes these subjects inhabit, and the U.S. nation-state policies that violently casts them out. Despite the negative connotations and brutality of homelessness, I contend that this position also has a subversive potential that challenges the criteria of national identity and membership. In doing so, I reconfigure the traditional definition and negative implications of homelessness to a metaphorical one that contests Central Americans’ liminality. Correspondingly, the trope of homelessness forms a crucial site of struggle against the national and socio-cultural marginalization imposed upon Central American populations. In doing so the trope of homelessness challenges a politics of national belonging that is based on phenotype (White European), language usage (English only) and territorial borders the nation-state emphasizes.

I define my use of the trope of homelessness based on three components that make up its constitution: unofficial spaces occupied by restless homeless bodies in motion, troubled subjectivities and the creation of new communal relationships that redefine the U.S.’s national politics of belonging. The first of these is the marginal spaces that homelessness puts at the front and center. These are unsanctioned zones that protagonists in these novels reluctantly inhabit. Because of expired visas, a legal

discourse that persecutes their presence in the U.S., and financial hardships these subjects find themselves unable to pay for rent, their mortgages, losing their claim to a place that they can call home. Consequently, they wander without a permanent residence or live temporarily under other people's roofs, but without a sense of stability or full acceptance. They find themselves living precariously in a range of locations that include abandoned construction sites, an unseaworthy ship docked at an empty pier and the desolate desert areas at the U.S.-Mexico border. These liminal spaces, however, have a subversive potential as they function as gray areas that confounds neat borders between the U.S., Mexico and Central America. Despite the U.S.'s claims to being separate from its neighboring countries, the trope of homelessness and the constant movement of these homeless characters highlights the porosity and permeability between these regions.

The trope of homelessness inevitably overlaps with subjects' psyches and subjectivities (I define subjectivity further ahead). In these narratives, subjects find themselves re-evaluating their habitual ways of understanding themselves and their new environments. The hardships their battered bodies experience leads to a re-evaluation of the self. The condition of exclusion tends to place their identities and viewpoints in crisis as they grapple with a fundamental feature of socio-cultural alienation. Just as important, the trope of homelessness also offers new understandings and possibilities of belonging through the creation of new communal ties (figured in romantic relationships and the construction of new families). As displaced subjects interact with other characters and new communities, they diverge from a politics that demands belonging exclusively to one nation, highlighting transnationalism. That is, the relationships that the characters construct showcase fissures that confound a national "insider" and "outsider" dichotomy.

In doing so these new connections trouble the idea of a stable national identity as diasporic Central American subjects seamlessly move in and out of the signifiers of “American” and “Salvadoran” (for instance).

Correspondingly, to succinctly describe the novelists’ nationalities and the places they have cultural ties to has always been challenging. They do not fit so readily under any national designation, given that their lives and communities stray from one, specific nation. On the contrary, these novelists, like the protagonists they sketch in their novels, drift and stretch out across multiple locations that complicates their positioning. Because of this quality of divergence, they refuse to easily settle into any single national descriptors such as Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Central American, North American, or even U.S.- Central Americans. All these signifiers stumble when it comes to expressing the national and cultural heterogeneity of these subjects. Attempts to disentangle and disjoin Central Americans from the countries they are bound to, and the national and cultural shifts they effect in the U.S., points to the limits and reconsiderations of what constitutes the nation-state.

In each of these novelist’s work, homelessness and banishment repeatedly surface. The condition of homelessness, the fact that protagonists in the narratives grapple with not belonging and are perpetually in a liminal space is the central preoccupation and source of conflict for these novelists. One fundamental source of this liminality stems from a complicated U.S. - Central America relationship, particularly during the 1980s. U.S. foreign policy made political asylum difficult for Nicaraguans, Guatemalans and Salvadorans that wanted to flee civil war. As the Ronald Reagan administration claimed to eradicate communism, it covertly gave military aid to Central

American right-wing governments. Reluctant to acknowledge that its policies provoked a Central American exodus, the Reagan and Bush administration refused to categorize these migrants as asylum seekers. Instead, it categorized them as economic migrants, denying them asylum, entry and economic support in the U.S. Persecuted in Central America and rejected from entering the U.S., these migrants find themselves purged from nation-states. As the U.S. and Central America does not integrate these subjects, and their diasporic condition seems endless, the interaction between the self and larger community becomes a fundamental aspect in these narratives. In this way, studying this predicament of national homelessness becomes urgent as does understanding how these protagonists', through their subjectivities, make sense of the world both inside and outside.

The first challenge these subjects face is the orthodoxy of the U.S. as isolated and detached from its Mesoamerican neighboring countries. Against this dominant notion, the trope of homelessness runs in stark contrast to various dominant visions of the U.S., Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador as unattached and closed nation-states. Instead, the works in this study allegorize to different degrees the socio-political relationships across these geographic locations where populations, far from occupying a settled position, find themselves culturally and nationally split between these regions. The condition of homelessness also underscores nation-states refusal to reconfigure themselves to the realities of their own migrant and neighboring populations. As Cristina Maria Garcia documents in *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States and Canada* (1996), a Central American mass migration, for which nations were not ready for, first occurred from 1974-1996 (31). In *Other Immigrants: The Global Origins of the Americas* (2005) David Reimers tracks Central American migrants. During the

1980s, Reimers suggests that roughly 5,000 Guatemalan migrants made their way into the U.S. through official processes, but a greater unknown number entered as undocumented (131).

As such, migrations of Central Americans took on a new dimension in the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that continue until today. This was produced by long-term civil wars and dire economic prospects, and further complicated by the U.S.'s involvement in fomenting these conditions of political and economic instability during and after the civil wars of the 1980s. Within the U.S., Central Americans' legal status further troubles their sense of stability. Of the 2.7 million of Central Americans, it is estimated that roughly 60%, or 1.6 million of them are undocumented. Taking these factors into account (civil wars and an undocumented status), I consider here that migration, and by extension, homelessness is the result of the complex relationship between the U.S. and Central America. The U.S., given its inconsistent immigration policies concealed its role in actively destabilizing Central American governments, contributed in the creation of this massive, undocumented population. These communities that live in the U.S. without the certainty of a permanent abode are never at ease, but to the contrary are incessantly troubled in their daily lives. They experience their reality as a harsh survival that calls into question any affinity towards nationalism, given that their presence is unwelcome and delegitimized. In this light, migrants and their offspring experience a crucial disconnection from their country of origin and the host country as well that results in a conflicted position towards the idea of national belonging.

The first generation of Central Americans, that is, those who left their countries and came to the U.S. between 1974-1996, have fond memories of the 'home' country on

account of meaningful and lasting relationships with friends and family. The neighborhoods where one grew up, the schools where one developed a sense of selfhood and one's former communities are always present. At the same time, those memories are shaped by the larger discourses of classism and nationalism that create deep political and socio-economic divisions. In Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador, the indigenous and working-class, which constitute at least half of the population, and those who challenged economic and political elites were violently eradicated, or, in response to this threat of state violence, forced to immigrate. While these undesired subjects did not figure in Central American states' national projects, they are also un-welcome in the U.S. By large, the U.S. excludes these migrants from entering, or leaves them living in an undocumented condition if they manage to set foot in the country. Banned from both Central American and the U.S. the subject is left perennially displaced either as a second-class citizen who is un-integrated into the nation-state, or totally living in the margins.

In response to these conditions, it is key for this study to understand the following points: the first-generation's displacement and efforts to integrate itself into a new national body, the way the second-generation's cultural identity plays into and is negotiated in this process, and, lastly, the alleged spatial and socio-cultural boundaries between nations. These matters ultimately revolve around the concept of belonging that effect both the first and second generation of Central Americans residing in the U.S. Their desire to simultaneously be a part of both places becomes relevant in these narratives, seeing that their subjectivity is constructed and shaped across the previously mentioned countries and conditions. Responding to this predicament and framing this issue within a larger scope, in *Troubling Nationhood in U.S. Latina Literature*:

*Exploration of Place and Belonging* (2013) Maya Socolovsky reimagines the U.S. as part of the larger Americas (4). She does so to challenge a contemporary U.S. concept of nationhood that is based on late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ideas of manifest destiny, colonization and expansion. The prominence of this thinking continues to cast Latino/as, despite their legal status, as perpetual outsiders. Unlike European immigrants, U.S. Latinos/as diverge from the tendency to assimilate into the host country. The proximity to the rest of the Americas promotes a lasting connection with the homeland. Frequent travel during the holidays, for instance, stimulates the drive to maintain cultural practices and the use of Spanish, challenging cultural homogenization in the U.S. Akin to previous migrants of color in the U.S., racialization also curbs U.S. Latinos/as incorporation into the social fabric as they are deemed non-White and Other, positioning them as non-residents. Against a normative discourse that proclaims a separation between U.S. society and Latino/a immigrants, transnationalism advances their inseparable composition. Socolovsky engages in this discourse by revising the cultural and geographical border between Latin American and the US. The texts she explores in her study are preoccupied with the idea of national permeation, cultural reciprocity, and interaction that do away with the stark separation between the U.S. and Latin America. Rather than seeing them as discontinuous and detached, she suggests that the rigid national parameters are arbitrary and fictional constructs that demand resistance. Socolovsky's study encourages a rethinking of space and place.

Drawing on Robert Prudel and Lynn Meskell definitions of these terms, I understand space as the physical setting in which everything occurs and place as the social processes of valuing space. They claim: "Place is a product of the imaginary, of

desire, and the primary means by which we articulate with space and transform it into a humanized landscape” (215). For persecuted and economically distressed Central Americans, the U.S. symbolized a place where they could escape physical violence, make a living and have a daily routine. In other words, make it a ‘home’, however, this process of forming roots does not easily, if at all, come into fruition as is evidenced in the 60% of Central Americans that are undocumented. Migrancy, moreover, from Guatemala and El Salvador has only increased as seen by the presence of unaccompanied minors crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in 2014 and most recently the caravans that loudly claim for a place to belong. The exclusion of these migrants, the looming threat of deportation disrupts communities and leaves Central Americans drifting between two regions that are allegedly unattached. As such, the narratives in this study challenge this predicament and present an alternative vision that supersedes the conceptual and spatial limits of national membership.

In the context of a U.S.-Central American relationship, I consider that these countries are not that socio-culturally disconnected as dominant accounts want us to believe. As an alternative configuration, I propose that Guatemala, El Salvador and the U.S. form a closely threaded, overlapping network. With millions of Central Americans in the U.S., that travel often between both Central and North America, to assign absolute, national denominations becomes less applicable. This is particularly the case for second and third generations of Central Americans born in the U.S., where the categories such as American and, Salvadoran, lose their capacity to compartmentalize and define individuals. Socio-culturally split subjects’ multiple positions drive my study to resist national classifications. In this way, the trope of homelessness questions the hegemonic



notion of the nation-state and national identity as finished projects. Instead homelessness opts for a transnational approach that is much more open-ended, highlighting a restless shifting as so many Central Americans simultaneously have one foot planted in the U.S. and the other in Central America.

In *Imagined Transnationalism* (2009), Kevin Concannon, Francisco Lomelí and Marc Prieue argue that for Latin American immigrants the exclusiveness of pertaining to one state is no longer tenable. In fact, it runs contrary to their reality. Movement by migrants and particularly their offspring between the host nation and their countries of origin greatly complicates this process of migration as being one-dimensional. The authors further suggest: "...for many migrants, a sense of home is no longer neat or easy to define as they live or interact with more than one spatial and cultural location, thus undermining the sense of one nation." Concannon, Lomelí and Prieue add: "Their cultural practices are therefore often no longer primarily constructed around essences (of nation, tradition, religion), but relationally connecting different cultural spaces in ways that defy simplistic mapping." In this way, migrant's experiences involve a multiplicity of places and relationships. It is important for my study to follow these author's suggestions such as the following, "Critical scholarly analysis of these processes must thus try to uncover the transversal elements of cultural mobility, especially efforts and structures of the flows and connectivities that (re)configure contemporary cultures at 'home' and 'abroad' (5). I am drawn to the idea of overlap and interaction because it disassembles the current framework of the U.S. and Central America as unattached both demographically and culturally. The novels in this study offer evidence that a Central American citizenry, although unwelcome from inhabiting either the U.S. or Central

America, constructs an unofficial and alternative idea of the nation-state that cuts across and constitutes these very places. That is, Central America becomes less bound to a territory as its populations reposition themselves in the U.S., destabilizing conventional notions of nation-states as firmly settled. Instead, these denationalized subjects, that are restless and in motion, place at the front and center an uncontainability that seeps beyond the domains of national and territorial control.

It is in this spirit and in response to this scholarly demand that the trope of homelessness in the narratives for my project gains significance. This trope stems from a national discourse that that deliberately refuses to admit and acknowledge Central American populations as seen by U.S. immigration policies that curbs migration and criminalizes Central Americans' presence. These policies include the Refugee Act of 1980 that rarely granted political asylum as immigrants needed to have a "well founded" reason for fleeing and accepted cases on an individual basis, creating a backlog of applications that lead to more undocumented migration. The Immigration and Reform Act of 1986 (IRCA) offered green cards to migrants on the condition that they had arrived before 1982, a difficult fact to prove that also left many in a legal limbo. According to Amalia Pallares in *Family Activism: Immigrant Struggles and the Politics of Non-citizenship* (2014), IRCA also penalized employers that hired undocumented labor (26). The Legal Immigrant Equity Act (LIFE) passed in 2000 gave undocumented migrants the chance to apply to a visa, but were given limited to apply and the policy did not cover all Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Nicaraguans, leaving many with an undocumented status. Partial policies as these make up discourses of power that do not allow Central American to come into view. In this light, the trope of homelessness

expresses the material deprivation, communal ruptures, social isolation and psychological turmoil of living in displacement. At the same time, and more importantly, the trope offers a counter-discourse to these conditions of national exclusion. The writings in this study have a liberatory aim that dismantle, frustrate and transform dominant notions of the nation-state. In its articulation the trope takes on a transnational approach, given that it cuts the alleged spatial divide between the U.S. and Central America, and subverts the alleged spatial and cultural boundaries between these two places.

The trope of homelessness thus redefines of the concept of ‘home’ that can no longer be based on and defined by a national territory and identity. The narratives in this study explore this instability and highlight the notion of a nation-state as an incomplete and unfinished project. These un-housed populations supersede the limits of the question where is one’s national “home” and instead ask what constitutes a national “home”? My study showcases that home can be a multitude of transnational locations, an oscillation rather than being anchored to one nation-state, unsettling the binary between ‘here’ and ‘there’. Drawing the line between who is a ‘native’ and is a ‘foreigner’ also becomes more and more difficult to discern, particularly for second and third generations of Central Americans raised in the U.S. In the process, I am careful and aware to not romanticize the homeless body as free to roam wherever and without the brutal conditions that homelessness includes. Rather from a Post-Colonial approach, I argue that the repeated trope of homelessness disrupts the epistemic and ontological regime of nationality that serves as a discourse of power to exclude. The trope of homelessness

serves as a processual phase that does away with the socio-cultural and spatial divisions imposed by official government immigration policy.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) Michel De Certeau calls attention to the shortcomings of the social sciences and official discourses that cannot account how populations in everyday settings subvert official and institutional representations. De Certeau begins his book with the image of a panoptical view from the top of the World Trade Center that offers the viewer a fixed and defined map of the city. The problem with this perspective is that overlooks the movement on the ground floor that ignores and contests this totalizing map of the city. He writes: “Beneath the discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate, without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer.” (96). Drawing on this insight, homeless Central Americans that wander across North American cities, and by extension nation-states, contest these fixed mappings of places, given that they escape the gaze of authority, and in doing so re-define the concept of home and city as being tied to one place.

In this light, homelessness runs counter to and discredits these official, spatial mappings that the U.S. sustains. It highlights a more elastic notion of the nation-state constructed along aspects of the subject’s life that extend out in opposing directions. For example, one may work in the U.S., but conserves ties with the ‘home’ country through multiple means that include but are not limited to the following: sending remittances to family, visiting during the holidays if possible, conducting business there, sending progeny to visit the ‘home’ country. In this way, homelessness revises and reinterprets the nation-state by underscoring this overlap of spaces and the interculturality that comes

with it. Just as important, for the migrant this process of living across countries is not necessarily a given. If it occurs, it does so slowly and gradually. Some never quite adjust to their new reality.

For these transient populations, homelessness can disintegrate the subject. That is, the subject can retreat into a troubled psyche that impedes a productive interaction with the rest of society. This problem is evidenced in *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998) where the Guatemalan character never adjusts to his new reality in Los Angeles and cannot separate himself from a discourse of masculinity that promotes violence. However, for others homelessness begins to serve as an empowering narrative that challenges the antiquated organization of nation-states and models of cultural identity. Writings like these suggest another reconfiguration that undermines the conceptual underpinnings of national belonging. Examples include the desire to break away from the notion of using English as the dominant language, and the need to question tenets that correlate phenotype to nationality. Homeless figures in these texts cross and re-cross national and cultural lines, and in doing so confuse and reject their classificatory power. Notably, in Marcos McPeck's Villatoro's Romilia Chacón series, for instance, the Salvadoran-American female detective and her nemesis, a Guatemalan-American, move through an alternative network, a "third" country as one of the characters refers to that is irrespective of the national boundaries among the U.S., Mexico, and Guatemala. It is this other socio-spatial system (a term elaborated by the sociologist Peter Somerville) that the trope of homelessness underscores.

For Central Americans who have managed to set foot in the U.S., they are subject to disparagement and communal exclusion, not only from mainstream society, but from

other Latinos/as as well. Different from Puerto Ricans and Cuban Americans, a significant number of Central Americans lack U.S. citizenship, making them outsiders among these established groups. As Claudia Milian argues, Central American diasporas indigenous cultural identity and practices also position them as Other and situates them outside of *latinidad* construct. In comparison to Mexicans and Chicanos/as, Central American migrants also lack a cultural tie to U.S. territory that Chicanos/as elaborated with the construct of Aztlán, granting them a claim to belong in the U.S.

This treatment of exclusion extends to Central Americans born in the U.S. cast perpetually as cultural and national outsiders despite their documented status. From this angle, this group lives at the edge of a larger national community that refuses to give them a space, and in this way do not see themselves reflected in North American society. From this angle, homelessness communicates the antithesis of having a community. Symbolically, its meaning expresses ‘purgatory’, a constant sense of insecurity in physical, physiological and emotional terms. In relation to self and others, the subject is marked by vulnerability, non-existence, alienation, exposure and surveillance. In this light, these U.S. Central American novelists I study here re-imagine place not by moving from one pole of the binary “homelessness” to “home”, but by deploying a subversive trope of homelessness that altogether dismantles the idea of nation-states as fragmentary and self-contained communities.

While the concepts of ‘home’ and the nation-state have been traditionally defined as closed and composed of a single, physical territory, I am drawn to Doreen Massey’s definition of ‘home’. She conceives home as open, constructed out of movement, unbounded, and “stretched out” beyond itself (135). By constructed “out of movement”, I

understand as a continuous crossing of cities, regions and countries where one has family, friends and other bonds that provoke and sustain this nomadic unrest. For the subjects in these novels, home is a web of points that are constantly in motion, that shift, are redrawn and are being constantly traversed. In this sense, the narratives in this study are clearly transnational in their presentation of place and nation. The demographic shift occasioned by the presence of immigrants inevitably raises the question of a changing citizenry.

From this perspective, a second line of investigation in my study is to understand how the experience of homelessness challenges the U.S.'s conceptual basis of citizenship that falls short of including non-dominant groups into the larger national body. Despite a current political climate of the Obama administration that emphasizes cultural diversity and loudly proclaims its values, at the level of government policy, little is done to rewrite laws that grant citizenship and its benefits to the large numbers of Mesoamerican immigrants that seek stability in the U.S. On the contrary, large numbers of deportations and raids have not ceased. In the sphere of higher education, for instance, undocumented youth receive little to no type of financial support that undermines their mobility and integration into a larger workforce. In other words, despite the rhetoric of diversity, the presence of these disenfranchised Latino/a populations, 'native' citizens perceive them as a threat to their livelihood. The idea of a cultural and national essence to stabilize populations continues to be firmly entrenched.

Given this government policy that has been reluctant to transformation, I turn to Raymond Rocco's term of "citizenship regimes" that he defines as "the ensemble of societal practices and norms that regulate the nature and level of societal and political membership of differentially situated social groups." (15). This definition frames the

social and institutional practices that have created a sense of homelessness that is so pervasive in U.S.-Central American novels that I analyze. Previous critics have brought attention to this painful consciousness provoked by social exclusion but have not explored those circumstances in relation to the larger question of the U.S.'s nativist and foundational pillars that constitute citizenship. For instance, Yajaira Padilla postulates that Marcos McPeck Villatoro series highlights a nuanced "Central American-American" presence that is carried out by the protagonist's performance and reconstruction of Salvadoran-ness. Padilla's significant contribution highlights the multiplicity of and within Central American communities but does not fully explore that visibility in relation to the broader discourse of citizenship and national belonging.

Seeing that this facet has not been systematically studied, I ponder the question to what extent are cultural visibility and ethnic reconstruction alone capable of unsettling the nativist foundations of U.S. citizenship? How profoundly do they complicate culturally and legally entrenched notions of belonging that go beyond Central American and Latino/a communities, and instead confuse the lines between national exclusion and inclusion? Given these questions, I trace how Villatoro's series, along with the other novels in my study, trouble the larger pillars of cultural pluralism in the U.S. That is, how does a Central American population, through the trope of homelessness express dissent, renegotiate and re-orient the bases of citizenship that have historically excluded racialized immigrants? Guided by Raymond Rocco, I will use his definition of racialization that consists of a conceptual configuration where individuals with visible phenotype differences from the rest of the Anglo national body are placed into a hierarchy that debases and degrades that difference. This logic situates these subjects at



the bottom of this insidious racial hierarchy that cuts across all levels of society that include the state, economic, cultural, institutional and quotidian experience. These codes become consolidated as a “common knowledge” that perpetuates this order and saddles individuals within a society (71). It is these codes of visibility that underprop citizenship in the U.S. that the novelists in this study problematize and destabilize.

In *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity and Class in America* (2001) Stephen Steinberg argues that ethnic pluralism in the U.S. has been built along the lines of conquest and exploitation of cultural others that include American Indians, Africans, Mexicans and early generations of Europeans. In doing so, the U.S. has firmly held on to Anglo pillars as the basis of nation that include English as the main language, Christianity as the central religion and an Anglicized imaginary as criteria for national belonging. Steinberg makes the claim that contemporary generation’s efforts to reconstruct their waning ethnicities find themselves limited only to superficial appearance, given that they do not really challenge, or are at odds with existing pillars of belonging in the U.S. That is, they do not displace these existing structures that insidiously undermine difference and keep cultural others at the margins of the polity.

In the same vein, Raymond Rocco in *Transforming Citizenship* (2014) brings attention to this liminal position of culturally perceived others by calling it “exclusionary inclusion” that is a type of belonging that regulates and restricts the extent of participation in central institutions of society (30). Raymond Rocco coincides with Stephen Steinberg that the U.S., since its creation, and despite cultural differences being one its defining characteristics, has always suppressed, subsumed and erased them. Now in the twenty-first century, more than ever before in American history, a conspicuous,

diverse national body is expanding. Still, the older models of citizenship and national identity that are constructed along the lines of a White, Christian imaginary refuse to adjust to this new reality, and maintain the reductive binary of Anglo-Americans and others. In the case of Central Americans, along with other brown and black non-dominant groups, even if they have legal citizenship, are outsiders of that national imaginary and are kept perpetually at a distance. Because of this demographic change, Rocco calls for the developing of alternative narratives of national belonging that fully incorporate these differences as constitutive of a truly multicultural democratic system (66). The idea of a culturally homogenous population is simply no longer tenable. For example, second and third generation Central Americans, akin to so many other diasporic groups, born in the U.S. travel to Central America and alter the conceptual scheme of what it means to be American, Guatemalan, or El Salvadoran, given that they are English dominant and bilingual as well. In this sense, these Central American diasporas propose alternative definitions of citizenship.

I draw on James Clifford's considerations of diaspora that he defines as communities that are positioned against and in tension with: 1) the norms the nation-state and 2) nativists' claims to a homeland (307). Positioned within these two categories, diasporas are significant because they call into question the primacy of national organization, in this case, articulated and maintained through citizenship. Diasporas subvert the allegedly stable identities of both the host country and the diaspora itself thus showcasing the suppleness of these constructs. In this sense, diasporas unsettle the binary, the 'indigenous' and the 'diasporic' and make us reconsider other possibilities for national integration (427).

In this process, the subjects in these novels contest and broaden the rigidity of national parameters, and in doing so offer another perspective of 'home', given that they inhabit at least two cultural spheres and can draw comparisons between and redefine what it means to be Central American, American and Latino/a. In opposing reductive notions of citizenship, these novelists undermine the grounds of perceiving migrants and their progeny as outsiders. Instead, they retrench cultural and geographical lines seek a place in society. It is these alternatives of national belonging that the trope of homelessness advances by blurring the racial and cultural boundaries that attempt to separate marginalized and brown bodies. These works present critical strategies of subversion that collapse the distinctions between insider and outsider. Integral to this process is the developing of U.S.- Central American subjectivities that, for this project, are constructed along the lines of class, (un) documented status, gender and generation.

How do Central American subjectivities come into being? How do they defy the reduction of categorization and organization that social administration foists upon them? My goal is not to offer a complete and definite answer, but rather to understand how and what points these multiple subjectivities find themselves at this point in the current political climate of anti-immigration and token claims of diversity. How do these subjectivities counter an antiquated rhetoric of citizenship. Because of these circumstances, I approach Central American subjectivity in these novels through the lens elaborated by Nick Mansfield in *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (2000). There are three facets of this subjectivity that I address. The first of these is the "politico-legal subject". Since Central Americans, along with other Latinos/as, are maintained in the "exclusionary-inclusion" model of citizenship

elaborated by Rocco, the social contract between subject and state is not respected, despite the U.S. claiming that it is a liberal democratic society that is inclusive of cultural difference. In the novels that I study, a pattern emerges of homeless subjects that on account of their undocumented status find themselves at the outskirts of society, institutions and without representation on a public scale. Inseparable from this socio-political constraint, the second approach to subjectivity that I apply is that of the “philosophical subject”. Thus, I examine how the subject knows, acts, and judges his or her environments that burden their quotidian lives. Manifestations of homelessness surface through a strong subtext of alienation, social isolation, ostracism and daily frustrations. As such, I explore how do these subjects contest the “exclusionary-inclusion” regime of citizenship that operates at the level of their subjectivity.

Just as important, I veer away from understandings of subjectivity not as an existing entity, but rather subjectivity as a creation by dominant systems of social organization that organize populations and regulate our conduct (10). In other words, I use Michel Foucault’s framework, given that it relates to a Central American population that is subjected, perpetually under surveillance and is forced to escape the gaze of authority. Once the subject has established a sense of self and developed agency, it can begin to subvert the racist politics of citizenship that are underpinned and defined by visible and audible markers of racial difference. Nick Mansfield defines subjectivity as the interaction between the self and others within (an) environment(s). The self is not a solitary being that lives in isolation, but instead is caught up in the social and cultural entanglement of daily life (2). The subject is always linked to something outside of it, and it is this linkage that the word subject insists upon. Examples of this dynamic in this

study include state practices of placing diasporic subjects within the discourses of criminality. Grasped from this angle, Central American subjects demand our attention, on account of their history and present condition of being set aside from the national body.

Inseparable from subjectivity in relation to the trope of homelessness is the question of memory. While homelessness encompasses the physical interaction of the subject with the external world, the question of memory addresses the subject's internal state and trajectory. All the subjects find themselves preoccupied with their past, or if they are second-generation Central Americans, they are intent on uncovering family secrets. Moreover, the narrative structures across several of these novels mirror this fixation by using broken and episodic fragments rather than following a linear organization.

In *Theories of Memory* (2007), Linda Anderson traces two common characteristics in diasporic writing that resonate with the dominant trope of homelessness in the narratives that I analyze: exclusion and historical trauma. The novelists in this study who constitute a part of the second generation of Central Americans in the U.S., along with the first generation of migrants, are constantly coping with feelings of displacement and exile. The countries that they cherish refuse to accept them on account of their cultural difference and a nationalistic discourse that dismisses them. This exclusion translates into a rootlessness that is based in unresolved historical traumas that these novelists make sense out of to contest the social condition of separation that I understand is expressed in terms of homelessness.

Vijay Agnew states that memories create a connection between our individual past and our collective origins. The past is always with us, and it defines our present (3).

In the case of these novelists, the plight of the first generation of immigrants is a memory that they carry closely. (Re)constructing it is a way of acknowledging their subjectivity is crucial for both generations. How can both older and younger generations break away from the memories of civil war, dislocation, rejection and racism that weigh heavily on them, and limits their socio-economic and political possibilities? Without a clear understanding of these memories, forming that linkage with others and environments that subjectivity emphasizes proves to be difficult. These narratives are an effort to contest those destructive memories that undercut efforts of cultural and political representation. Central Americans run the risk of continually wandering without a sense of direction and remaining homeless.

Within the context of an outdated nation-state system, authorities adopt these same views to delegitimize Central American and Mesoamerican populations in the U.S. On account of this practice, almost all the subjects in these novels are presented as menacing threats due to their criminality and homeless condition. As such, they are deemed as criminal and undesirables within the nation-state. Examples represented in the novels for this study include loitering, kidnapping and narco-trafficking. While these two features apply to solitary male diasporic subjects, the final chapter attends to gendered dimensions of homelessness. Deemed as less threatening than those cast as criminal or of an unsound mind, the female subjects in these novels manage to find employment, or temporary lodging in Anglo homes. Nevertheless, they are cast as homeless subjects, seeing that they are kept at a threshold between insider and outsider.

Seen as whole, these representations of homelessness overlap and articulate the problem of Central American communities' rejection from the national imaginary. As I

survey the variations of homelessness in these narratives, my study is organized into four chapters, including the Introduction as chapter one. In the second chapter titled “Noir and Nationhood” I attend to Marcos McPeck Villatoro’s detective series (*Home Killings: A Romilia Chacón Mystery*, *Minos: A Romilia Chacón Novel*, *A Venom Beneath the Skin: A Romilia Chacón Novel*). The trope of homelessness manifests itself through two facets central to noir detective fiction: an incessant movement coupled with variety of disparate landscapes, and the practice of shapeshifting. A constant movement on part of the protagonists suggests a disruption of a centralized and compartmentalized nation-state. Villatoro’s series foregrounds a re-drawing of national spaces typified by highlighting a repeated crossings and re-crossings as detective Romilia Chacón chases her nemesis/ally across the U.S., Mexico and Guatemala. Together they trek across Atlanta, Nashville, Los Angeles, Denver, Tijuana, and a jungle in El Petén, Guatemala. These backgrounds are highly suggestive of a national reconfiguration that disregards a single, national space as the essence of ‘home’.

Linked to detective Chacón in the detective series is Rafael Murrillo, a Guatemalan-American. His fall as a wealthy philanthropist to a wanted narco-trafficker signals the series chief preoccupation with homelessness. Rafael Murrillo’s own nonprofit company attends to the U.S.’s indigent. More importantly, as homeless subject himself, he undergoes the physical and ontological homelessness that disturbs the settled logic of ‘home’ based on national soil. As the series advances, Rafael Murrillo loses all geographical footing and finds himself split across a multitude of places and cultures. This position suggests a reconsideration of ‘home’ that includes a much wider social sphere than the national. Drawing on Michel De Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*

(1980), this incessant movement subtly undermines official accounts of national borders as strict. The subjects in this series become uncontainable and push off center the idea of dwelling, belonging to, and establish a sense of community limited exclusively to one center.

As mentioned earlier, the second feature that unsettles nativist underpinnings of national belonging is shapeshifting. This idiosyncrasy of noir detective fiction has the capacity to disorient the reader by never fully clarifying where characters fall along the scale of good and evil. This strategy of not being able to clearly distinguish antagonists from protagonists leads to narrative twists that keep the reader in suspense. In the same way, Villatoro applies this uncertainty to the discourse of national belonging by frustrating phenotype and language as markers of nationality. Definitive and monolithic nationalities determined by appearance and language become more and more difficult to discern as the series advances. Detective Romilia Chacón, like the reader, cannot easily recognize which characters are American, Salvadoran or Mexican. Within the context of the U.S., the constructs of Anglo and Latino/a also lose their descriptive capacity as characters origins become indistinguishable and frustrate the color line by leading the reader to a gray area.

While the second chapter speaks to homelessness through a discourse of criminality, the third chapter, titled “Displaced Soldiers: Masculinity and the Nation-state in the *The Tattooed Soldier* and *The Ordinary Seaman*”, attends to a discourse of masculinity that has the capacity to disenfranchise and marginalize Central American diasporas. As participants and victims of civil wars in Central America, the subjects of these novels now in the U.S. deal with a socialization that manifests itself in a form of a



hyper-masculinity. Francisco Goldman's and Héctor Tobar's novels are oriented around Central American ex-soldiers that find themselves homeless and disengaged from society. That is, these subjects' understanding of masculinity has an active role in provoking and sustaining their liminality as it makes them anti-social and prevents new relationships in the host country. Narrated within the contexts of combat and maritime exploration, all the male subjects in these novels share the fundamental characteristic of engaging in troublesome practices associated with a dominant masculinity. I place this masculinity in relation to the destruction provoked by the anxiety over modernity in Central America. Discourses of masculinity, oriented around violence and honor, provides me a new lens to explore these soldiers' homeless position in the U.S. Drawing on Jean Franco's concept of "extreme masculinity", I compare Goldman's and Tobar's works by analyzing how these subjects' grapple with tensions and contradictions of their militant subjectivities, how they engage in and produce new meanings of masculinity that makes possible claiming a new home. I have chosen to approach these novels from a discourse of masculinity in relation to national belonging, seeing that current scholarship has overlooked this relationship.

The earlier chapters male novelist place at front and center masculine subjects' position of homelessness. In their narratives, the reconstruction of a new community expresses itself in terms of physically assaulted bodies, harsh environmental conditions, and armed battles. In response to this masculine archetype, I turn to Tanya Maria Barrientos who is to date the only Guatemalan-American female novelist whose work has gone understudied largely because it is conventional, but more importantly because her work presents an anomaly. She frustrates traditional approaches to analyzing Latino/a

literature that emphasize national classifications, and instead underscores intercultural crossings. As someone of Guatemalan descent, she writes about Chicanas, questioning the practice that Latino/a authors write expressly about their own ethnic communities. Intercultural associations and changing subjectivities are the cornerstone of *Frontera Street* as they offer a way to build a new national home carried out by homeless Anglo women and Chicanas. I am mindful of and do not labor under the assumption of “women” as stable and monolithic category. In my analysis I underscore stark differences of class, ethnicity and unequal socio-economic relationships among these subjects. Yet, together these female characters construct a new family and home that rests on social relations defined by collaboration and friendship.

As such, in this closing chapter I contend that women’s crises of homelessness coincide with national crises of identity at large, as a dominant Anglo imaginary finds itself dislocated by the influx of Latino/a communities. As such, Barrientos’ highlights this tension through subjects’ re-evaluation of family that threads Anglo and Mexican women together, placing them at the center of a current national transformation in the U.S. As these subjects challenge an unyielding patriarchy and construct an alternative idea of national community in an allegorical border town, I draw on Stuart Hall’s framework for subjectivity and Judith Butler’s practice of mourning as an approach to reimagine a national “we”. I also turn to Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of the “new mestiza” and Mary Louise Pratt’s precepts of the “contact zone” and “feminitopia”. I argue that Barrientos deploys Pratt’s and Anzaldúa’s frameworks, albeit without her own shortcomings.

## Chapter 2: Noir and Nationhood in Marcos McPeek-Villatoro's Romilia Chacón Detective Series

*“But why? And who? McCabe sat back in his chair. “And Nashvillians, for god’s sake! We’re three thousand miles away from Guatemala. Death squads are in Latin American countries. We don’t have much of a Latino population here.*

– McPeek Villatoro (2001)

The solitary detective is a figure that heads into unwelcoming environments where he/she discerns others’ conduct and motives. Their work entails discerning who is good or evil, who is innocent or guilty of committing a crime. Yet, narrators of noir detective fiction often confound these established categories, and instead highlight gray zones that call into question our previous understandings. The tables always turn, seeing that characters portrayed as sinister turn out to be protagonists, and vice versa. Narrators of this genre consistently sketch gray atmospheres of societies in times of ideological shifts, crises and transformations. From this perspective, in this chapter I am interested in Marcos McPeek’s Villatoro crime series that addresses the changing and contentious definition of national belonging in the U.S. A growing body of Mesoamerican immigrants that sustain a close relationship with their country of origin resist classic models of national integration. In doing so, the consolidated dichotomies between ‘native’ and ‘immigrant, White and Other, national spaces located ‘here’ versus over ‘there’ are not serviceable anymore. Through the central figures of detective Romilia Chacón and her nemesis Rafael Murrillo, Villatoro’s crime series addresses the spatial,

cultural and national overlap between North America and Central America that goes unrecognized by official accounts yet continues to expand at the quotidian level.

Alexander Diener and Joshua Hagen define territory as the geographic area intended to regulate movement of peoples and establish norms of conduct; it consists namely of the demarcated space itself. The practice of territoriality, on the other hand, and central to my thesis, they define as such: “the means by which humans create, communicate and control geographical spaces, either individually, or through some social or political entity” (4). Contrary to popular belief, apparently innate categories as race, ethnicity, and language do not determine territoriality. Instead, unequal power relations within a given social system are the backbone that do so (5). In other words, territoriality serves as a discourse for social control aimed at populations that regardless of their citizenship status are deemed as outsiders. In contrast to the sharp lines that the practice of territoriality draws, Villatoro’s noir series blurs them and points to gray zones among the demarcated territories of the U.S., Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador. Villatoro carries out this enterprise through the relationship between homelessness and criminality.

As such, the series follows Romilia Chacón, a young Salvadoran-American who becomes a homicide detective after the brutal and unresolved murder of her sister in Atlanta. Chacón’s investigative work takes her through a multitude of cities including Atlanta, Nashville, Tennessee, Denver, Los Angeles, rural Guatemala and the Mexico-U.S. border. The countries in which these cities are located gradually begin to overlap and form a network, irrespective of territorial divisions as represented on maps. One of the most intriguing features of the series is her ambiguous relationship with Rafael Murrillo, an older, wealthy Guatemalan-American whose downfall is considerable. He

goes from being a public philanthropist to a fugitive from the FBI leaving him homeless as he finds it impossible to return to any of his residences and lives precariously on the run from the authorities. A former Guatemalan Special Forces soldier, he secretly spearheads an elaborate and transnational drug ring that stretches over the previously mentioned countries. As Romilia Chacón pursues serial murderers, Rafael Murrillo's homelessness becomes more pronounced and parallels Detective Chacón's plight with belonging both professionally and nationally. As such, the interplay between territory, displacement, and discourses of national belonging drive my analysis.

Despite the U.S.'s efforts to culturally separate itself from neighboring Latin American countries, and its guarded entry process, unaccounted for and unaddressed Latino/a populations call attention to boundaries that demand reconsideration. Central Americans are in the process of unsettling the idea of the nation-state as a finished process. Through the homelessness of a central character and his involvement with crime that includes drug-trafficking, 'illegal' immigration and terrorism, the series highlights the contradictory relationship between the U.S. and Central America that advances an alternative spatial and national reality. The resistance to this cultural and national shift occurring in the U.S. is also echoed by detective Chacón's investigations of serial murderers that target Latinos/as, and her limited and ambivalent role within the institutional and legal apparatuses who regulate social order and that reluctantly employ her.

Within this context, this chapter discusses three significant and interrelated questions raised in The Romilia Chacón detective series *Home Killings* (2001), *Minos* (2003) and *Venom Beneath the Skin* (2005). They include the following: 1) the upsetting

and re-signification of nationhood that is less anchored in territory, language, and a White-Euro oriented racial hierarchy, 2) the subject's trauma based on the U.S.'s role in Central American civil wars that contributes to a redefinition of national home, and 3) the role of noir detective fiction in articulating international crimes during the Cold War that unsettle established notions of the contemporary nation-state. To understand the subversive quality of the Romilia Chacón series, that highlights the fissures in the totalizing project of homogenous nation-states, it behooves us to understand its current definition coupled with the anti-immigrant discourse that permeates North American society.

### **Narratives of National Collapse**

According to sociologists Susan Brown and Frank Bean, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1960s, immigrants in the U.S. followed the classic assimilation paradigm. Its goal was to foment a single and homogenous national body that discouraged interconnections with the original homeland. In order to seamlessly blend into the larger social fabric, immigrants shed all ethnic markers, such as language, names and traditions. Conversely, the process included learning English and adopting the dominant norms and practices of the host country. More importantly, this slow, but definite adjustment to a new society worked in a linear and uninterrupted fashion. That is, those immigrants who had resided in the U.S. the longest and especially their offspring would eventually resemble dominant society as they had entirely cut ties with their countries of origin. Such an approach is also popularly known as “Americanization”, or the ‘melting pot’, given that heterogeneous populations break with their customs in order to form a homogenous people in a new territory.

Criticized as ascribing exclusively to Protestant, middle-class values, since the 1970s, multiculturalism challenges this assimilation model by emphasizing cultural markers rather than abandoning them. This new framework deliberately favored distinction and dissociation. Practices from the country of origin, such as language, cuisine and dress should be maintained and laid bare for the larger national public to see, according to sociologist Will Kymlicka. As opposed to the assimilationist rhetoric, multiculturalism celebrates cultural differences as is evidenced in festivals, museums and the media (4). Despite its affirmative tone, the narrative of multiculturalism was not without its problems, seeing that it is occupied with integration at the surface level, but failed to enact any substantive change for underrepresented groups such as, revising citizenship policies, improving educational opportunities, and fomenting civic participation. While multiculturalism sought to accord visibility to populations in liminal positions, it ran the risk of inadvertently separating them as well. The display of ethnic markers and habits created the perception of these groups as distinct, as “Other”, and in doing so, signaled them as different and inadmissible to the idea of a coherent, national body. Although individuals were encouraged to showcase their non-Anglo cultures, the concept of forming a homogenous, American citizenry is left intact. White, middle class values and tastes continue to be institutionalized as the normalized, hegemonic discourse of being.

The more pronounced presence of Central Americans weakens the centrality of these frameworks. As these populations continuously shift from the home country to the host country, assuming a centralized, homogenous national identity presents a challenge. Their persistent relationship with their home country interrupts the linearity of eventually

and seamlessly blending into North American society. If this established method of becoming part of the U.S. is destabilized, nativists and other like-minded individuals fear the decomposition of the country. Seen in this light, the social transformation brought about by new immigrants, and especially their later generations, implies substantial changes to the predominant model of nationhood. While the melting pot and multiculturalism rhetoric sustained a predominant model of belonging, these populations signify a reconstitution of the relationship between territory, national identity and the rights to citizenship. In contrast to building national boundaries, immigrants, of both the first and second generation, signal a new framework where permeability becomes the central aspect that sharply undercuts the classic approach to constituting national communities.

In *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (2004), academic and political advisor Robert Rotberg offers a comprehensible definition of nation-states along with a series of characteristics that defines them. According to him, and in agreement with the sociologist James Clifford, nation-states constitute the building blocks of the current world order. Rotberg asserts that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are more nation-states than ever before that result in a total of 192 altogether. Along with their increase in number, one prominent detail is that nation-states' populations are increasing as well. Strangely enough, he does not comment on the factors for this growth, a point that I will address further below. Of the qualities that Rotberg delineates, the one that he puts most emphasis on is that of national security. That is, he adamantly and repeatedly underscores that nation-states are accountable and ultimately responsible for controlling their territory. He writes: "The state's prime function is to provide that political good of security – to



prevent cross-border invasions and infiltrations, and any loss of territory; to eliminate domestic threats to or upon the national order and social structure; to prevent crime and any related dangers to domestic human security;....” (3). There are a couple of points that I would like to problematize in this description of national defense that foments a regressive notion of national home. First, it is not clear who or what constitutes a threat, the criteria go uncommented and is left open to interpretation. Consequently, and on account of this fear, we find ourselves living in an era of national isolation and fear as visceral responses to perceived external threats that are heightened. That is, U.S. immigration policy insists on curbing migrations that threaten its claimed peace and stability. What Rotberg also omits in his view are the causes and groups that drive the demographic expansion of nation-states. A complicated and post-colonial relationship that goes unmentioned based on unequal power relations is what constitutes the mass migrations of the last two centuries. Millions of citizens from non-European nations looking to escape political violence and economic uncertainty is what fuels this growth and leads to a vociferous rhetoric against the Other. Or if immigrants are allowed into U.S. soil and establish a life, they are expected to sever all cultural, linguistic and religious ties with their country of origin in order to assimilate into the U.S. common culture. Thereby, this cultural pluralism would not disrupt the relations of domination and subordination in American society.

Peter Brimelow’s *Common Sense About America’s Immigration Disaster* (1996) is a case and point. It presents the economic, cultural, social, environmental and political reasons for limiting immigration into the U.S. In his work, Brimelow views the nation in traditionally conservative terms as is evidenced in the corporal and familial language he

deploys to describe it. A nation, according to him, consists of a single body that must be taken care of with the utmost care in order to conserve its health, even if some of those measures are deemed as harsh. Brimelow claims that the contemporary U.S. is no longer in the condition to grant entry to new immigrant bodies. If so, its economic structure would collapse on account of the expense that undocumented immigrants would incur. In addition to this authoritative view of the nation as a body, he also considers it a family that must be held by the same principles and practices. In other words, it should consist of one people who speak the same language, who profess the same religion, are attached to the same principles and very similar in manners. His principle preoccupation is that without a homogenous national body, without the uniformity that is necessary to administer a state, the country would disintegrate into a collection of divided colonies.

In the same way *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (2002) by Patrick Buchanan echoes this sentiment, but with a more impending sense of doom. The claimed cohesiveness of nation-states, according to him and particularly in the U.S., is bound to fall apart with the rise of a non-European presence accompanied with the influx of Asian, Latino/a and African (American) populations. His concern is that nation-states will be split countries that will be composed of small nations within nations. According to Buchanan the politics of inclusion initiated during the 1960s have altered the racial composition and political orientation of the U.S. resulting in the alienation of a White majority that feels out of place. The moral, religious and cultural underpinnings are fading along with the citizens of northern European descent as well. In his view, unstoppable waves of immigration signify the surrender of nationhood and the death of the West overall (seeing

that he detects the same trend in European countries such as England, Italy and Germany where lower birth rate and higher death rate among Anglo 'natives' is the demographic trend). National disunion and a split country haunt Buchannan and other like-minded individuals. These thinkers cast cultural and national changes in terms of winner-loser, of the triumphant and the defeated, sustaining an insider-outsider national binary. Despite these expositions representing a one-dimensional perspective and intolerance towards difference, they have come to dominate public discourse for national belonging. As seen, territory and race are the underlying lines that ground this treatment of nationhood.

From this perspective, what is at stake in the Romilia Chacón series, as with the rest of the novels in my project, is that traditional, national identities, and territories are becoming less and less serviceable. The series probes into the construct of what constitutes a national space and suggests that it no longer anchors identity as strongly as it did in previous centuries. The Villatoro series, problematizes this debate of belonging by displacing the question of nationality in a time where the discourse towards the Other is vehement. With such a restrictive social order that is hostile to those perceived as outsiders, one is forced to ask oneself the following questions: How does the presence of a Central American re-inscribe racial relations of domination and subordination in the U.S.? What is the wisest and most humane way to administer a poly-ethnic state? Contrary to the mistreatment of non-dominant populations, Villatoro's crime series highlights unacknowledged spatialities, contradictions, tensions and modes of interaction that unsettle notions of national space and identity.

As such, the monocultural model of national identity clearly has its limits, seeing that it either marginalizes or subsumes socio-cultural differences. As a bicultural subject

whose family and himself who has faced the bitterness of socio-cultural exclusion, it is my view that Villatoro contests Brimelow's and Buchanan's logic, given that racial tensions, conflicts and alliances are sharply pronounced in the series. In this way, I deem it necessary to look at Villatoro's own peripatetic existence that permeates his discursive practice.

### **An Ambulatory Life**

His personal experience with an incessant change of geographies, cities, countries and languages helps us better understand the architecture of the Romilia Chacón series that undermines racial hierarchies and spatial divisions. Marcos McPeek-Villatoro is a Tennessean author of Salvadoran descent. A graduate from the University of Iowa's Writers Workshop, and, in addition to the Romilia Chacón series, Villatoro has penned several works that include the following: two novels *A Fire in the Earth* (1996), *The Holy Spirit of my Uncle's Cojones* (1999), an autobiographical account *Walking to la Milpa: Living in Guatemala with Armies, Demons, Abrazos and Death*, two collections of poetry *They Say That I Am Two* (1998), *On Tuesday When the Homeless Disappeared* (2004) and the film *Tamale Road: A Memoir from El Salvador* (2012). He has also received various awards for his works that include the Latino Literary Hall of Fame and Best Book in 2001.

In 2001 professor and writer Jim Minick interviewed Marcos McPeek Villatoro and titled the piece "Latino Hillbilly", whose apparent contradiction, an unexpected combination that undermines the racism behind the expression "hillbilly", given that it is a pejorative term that refers to impoverished, rural White Americans. While the expression also signals Villatoro's class identification, seeing that it indicates his

working-class background, it also suggests, and more importantly, a disruption of categorical closures, namely the social constructs of “White” and “Latino/a”. In accordance with this tendency, there are several points that I am drawn to in Minick’s interview, seeing that they resonate with my interpretation of the detective series as a disruption of the hegemonic conceptual scheme that defines national and cultural communities.

At the outset of the interview, Villatoro states the following: “Where do I consider my roots to be, my native home? That’s always a question.”. His background is intriguing on account of the multitude of places he and his family have lived. In total, he has moved seventeen times to places that include four significant regions that spread across the U.S. They extend from the West Coast, the Appalachian Mountains, the rural south and the Midwest. Moreover, his multiple domiciles extend beyond national borders, given that while doing missionary work he and his family have also resided for extensive periods of time in Central America, namely Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua during the 1980s.

In relation to this constant movement and his mixed background, and more importantly for this chapter, Villatoro establishes an unexpected series of parallels among these places and their communities. A case and point are his neighborhoods in Guatemala and contemporary Los Angeles that, that in his view, mirror each other. Villatoro comments that evenings in Guatemala included nightly socializing, gossiping and neighbors habitually checking in on each other. Though cautious not to romanticize his current neighborhood in Los Angeles, Villatoro comments that it feels as if he is in Guatemala on account of his congenial neighbors and their strong sense of a community.

Similarly, Villatoro is not alone in this conception of a less bordered reality. During the interview, he mentions how his parents also draw much of the same cultural and geographical parallels between the U.S. in El Salvador. His mother reports that she did not feel entirely disconnected from El Salvador when she arrived at the Appalachia region on account of the encircling mountains. They reminded her of the ones *back home* (emphasis mine) that made her feel very comfortable in her new surroundings. These symmetries between cultures and places, in addition to the U.S. and Central America, are constant throughout the interview. While commenting on the demographic change in Tennessee on account of Mexican migrant workers, Villatoro throws into relief country music and culture as well. He sustains that Mexican *norteño* has some of the same rhythms of the local country music that is played at local dances. The cowboy aesthetic exhibited through attire that consists of boots, jeans, shirts and overlaps with local Tennessean tastes and culture. Villatoro affirms that these cultural resemblances draw Mexicans and Anglo women to dances where romantic relationships arise.

I mention these correspondences regarding geography, home and culture because they indicate that Villatoro does not distinguish between apparently different societies and places. Rather than seeing them as discrete spheres that avoid contact, they coalesce, unbinding territorial and symbolic boundaries. These places and peoples permeate each other and absorb each other's characteristics leaving all parties to a considerable degree indistinguishable. Under these conditions, determining stark differences becomes more difficult to detect which brings me to second point of the interview that caught my attention.

In conjunction with the constant relocation that Villatoro and his family experienced, is the question of cultural identity. Villatoro's preoccupation with names, his own circumstance of having two first names along with cultivating the selves that occupy them, denotes a preoccupation with mutability and contradiction. During his childhood in San Francisco he was called "Marcos", on account of his Salvadoran family and a larger Latino/a community that resides in California. Curiously enough, in Tennessee with his Anglo side of his family he was "Mark". Villatoro addressed this cultural dissonance at the age of nineteen by synthesizing both names that resulted in his actual full name Marcos McPeck-Villatoro. This same metamorphosis is a constant in his novels as is evidenced in his earliest piece, *A Fire Beneath the Earth* (1996) and *The Holy Spirit of My Uncle's Cojones* (1999).

In all the novels, including the Romilia Chacón detective series, one of the most prominent metamorphoses of identity relates to language acquisition. Finding themselves as newcomers in different settings, characters repeatedly make a deliberate effort to master new languages, registers and regional accents. They are highly sensitive to these aspects and the narrator highlights these adjustments and learning processes. That is, personages eventually blend into their surroundings, but their aim is not to fully assimilate, given that these characters also refuse to bury of their class and cultural origins. Instead, their command of multiple languages, registers and accents produces an internal dissonance against the logic of racism and nationalism. These subjects resist this tendency as they gradually become culturally and nationally uncategorizable. With nicknames, complete name changes, and the command of at least another language, these characters highlight contradictory and antagonistic identifications, rejecting the premise

of a unified national identity. To borrow a characteristic from noir detective fiction, these characters constantly engage in the act of shapeshifting, nationally and culturally in this context.

These two features of constant movement from place to place, and a deliberate indeterminacy of identity into account, help us understand why Villatoro turns to noir fiction to address the limits of contemporary nationhood. Nothing could be more fitting than borrowing from noir detective fiction where it is not so much the foreground that he emphasizes, in this case Salvadoran-ness, as are the multiple backgrounds and places that seamlessly overlap. In the series, alleged crime free cities in the U.S. find themselves ridden with drug rings rooted in Central America (as direct products of the Cold War) disorient the detective along with the reader. Urban landscapes are filled with economic refugees and homeless shelters echoing Central American's national displacement. Protagonists, just as much as antagonists, are constantly split across multiple cities and countries, dislodging the paradigm of a centered nation-state. Through a profusion of contradictions, instabilities, and narrative twists the practice of determining characters cultural origins and homes becomes futile. In this way, Villatoro draws attention to a considerable cultural and national gray area, a blind spot in the construction of contemporary nationhood that merits our attention. As such, I focus on how detective Chacón, is highly concerned with her social and institutional surroundings that partially accept her suggesting a deep sense of alienation and homelessness.



### A New Reading of the Romilia Chacón Crime Series

Critics have postulated that the series is largely about detective Romilia Chacón tracing the history of El Salvador's civil wars and spotlighting her Salvadoran-American cultural identity. In "Hot on the Heels of Transnational America: The Case of the Latina Detective" of *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World* Knepper focuses on Romilia Chacón's offbeat method for investigation. Knepper invokes Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of the new *mestiza* that consists of a dual point of view accessible to individuals who straddle two or more cultures. The figure of the *mestiza* unsettles fixed cultures and therefore grants one the possibility to perceive reality from an angle characterized by its hybridity (Anzaldúa 102). In this sense Romilia Chacón as a border-crosser detects and solves the crime from this unorthodox angle that includes her bilingual and bicultural bodies of knowledge that deviate from the traditional, monocultural Anglo-American sleuth. This hybrid perspective advanced by Wendy Knepper coincides with Ana Patricia Rodríguez's view that Romilia's *salvadoreñidad* enhances the young detective's crime solving capacities. She asserts that it is "lo invisible" (what she refers to as Latino/a culture), her hybrid gaze, her own experiences and ultimately her *salvadoreñidad* that allow Romilia Chacón to be an effective gumshoe. In this light, the whole series revolves around Romilia recovering this facet of her cultural identity while simultaneously engaging with and learning how to live with the trauma of civil war.

Akin to Rodríguez, *In Changing Women, Changing Nation: Female Agency, Nationhood & Identity in Trans-Salvadoran Narratives* (2012) Yajaira Padilla advances that the Romilia Chacón detective series permits Villatoro to highlight Salvadoran-ness. Padilla approaches the series from the framework elaborated by Arturo Arias. In his

article, “Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the U.S. Latino World”, Arias claims that as opposed to Chicanos/as and Puerto Ricans, Central Americans have not developed a politics of cultural affirmation, and thereby have struggled to resist their erasure in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Given that Villatoro situates the first installment of the series within the cultural landscape of the southern U.S. that is composed of Whites and African-Americans, and recently by an influx of Mexicans, Romilia’s Salvadoran background is significant. Her variant of Spanish, cuisine and cultural allusions emphatically mark her Central American descent. These aspects lead Padilla to claim that Romilia Chacón performs Salvadoran-ness. She proceeds to argue that through this performance of cultural identity, detective Romilia Chacón uncovers the brutality and trauma of the civil war and permits second-generation Salvadoran-Americans to inscribe themselves in the lingering effects of this conflict. The ambivalent relationship with her nemesis Rafael Murrillo allegorizes an attempt at a tenuous peace between victims and victimizers.

While critics claim that Villatoro highlights Central American-American subjectivity, I argue that the series goes beyond spotlighting and representing Central American subjects. Instead, it takes on a more subversive approach by pushing past the

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<sup>1</sup>Arias makes a strong case as to why Central Americans position themselves as invisible and shadowy in the U.S. Latino landscape. Placed in the context of their long social history of colonization by Spain and later overpowered by Mexico, Central Americans internalized and accepted an attitude of self-effacement. Against racism, sexism and any other oppressive practice this community finds it difficult to deploy power or resistance. The “Scorched Earth” policies during the Cold War that annihilated Guatemalans considered enemies of the state further drove this erasure. On account of this mistreatment, displaced in North America, Central Americans (largely Salvadorans and Guatemalans) never develop a new subjectivity.

politics of highlighting a specific nationality or ethnicity. Instead, the series reevaluates and dismantles the elements of national belonging that are based on geographical and racial parameters. By complicating any clear-cut distinctions between Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Mexican, U.S. Latino/a, and American, I contend that the series frustrates any pretensions of nation-state exclusivity. In this way, Villatoro sharply critiques this discursive construction that produces a liminal space for those that do not fit into its narrow parameters of a conventional social order and normativity. Through the homelessness of Rafael Murrillo and his involvement in crime, and by extension detective Romilia Chacón's, that becomes more pronounced as the series advances, Villatoro dismantles the rigidity and applicability of nationalities.

The argument that I elaborate is consonant of a larger tendency within Central American diasporic writings that problematizes traditional and nationalistic identities. That is, as opposed to anchoring the self in one nationality, newer bodies of work showcase overlapping and contradictory subject-positions that frustrate labels such as "American" and "Salvadoran", making them untenable. In other words, these voices defy straightforward categorization. This is particularly the case in the U.S. where a demographic and cultural shift never seen in the country's history upsets the view of sharing a common and homogenous culture. In his article "EpiCentro: The Emergence of a New Central American-American Literature" (2012), Arturo Arias explores spoken word poetry and performances. The artists that constitute the *EpiCentro* collective are U.S. born Central Americans, specifically the generation born during the 1980s (as opposed to Villatoro who also constitutes the second-generation but antedates these poets in age). A poem such as "Hybridities" by Gustavo Guerra Vásquez, resonates with

Villatoro's poetics of national homelessness. In Guerra's poems strings of lines such as: "...GuateMayAngelino, GuanaMex, Guanachapín, Guanachapín..." make identifying a clear nationality of no avail. Nationalistic discourses elaborated within Central America seven countries included developing a short-hand, or nickname for its inhabitants. I name only a couple in order to provide the context to understand the example mentioned above. Consider, for instance, that Guatemalans refer to themselves as "chapines" and Salvadorans call themselves "guanacos". In this way, the word play above is irrespective of national origins, given that it seamlessly weaves these identifiers together. As well as disrupting the division within Central America, the poem complicates regional divisions further by making references to African American letters (through the figure of Maya Angelou). With subversive poetry such as this, Arias claims that these artists not only call for a looser notion of Central American regional unity, but all together think beyond the concepts of nation and nationalism. These same preoccupations of the *EpiCentro* produce is not limited to their circle. The trope of homelessness that I elaborate in this chapter engages in these same disruptive practices, but does so through highlighting the porosity between allegedly, divided national territories.

In *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin pose the same question in relation to novelists that hail from diasporas. They ask: "What does 'home' mean in the disrupted world of colonial space? How can 'home' become the transformative habitation of boundaries? For certainly...that 'unhousedness'...that characterizes much of colonial displacement, is a primary force of disruption... Can it also be a form of liberation?" (425). Seeing that Villatoro is a product of El Salvador's diasporas, I am convinced that the trope of homelessness that the

Romilia Chacón series foregrounds, responds directly to this question. The series makes room for an alternative view of nation-states that is irrespective of geography, language, and cultural identity.

This disarrangement of the historical, the spatial and the social affected by the trope of homelessness that I set forth draws on Edward Soja's theoretical framework of the "Thirdspace" epistemology. Soja questions the limits of dichotomy-oriented thinking such as immigrant-native, White-Black, Mexican-American, and advances another possibility that is not merely a synthesis of two categories, but that pushes beyond them. The result is a transgression that presents an alternative that confounds established orders, seeing that it is based on them while simultaneously and radically departing from them. Soja's theory lends itself precisely to the trope of homelessness, seeing that Central American populations in the U.S. present a confluence of the historical (the trauma of civil wars), the spatial (the division within and across nation-states) and social life (a diverse citizenry that problematizes and supersedes nationalisms). To fully appreciate the richness of thirdspace, it is necessary to understand the concepts of firstspace and secondspace.

The first of these is constructed around objectivity and the formal science of space (75). That is, firstspace emphasizes the physical property and forms depicted in empirical and measurable configurations. Examples are visible geographies represented in maps, such as neighborhoods, cities and nations. In response to this empirical approach that has become mainstream, secondspace logic concentrates on the mental aspect, on the conceived rather than the perceived (78). Without abandoning the material form of space all together, secondspace gives preference par excellence to the subjective approach for

imagining and conceptualizing space. Thirdspace pushes pass this dualism of first and second spaces by distancing itself from the realm of the epistemological and leaning towards the ontological, namely, by concentrating on the immediate social experience. In this fashion, while not completely discarding the binary of first and secondspaces, Soja surpasses their blindspots by introducing the trialectic of Spatiality-Historicity-Sociality (81).

In relation to the U.S. as a nation-state as a “home”, I am drawn to a process of redefining it both spatially and culturally that resists firstspace and secondspace paradigms. Drawing on Soja, I advance the idea of a meta-national arrangement as the subjects in Villatoro’s series are not only Salvadoran, or American, or a simple combination of these two. Instead, their constant crossings and contradictory identifications advance another alternative whose identity is contingent on context, and stretches beyond the limits of one nationality, or community. As such, I contend that in the Chacón series the idea of a home in isolation, moored in one, visible geography is incomplete and incompatible with the social reality of Central American migration. Home can no longer constitutes one unchanging location, but rather is complicated by memory and quotidian social practice of shuttling between geographic locations. Both first and second-generation immigrants constantly shift back and forth between, and not necessarily geographically, but culturally, linguistically and socially among a plurality of spheres. For instance, while Spanish is the language spoken at home and with relatives over the phone and through social media, outside of those contexts, English is the dominant language accompanied with environments where one’s colleagues and neighbors might hail from Black, Asian and Native American denominations. Diasporic

subjects that engage in these multiple operations advance a centerless and borderless model of nations that go beyond our old-fashioned frameworks in contemporary daily life. What Villatoro's series highlights through the trope of homelessness is the mismatch between Brimelowe's and Buchanan's discourses regarding the nation-state and the restless crossings of Central Americans that complicate a stable national identity and citizenship. A check box on an institutional document that asks for one's ethnicity, a state granted driver's license and a passport are indicative of regional and national myopias that cannot contain this ontological homelessness that resists containment. In this way, the series moves towards a new possibility of the nation where fixed nationalisms fall apart. The discourse of homelessness serves as a counter-space to clearly coded national territories and logics that proceed without recognizing or extending representation to uncategorizable subjects.

### **Noir and Nationhood**

Persephone Braham postulates that detective literature can be both an affirmation of existing social values, and a way of setting new or controversial ideas against these established values (xix). That is, this genre has the capacity to offer new perceptions of reality that challenge the status quo. In the same way, Neelson and Braham claim that since its inception the detective genre has been engaged with epistemological formations that are not those of the dominant culture's or its hegemonic discourse (3). As a liminal figure in society the sleuth is not associated to state institutions and normally leads a solitary life, finding him/herself positioned to criticize society. The Romilia Chacón detective novels that I analyze fall within these criteria, given that in this chapter I focus

on how the series highlights alternative forms of national belonging that are fragmentary and interstitial, disrupting the nation-state's system foundational characteristics.

Detective Chacón's unofficial methods of detection, coupled with her nemesis' homelessness, run counter to the framework of the nation-state that assumes a symmetrical relationship between territory, identity and citizenship. Despite being cast as subjects dismissed from nation-states (the U.S., Guatemala and El Salvador), Central American diasporas, represented by the detective and her nemesis, contest these models by cultivating multiple trajectories of belonging that complicate the neat dyad of 'home' and 'host' country. In this way, the Chacón detective series re-conceptualizes the centered-ness of nation-states by highlighting a series of relationships that Pearson and Nels deem as non-binary, non-linear and non-hierarchical.

Against the exclusion imposed upon by state apparatuses (in this case represented by local police departments, the FBI and the DEA), detective Chacón and Murrillo's stark contradictions question the established social order of national belonging that no longer fit the changing contexts of the contemporary moment. In the Romilia Chacón series, this disruptive drive is articulated in several forms that include the following: memory of civil wars in Central America, an ambivalent partnership between criminal and detective, a scarred and socially rejected detective who investigates racist-oriented crimes, sleuthing not only in several metropolises, but also in rural areas, and lastly engaging in extralegal investigative practices. In this series the villains, largely White-male serial murderers, share the characteristic of being hostile towards racial and religious difference, or groups that, according their racist views, signal the decline of an Anglo-oriented monoculturalism. Moreover, these serial killers occupy, or have



occupied, positions within the U.S. state itself, suggesting its hostility towards those considered as Other and that threaten the social hierarchy established by a discourse of racial superiority. These serial murderers include a corrupt and racist police officer (detective Jerry Wilson), an ultra-national ex-FBI agent (Agent Carl Spooner), and a literary-inspired religious fanatic (Bobby Green). On the other hand, the victims that the narrator puts the most emphasis on are young and bi-cultural, Brown subjects, just like detective Chacón herself. Particularly in *Minos* (2003) where the murder of a young Latina (Romilia's sister Katy Chacón) opens the novel and the abduction of another young Latina advances the novel to its end. The most ambivalent figure throughout the series is Rafael Murrillo (a Guatemalan-American, formerly a Special Operations soldier in Guatemala turned narco-trafficker in the U.S.) who resists falling neatly into the classification of villain, or protagonist on account of his contradictory deeds. In love with detective Chacón, he illicitly helps with her investigation of serial murderers while, at times, threatens her with violence if she turns him into the authorities. He maintains loving relationships with his circle of family and friends yet delights in mercilessly torturing those who cross him. Strangely enough, despite her robust ideological and legal differences with Murrillo, detective Chacón also engages in questionable practices that include harsh interrogations and an excessive use of violence. These deviations from the norm of firmly belonging within a fixed designation, these ambiguous shades of gray that Murrillo and Chacón occupy are precisely the cornerstone of the series. Together, both characters subvert the professional, legal and national categories. Consider that despite being on opposite sides of the law, detective Chacón accepts the illicit help of Murrillo to solve crimes. By assisting detective Chacón, Murrillo who symbolizes an alleged danger

to the state, surprisingly keeps its citizens safe from racist-oriented crimes. Symbolically, this interaction between them characterized by contradictions frustrates the primacy of the nation-state system given that they repeatedly move in and out of their roles. In doing so, they disrupt any pretenses of clear cultural and national divisions. Murrillo and detective Chacón sustain an ambivalent relationship with the state that goes beyond the binary of national ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’. From their marginalized positioning that serve as counter-spaces, these characters’ interactions create alternative communities and that stretch beyond the narrow grounds of geographical, national, and legally sanctioned parameters.

### **Transnational Crimes and National Displacement**

The Romilia Chacón detective novels *Home Killings* (2001), *Minos* (2003) and *A Venom Beneath the Skin* (2005) follow the young, Salvadoran-American detective Romilia Chacón who investigates homicides that cut across Central America and the U.S. The first installment deals with an alleged scare that Guatemalan ex-military forces, specifically the group known as *kaibiles* are on a murdering spree in Nashville, TN. The killer turns out to be detective Chacón’s own partner, Jerry Wilson. In the second installment the murderer is a religious fanatic, Bobby Green who targets those who he deems as sinners, including detective Chacón’s sister. In the third installment, detective Chacón pursues a xenophobic terrorist organization that plants bombs throughout Los Angeles. The killer turns out to be the disgraced FBI agent Carl Spooner. Throughout the series, detective Chacón ascends the law enforcement hierarchy that leads to a position as an FBI agent. However, her colleagues continually marginalize her and frame her as a

cultural-national Other, highlighting her sense of partial belonging within the institutions that employ her.

As detective Chacón pursues serial killers that target Latino/a communities, her investigations are inevitably tied to murders in Atlanta, Nashville, Memphis, Denver, Los Angeles, el Petén in Guatemala and the U.S.-Mexico border, complicating her identification to nationhood. Correspondingly, at the outset of the first novel, the prologue underscores a non-essentialist view of a national home. Although situated in the U.S., she is bound to Central America's civil wars that provoked her profound sense of loss, figured in the unresolved murder of her sister, and her own family's national displacement. As such, the first point the prologue emphasizes is her position as a newcomer to Nashville and to the profession of homicide investigation, signaling her recent arrival to a new city. Detective Chacón's liminal position, coupled with the imprint of civil war, are the central characteristics that define her at the beginning. In this way, *Home Killings* (2001) the first installment of the series opens with the following prologue

"I'm twenty-eight, Latina, and a southerner. Atlanta was my hometown. Now Nashville is where I hang the few skirts I own. I'm a bonafide rookie detective, having made the cut only six months ago. I've only seen three murdered bodies in my life, the latest one being this young guy Diego Sáenz. Still, I'm good at this. I know I'm good at this because I think about murder all the time. I have that right. My big sister's killer gave me that right six years ago. He also gave me an obsessive vengeance, though I've learned to keep that in check, hidden from my superiors...I rarely show my rage. I put the anger toward cases before me like a thin stream of gas on an open flame. Used sparingly anger is the best fuel. But once I find the man who took Catalina away from mother and me, I'll throw the whole tank into the fire." (vii)

Detective Romilia Chacón self-introduction echoes the displacement and trauma of homeless Central Americans. The loss of her hometown, being new to Nashville, coupled with the lingering memory of a murdered sister, suggest the disruption of a previous community. Related in the first person, this narrative recourse suggests a desired

collective agency for communities that have continually suffered an unchecked violence during the sanguinary period of its civil wars from the 1960s until the late 1990s. As she identifies herself as a Southerner, Central America's history of civil war undergirds her subjectivity. Images of cadavers, open flames and memories of her murdered and missing sister evokes Guatemala's military "Scorched Earth" counter-insurgency policies during the height of the armed conflicts. From this angle, Detective Chacón's rage communicates a desire for justice against states that were never held accountable for mass killings in Central America. This murder that lingers in detective Chacón's subjectivity also provokes the condition of homelessness that is not only limited to Central America but extends into the U.S. as well as these newly arrived populations are unwelcome. If in Central America these unwanted citizens were deemed as a threat to the conservative social order, in the U.S. these Central American and Mesoamerican populations are a menace to the racial and social order, as is evidenced by the killings of young Latinos/as the series explores. On account of this discourse of exclusion, it becomes clear why Villatoro turned to crime fiction.

In *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World* (2009) Nels Pearson and Marc Singer postulate since its origins the detective genre has reflected dominant society's anxieties towards the Other in which the detective's interactions and encounters invoke clashes between nations, races and cultures (3). Seen in this light, the prologue foregrounds covert U.S. intervention in Central America that occasioned large-scale migration to the U.S. The staggering influx largely of Salvadorans and Guatemalans in the U.S. compounded the condition of national homelessness as these populations' entry was reluctant (as seen in U.S. immigration policy that I mentioned in the previous

chapter). Seen in this light, Chacón symbolizes those populations that are the product of tense encounters between Central America and the U.S. As a nationally displaced subject deemed Other, tense racial encounters in the workplace dominate the beginning of the first installment. Her defining characteristics that she enumerates herself (Southern, Salvadoran and female) draw attention to her marginalized position within unfamiliar and unwelcoming situations that include crime scenes, police officers reluctant to work with Chacón, and hostile suspects that she confronts.

As a subject whose national identification is complex, Detective Chacón, deviates considerably from the classic hard-boiled detective in several respects, namely through the quality of her striking newness. Professionally, she is inexperienced with official detective work and with seeing bloodshed, but she is familiar with detective procedures and first-hand loss of loved ones and, by extension, obsessed with vengeance. Similarly, while most detectives are middle-aged and jaded men, Detective Chacón is considerably younger, and more importantly, a Latina in a White, male-dominated profession. Similarly, if one notes that Chacón hails from a community that is indignant about injustice, it is highly symbolic that she is not an independent private eye but constitutes part of the Nashville police force that is bound to serve the broader public.

In this way, she investigates serial murders that effect entire local and national communities, including and not limited to the Latino/a, Salvadoran one that she hails from, but also dominant ones as well, which places her again at the crux of North and Central American societies that slowly become less separable. In the first installment *Home Killings* (2001), as with the rest of the series, Detective Chacón does not work crimes confined to particular families, or is hired by wealthy patrons, but tracks down

serial killers whose murders and drug rings not only effect her own family, or exclusive cliques, but have far-reaching effects across multiple societies. This last quality explains why Detective Chacón and Rafael Murrillo will move incessantly throughout the series from place to place, as well as Romilia's preoccupation with home, as is evidenced in the prologue with her recent move from Atlanta to Nashville.

Correspondingly, she longs to be home at the end of the workday. Moments spent with her small family, that consists of her mother and young son, are the only times where she finds solace. Villatoro highlights Detective Chacón's desire to be at home at the outset of the series. He establishes a figurative link between Detective Chacón and her first official murder victim, the young journalist Diego Sáenz who mirrors her in many ways. As a young, bilingual and bicultural subject, Sáenz served as a cultural liaison for the burgeoning Latino/a community in Nashville, a duty that Romilia continues to carry out. Nonetheless, the series open with the crime scene in which Saézn's body is sprawled out in a parking lot with a gunshot wound to head in what looks to be a suicide. After a tense exchange with an officer that questions her authority, Villatoro establishes the connection between Saézn, and Chacón's desire for home in relation to an unwelcoming city. Detective Chacón thinks: "...Maybe he would appreciate 'Up yours, officer Beaver' more. He angered me. But he also emptied a hole in me. I had a sudden urge to call home, wake my mother, and ask her how my son, Sergio was...she would assure me that my *hijo*, my *querido* was safe. It would be enough to fill the edges of this hole. (5).

On Villatoro's part the macabre metaphor is deliberate, seeing that the hole the gunshot wound left in Saézn's body runs parallel to the symbolic aperture in Detective

Chacón's troubled psyche. Given that she hails from Central American communities that have been profoundly rejected, her torment stems not so much for the desire to return to physical place, but also the overall lack of belonging in Nashville. Her immediate family that she loves so dearly and fiercely protects, at the beginning of the series, is the only community that she has, something that her nemesis Rafael Murrillo has, but gradually loses. In this way, as the series progresses, Murrillo echoes and amplifies the same crises detective Chacón faces, yet despite being cast as homeless, his multi-directionality posits an alternative to rigid frameworks of national belonging.

### **De-Centralized America(s)**

Rafael Murrillo, a wealthy philanthropist of Guatemalan and Tennessean origin that caters to the homeless, is detective Chacón's rival. He embodies the unhousedness that characterizes the displacement of Central Americans, while at the same time presenting a form of liberation from this condition. Akin to detective Chacón, one of Rafael Murrillo's defining characteristics is his transit across the U.S., Mexico and Guatemala. Similar to detective Chacón, he never quite arrives at one clear, definitive "home", but rather constantly finds himself spread across several regions and countries. The existence of this character leads one to ask the questions: What is the meaning of home after one's world in another land has been disrupted forcing one to look for stability elsewhere? How does one nationally and culturally define him/herself? In this way, his incessant movement suggests an unsettling of traditional and epistemological notions of national belonging that fall short accommodating to diasporic subjects.

In "Minimal Selves" Stuart Hall elaborates the idea that although diasporas may find themselves displaced, they also contest the binaries that define them (namely, being

cast as a national insider or outsider). Murrillo engages in the practice by gradually doing away with the major pole of the nation as an articulation of the self by minimizing its territorial demarcations. A lack of anchorage in the nation and its terrain define a new space for national identity irrespective of nationalisms. Instead identities, or specifically new ethnicities, as Hall refers to them, are composed of contradictions, disjunctions and contingencies that complicate old frameworks of nation-states. Rafael Murrillo, like detective Chacón, and a gamut of secondary characters, highlights this divergence and lack of essential characteristics (language, phenotype, customs) associated with being a national subject. In the case of detective fiction, this shift in the orientation of national politics manifests itself in the question of determining who is evil, or not. In Murrillo's case, the disruption of nationhood is also figured in these terms of his multiple and contradictory tendencies. He oscillates between being a local celebrity philanthropist and hunted narco-trafficker, having several homes to becoming homeless, practicing violence and exhibiting a desire to help his enemy. In this way, he actively engages in a politics of difference by breaking with essential correspondences of Guatemalan versus American, or villain versus hero.

This quality of losing anchorage with his countries is first signaled by Rafael Murrillo's proximity with homeless communities. For example, he sets up shelters for the un-housed and as the series advances finds himself as a homeless subject as well. More importantly, this trope of homeless echoes the larger issue of social isolation for those seen as unassimilable to the normative national imaginary in the U.S. As a philanthropist CEO and new to Nashville, his recent project is the *Southern Homestead*, a nonprofit organization that gives refuge and resettlement to refugees from all over the world.



Before coming to Nashville, he had established a homeless shelter and soup kitchen in Atlanta as well, signaling a trajectory of placelessness. Akin to the homeless communities Murrillo serves, he will never have his feet permanently planted on the ground himself. New to Nashville, an article that Detective Chacón reads in the paper about him is headlined “Atlanta Philanthropist Plants Roots in Nashville”. The question of planting roots is central to the series, seeing that both Murrillo and Chacón look to not lose sight of their roots while drifting between multiple cities and countries that refuse to accept them.

Curiously enough, despite the hostility detective Chacón faces in Nashville while interrogating witnesses, her interaction with Atlanta’s homeless community breaks this pattern. While trying to find the connection between the murdered reporter Sáenz and his enigmatic connection to another victim, nurse Pamela Kim, Detective Chacón comes to a homeless shelter. As opposed to a matter-of-factly approach to questioning any potential witness, Detective Chacón and her partner sit down and have dinner with the homeless community. In this space that caters to those who have no fixed home and wander throughout society, Detective Chacón comes across a vital piece of information. The chief suspect for the murders was incapable of harming the victim Nurse Pamela, seeing that he was deeply in love with her. In other words, as opposed to numerous hostile suspects, members of the homeless community easily collaborate with Detective Chacón. In this sense, establishes a parallel between Chacón’s family and Murrillo who migrate across North and Central America in a nomadic fashion.

At the end of the first installment, despite Rafael Murrillo’s image as a wealthy philanthropist and vital member of the local community, his clandestine and massive

drug ring comes to light. While the first installment familiarized us with detective Chacón, the second installment *Minos* (2003) delves into Murrillo's history of displacement. In this novel, simultaneity comes to the fore if we consider that unlike most detective stories, Chacón is searching for a new serial killer, Bobby Green known as the Whisperer, and Murrillo concomitantly. Despite being on the run, Murrillo is determined to not lose sight of his homes and loved ones both in Tennessee and Guatemala. The multi-directional bonds exhibit a non-linear relationship with statehood that signals the rupture between national territory and identity. This unofficial shift in paradigms is expressed through the similarities and differences between the two criminals in this installment, Rafael Murrillo and Bobby Green (known as the Whisperer). Green is a religious fanatic that killed detective Chacón's sister.

Together, they echo each other in multiple ways. Both are physically situated and operate from dark and remote locations, Rafael from his country house in Ixaba, Guatemala, and Bobby Green in the deep, rural south of the U.S. Just as Rafael, the Whisperer observes his victims from afar, meticulously selects his weaponry and communicates a message with each killing. When he plans to kill Detective Chacón's sister for adultery, Green carefully selects a pole used for building gates as his weapon of choice. In a sadistic crime, he spears both Katy and her lover while they are embraced in the act of love. When he kills a group of bankers for gluttony, Green handpicks and searches for the vicious pitbull dog that will eat the three stockbrokers alive while they are bound and hanging upside down. Even more unsettling, just like Murrillo, Green delights in the slow torture of his victims.

Murrillo shares some of these same tendencies. Instead of using guns, Murrillo's weapon of choice is a lightweight curved knife with an African gazelle horn that he calls "The Sorcerer's Apprentice". His new business partner gifts him a hand carved wooden Andean blowgun with Guaraní poisoned darts. With these two weapons, Murrillo carefully crafts his plan of attack against an FBI agent, Carl Spooner, that pursues him in Ixbala, Guatemala. While Spooner is sedated, but conscious, he carves the word "idiota" into his chest. Even more disturbingly, through a report of the wounds Spooner suffered through the attack, the reader finds out that Murrillo castrated agent Spooner. The torture passage evokes even more empathy, seeing that Spooner is a dedicated family man with a pregnant wife who anxiously awaits his arrival back in the U.S. Just like Agent Spooner being conscious during the attack, the stockbrokers and Catalina that Green killed were helpless and lucid during their torturous deaths.

Despite these similarities, the most striking difference between both criminals is their motive, particularly Green's. Inspired by *Dante's Inferno* his crimes are tightly structured around the nine rings of hell and each specific sin corresponds to each ring. In this second novel titled *Minos*, in reference to the judge of the underworld depicted in More's paintings, Green is motivated and obsessed with moral, religious and social order that should dictate human conduct. If anyone deviates from those established parameters, he deems them as sinners and sadistically murders them. Hence, his victims are those he perceives as adulterers (Detective Chacón sister Katy Chacón and the married man she was involved with), gluttons (the young bankers in New Orleans) and pedophiles (the father in Alabama). While he observes his victims and society in general, Green often reiterates not going against the established moral and religious order. When Catalina

Chacón flirts with a married man in the coffeeshop where Green works at he thinks: “It’s just wrong. People marry, Catalina. This is order.” (2). When he interacts with a helpful and chipper sales assistant the Home Depot, Bobby thinks: “Bobby pays...then turns and sees Willie approach another customer. Bobby smiles, a satisfaction, seeing clearly how much order is in Willie’s life. Willie has no need for the logic of circles” (5). As he studies the three bankers in a bar, that he later kills, he isolates one in particular and considers: “Dumb-ass Sam, who’s losing any sense of place in this world he has entered...(69). In other words, Green’s victims are those who cross the threshold of moral lines.

In this light, Green’s pathology figured in terms of an inviolate social and moral order parallels nationalistic discourses that emphasize a territorial and racial order. There is no room for ambiguity or indeterminacy in Green’s psyche, given that he constructs a homogenous world where citizens all follow the same norm, or are ruthlessly eliminated from the social fabric. The threat to his inner world is any infraction, any conduct that deviates from his rigidly established viewpoint. Bobby Green’s victims at the opening and at the ending of the second installment attest to his nationally monocentric world view, given that they are both young, Latina women.

The first one is Katy Chacón (Detective Chacón sister) who is committing adultery and the second one is Karen Allen, a suicidal youth who is the daughter of a fictional Hollywood Latina actress, Rigoberta Allende. In the diegesis, she is the first Mexican American from East Los Angeles to win an Oscar. In detective Chacón’s household this woman is a highly regarded star, given that detective Chacón and her mother are fans of this actress. The construction of the celebrity’s name makes the reader

recall two known female voices, Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú and Chilean novelist Isabel Allende. The presence of a famous and prosperous Latinas evokes a sense of envy surrounding Latino/a communities that Bobby embodies. He is well aware that the implied target of his crime does not only include Allende's daughter (Karen), but Rigoberta Allende herself. In other words, his intended crime is highly symbolic given that it is far-reaching statement that targets U.S. Latinos/as.

In much the same way, the rest of the serial killers in the series echo this same characteristic of antagonizing the female Other and desiring to return to an older, racially 'pure' arrangement in the U.S. Detective Jerry Wilson in *Home Killings* falsely created the scare of Guatemalan *kaibiles* murdering innocent citizens of Nashville and ex-DEA agent Carl Spooner, the serial killer in the third installment, is a homophobic xenophobe who terrorizes San Francisco with his killing spree. What binds all three of the serial killers is an intolerance of non-Anglo and non-English speaking communities who destabilize persisting paradigms of a monocultural nation.

On the other hand, Murrillo's attacks are more defensive and oriented towards his own survival, or that of his loved ones. In contrast to the solitary serial murderers, Murrillo maintains family and filial bonds. As a former *kaibil* we know that he has murdered before, but he is not a serial killer, or obsessed with maintaining a national order. This character is the exact inverse of national and cultural order on account of his mixed background and incessant movement across the U.S., Central America and Mexico. Although he tortures, he is unsettled when he reads the forensic report that describes in detail how Green killed Katy Chacón. In this way, the narrator exhibits a certain sympathy and proximity for Rafael Murrillo, given that the voice refers to him by

his nickname, and not his official name. Murrillo harms on account of his training as a former Special Operations military member. Taking these points into consideration, the narrator paints Murrillo as a victim, seeing that he inescapably follows the same path as his father in the drug trade.

Rafael's Murrillo's clandestine drug ring symbolizes the Guatemalan military officers who turned to narco-trafficking after the armed conflict. Murrillo is not alone in following these footsteps of national displacement. In Horacio Castellanos' *El arma en el hombre* (2001) the central character and anti-hero referred to simply as Robocop on account of being deformed and manipulated by the Salvadoran state is a former *Atlatl*, U.S. trained special operations soldier, who finds himself idle and unemployed after the peace accords of 1992. Placeless in society, he turns to the drug trade to make a living by drug smuggling and working as a hitman, seeing that he is excessively violent and merciless. In "The Untouchable Narco-State" Frank Smyth documents this trend of how U.S. trained, high-ranking Central American officers pursued the drug trade and contracted their services to established Mexican cartels.

In the series, Rafael Murrillo is not a small-time drug dealer, he runs a massive operation that caters to Nashville's elites as well as the rest of the city. As one sees in the second and third installments, *Minos* and *A Venom Beneath The Skin*, his network is center-less and expands across multiple countries. While publicly being a philanthropist in Nashville and later as a criminalized drug kingpin, Murrillo is a key player in a transnational drug network that was indirectly facilitated by the U.S. The treatment he experiences in Nashville first as a friend and then as foe symbolizes U.S. contradictory policy towards Central Americans. As a former *kaibil*, he is an abomination created by

the U.S. during the Cold War played out in Central America and is now an enemy of the state persecuted by the DEA on account of his narco-trafficking. This policy of aiding allies against the Cold War and then demonizing them is one of the central causes for the re-configuration of national territories suggested by the series. Millions of Central Americans fled during the civil war and continue to do so on account of a drug trade that permeates society. Murrillo's presence in the U.S. signals contradictions in U.S. foreign policy that deliberately arms and trains locals to deal with a threat (communism for instance) and years later, after official conflicts are over, is outraged when these armed forces threaten U.S. interests or affairs. Murrillo's role indicates that although official conflict come to end, the memory of them and their criminal repercussions are alive and well. In this way, the crimes carried out by Murrillo, and the scare of *kaibiles* terrorizing Nashville citizens elaborated by the crooked detective Jerry Wilson is the result of those larger crimes perpetrated by U.S. foreign policy in Central America. If the U.S. constantly intervenes in Central America, Murrillo and Chacón's presence invalidates the fiction of national and social boundaries between North and Central America.

Rafael Murrillo elaborates a counter-discourse of belonging. This national exclusion perpetuated both by the U.S. and Central America lead Murrillo to abandon his home, but at the same time construct an alternative one that is more complex and less dependent on physical territories. Yajaira Padilla claims that Murrillo's position as a fugitive serves as a metaphor for undocumented Central American populations living precariously in the U.S. Crossing borders among the U.S., Mexico and Central America mirrors the perilous journeys of Central Americans escaping political violence and dire economic circumstances in Central America. Different from Padilla's claim, I interpret

Rafael Murrillo's liminal as a counterhegemonic strategy against the foundational pillar of a socio-cultural cohesion sustained by nationhood. Rafael Murrillo signals the desire to belong, but through a more complex epistemology. Rather than being attached to the primacy of one place or culture, Rafael Murrillo engages in a multi-dimensional practice of belonging to multiple communities and places, yet the state does not easily permit him to do so. To a large extent, what defines this complex character are the multi-dimensional and transnational communities that he constitutes and maintains. He interacts and blends in seamlessly with a wide variety of societies. These include his Guatemalan side of his family and indigenous communities located in rural Guatemala, his North American side of his family located in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and a thick network of illicit communities situated at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Complementary to these relationships is the peculiar bond that he cultivates with detective Chacón. Despite being on opposing sides of the law, a striking feature of Murrillo is his genuine concern and care for her. As opposed to other villains and kingpins in crime fiction, Murrillo does not define himself by a central preoccupation with acquiring power, the accumulation wealth or murder. On the contrary, Murrillo's central aim is to establish a loving relationship with detective Chacón. Throughout the series he consistently protects her from serial killers and actively helps her with her investigations. Consider for instance, the suspenseful endings of both *Home Killings* and *Minos* where he saves Chacón's life from both serial killers detective Jerry Wilson and The Whisperer. Murrillo's central enemy is not Detective Chacón, but nationalistic and racist law enforcement agents of the state that turn into serial killers or terrorists.



On Murrillo's part, the U.S. state that created him as a former *kaibil* now paints him as an aberration and perpetually casts into the position of a wanderer out of place. Taking this perspective into consideration, Murrillo's homeless position calls for an innovative re-thinking of social organization that distances itself from the insistent use of bordered territories. Murrillo, along with millions of Mesoamerican migrants and their offspring are delegitimized by the U.S. state that criminalizes transnational realities that undermine state sovereignty. Applying a hollow discourse of multiculturalism and the narrative of assimilation into the U.S. social fabric is not tenable for displaced Mesoamerican societies. In this way, Villatoro suggests the mismatch between 18<sup>th</sup> century theoretical frameworks of the nation-state and its contemporary Central American migration. Through the criminalization, exclusion and persecution of Murrillo, the series suggests a revision and replacement of these outdated notions of social organization. One of these tenets is the praxis of territorialization. Murrillo's position of homelessness not only evokes this paradigm, but also resists it.

In *Minos*, the concept of territorialization, that is, the division of land between social entities and assigning specific meanings to the resultant places (Diener 59) collapses as Murrillo loses his sense of home in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Rafael Murrillo never fully occupies one position, or space, but traverses through the U.S., Central America and Mexico in a non-linear fashion, signaling a rupture among, national identity, territory and home. Drawing on Soja, Murrillo questions the structure of nation-states that falls under the category of what Soja defines as Firstspace. This epistemology privileges objectivity and materiality by dividing space into empirically, measurable configurations that are captured in maps, cities, regions and nation-states (75). Against these surface-

based representations of space, the concept of Thirdspace takes into consideration a social dynamic that contests the imposing and operational power of Firstspace. Seen from this angle, Thirdspace encompasses lived dimensions that make possible a counter-discourse against peripheral and marginalized positionings that Firstspace orientations foment. In other words, possibilities for transformation and inclusivity arise. In the case of Rafael Murrillo, he contests the rigid bipolar ordering of Firstspace exercised by nation-states, by engaging in a sociality that showcases Central American diasporas active participation in an alternative reconstruction of nations. His condition of homelessness pries open spatial division between North and Central America without prioritizing one over the other but seeing them as unruly and unfixed geographies that are variable and shifting.

Consider, for instance, that while Detective Chacón pursues Bobby Green (the serial murderer known as the Whisperer), she also goes to Murrillo's childhood home and questions his aunt Ruthie, an elderly upper-class southerner. At the end of their conversation, she emphasizes to Chacón, "You'll never catch him. He's too elusive. He's been trained... You won't catch him. (40). As a child, there are references that describe Murrillo as a young boy perpetually in motion that would and effortlessly swing from branches while climbing trees. When cornered by the DEA at his mother's house during his visit, he uses the same method to escape. Despite being set up by his aunt, he jumps out of the window into the old forest of his childhood and avoids the authorities. While he loses contact and the possibility to return to Chattanooga, this ease and flexibility on his part to move in and out of territories signals that U.S. Central Americans are not dependent on one geographical center as an anchor for a national identity. A concrete

space, although a starting point, is no longer a requirement of belonging for placeless Central American diasporas that move across Central American and North American societies. The question of physical origins loses importance for Murrillo as he gradually constructs a figurative space of community without a geographical center, but through his partnership with Detective Chacón, regardless of location.

*A Venom Beneath the Skin* (2005) the third installment of the series exemplifies this resistance to a centrality demanded by the nation-state system. Rafael Murrillo, along with detective Chacón, consistently and without documentation cross the U.S.-Mexico border. Moreover, they do so on foot according the reader a picture of this restless and dense migration pattern composed of unsanctioned spaces, such as hidden tunnels and unmanned territories that elude official maps. This practice of transgressing state lines is so pronounced throughout the series that in one of Murrillo's crossings the narrator writes: "Between our countries there is a third country of tunnels and trucks and coyotes. *El país ambulante*, Tekún once wrote in an old journal, in days when he used to write. An ambulant land." (Villatoro 72). The deed of walking defiantly and subversively across a highly policed zone, coupled with the narrator's suggestion that there exists a roving country that escapes sanctioned grids, leads us back to Michel De Certeau's considerations. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988) he brings to relief the subversive practices of individuals and communities that disrupt the surveillance and aspirations of state power. Despite its attempts to suppress and erase illegitimate forms of social life, the act of walking resists this control. Rather than understanding a city as a fixed and static space, De Certeau conceives it as an unruly and unstable phenomenon that cannot easily be reduced to a series of contained parameters. He establishes a parallel between

the act of walking and the act of speaking. While language has a theoretical and fixed set of norms, the practice of enunciation often deviates from its established principles. Through the improvisation of speech, the subject turns the established rules and words into something else that turns away from the norm. Similarly, the activity of walking across a city escapes the theoretical and panoptic ambitions of power that seek to compartmentalize populations. Underneath official representations elaborated by urban planners, there exists an energy that escapes these pretensions of containment. He writes: “Beneath the discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer” (De Certeau 95).

In the same way, the trope of homelessness that Murrillo performs, draws on and extends De Certeau’s framework, given that despite the intense persecution by state sanctioned authorities, Murrillo’s incessant roving presents a novel spatial arrangement that supersedes the limits of the contemporary model. The exercise of walking undermines the core tenet of territory as a basis of nationhood. In walking across North and Central America the series resists and reformulates the current social order. Going beyond the case of undocumented immigrants, Murrillo’s incessant trekking symbolizes a larger pattern in where U.S. born generations whose social lives and identities also refuse to be contained by the rigidity of one national home. The praxis that the narrator describes revisits the nation-state and conceives it as more dynamic and elastic. Overall, I understand these crossings as a different spatial and conceptual arrangement that rejects nation-states as detached units.

These references evoke a new possibility that cuts across these mono-logical forms Firstspace epistemologies required for national belonging. If the nation-state, according to Bill Ashcroft is one of the building blocks of modernity, the Chacón crime series disrupts its processes, seeing that it does away with the totalizing discourse of nationhood and looks for a liberation from its weight to those subjects who are excluded from it. Still, departing and disrupting national classification takes a toll on Chacón's subjectivity as she grapples with alienation. As such, she often finds herself tormented by the daily, tense interactions with the law enforcement agencies that reluctantly "house" her. Just as Rafael grapples with national homelessness, detective Chacón figuratively undergoes the same process of partial belonging and social exclusion.

### **Another Case of Lonely Detectives**

In many ways, Detective Chacón echoes Murrillo's homelessness that normative discourses of nationhood sustain. Therefore, it is no wonder that a strong subtext of alienation and isolation against institutionalized national exclusion is prominent in the series. In the case of detective Chacón, a lack of home and community are figured in terms of a half-hearted acceptance of the state agencies that reluctantly employ her. From beginning to end, Chacón's loneliness is constant throughout the narrative. Detective Chacón continually feels unwelcome and outcast at state law enforcement entities, and among the existing Latino/a communities. She repeatedly makes references to hostile gazes that mark her as an outsider, especially in *Home Killings*. Upon the crime scene of Diego Sáenz she reflects on about the interaction with Officer Beaver: "I could feel his eyes float quickly down my body, which made no sense, considering I wore a long black trenchcoat that covered me from my neck to my ankles" (3). When approaching the

witness, the young Nelson García, nicknamed Gato Negro, within Nashville's Latino/a communities, detective Chacón more than often, makes note of being gazed upon by García and his mother Doña Marina Osegueda: "She just stared at me (33)... I drove the half block away from Doña Marina's store. It was a last-ditch attempt to have her stop looking at me (35)..., Again, I felt a set of eyes upon me and my Taurus, fearful eyes..." (36). These references permeate *Home Killings* as detective Chacón is conscious of stares from the White, male police department and the Latino/a community in Nashville. This pattern of gazes suggests the ostracism that Central Americans encounter from society in general.

Similar to *Home Killings*, in *Minos* detective Chacón intuits that she does not completely belong at the law enforcement institutions that employ her. Upon her transition from a local detective to working with the FBI, her dismissal from the Nashville police force, and her welcome to the FBI connotes a sense of exclusion that follows her. References to feeling unattended by her superiors and their silences and disaffection are constant:

"It rattled me the way McCabe signed the papers, had them delivered to the downstairs, whose offices, who would send them on to Washington. It bothered me, the way McCabe, who I had come to like, to trust, now avoided eye contact with me. He said little. Though he did, as I left the threshold of his door, wish me good luck.

Agent Pierce handed me a temporary FBI badge. It was cardboard, with my name typed over a line, just above a federal seal. Not even laminated. Even with a temp, I expected a little more from the Feds" (212).

As a sleuth who is constantly seen as an outsider in new cities, she repeatedly feels deserted and faces institutional limits. At one police station in Memphis, an officer who is neighborly with her holds back information that can help her with her case on Bobby Green. On account of her investigative acumen, she manages to work in tandem with FBI, but since she is at the threshold between local and federal, Detective Chacón finds herself without access to protected files. When the FBI closes in on one of the serial killers, she is not allowed to charge in, given that she is not familiar with their procedures. Moreover, as she winds up pointing her gun at the apparent serial killer (the Whisperer), FBI agents threaten to shoot Chacón if she shoots him. In other words, she occupies a provisional, marginal position and is perpetually reminded of it.

The central symbol that separates detective Chacón from other police agents and that communicates her isolation and figurative homelessness is the fresh, highly visible scar on her neck. In addition to being a Salvadoran Latina in law enforcement, the scar serves a maximum expression of her national Otherness. At the end of *Home Killings* (2001) the first installment, the corrupt police officer Jerry Wilson who faked the *kaibil* scare in Nashville, slashes the side of her neck during a shootout. *Minos* (2003), the second installment, opens with Romilia adjusting the multiple stitches of the scar in a hospital. While Romilia already had a scar from an accident with her older sister, it was on her foot where it was covered. In contrast to this hidden wound, the new scar prohibits her from carrying on with her life. She must tie her hair differently to cover it, use caution when exercising and make sure not to strain it. References to the scar when she meets other law enforcement agents, questions the witnesses and interacts with the public abound. When she finds herself alone, which is quite often given that she travels from

city to city, she contemplates her disfigurement. As an attractive widowed twenty-eight-year old woman, she incessantly wonders if another man will find her desirable. In this way, detective Chacón's scar echoes diasporas who have been brutalized and rejected from Central and North American nation-states. Specific to diasporic Salvadorans, the scar symbolizes the memory of civil war that leaves these societies incomplete and broken. The multiple crises of loss, brutality, exclusion, being Othered, and torn communities work themselves out through the scarred body and troubled subjectivity of detective Romilia Chacón.

In contrast to her perpetual isolation within state apparatuses of law enforcement, her romantic relationship with FBI special agent Pierce is significant. Akin to detective Chacón, Pierce is another scarred and severely battered investigator. He is missing an eye and manages to partially cover the remaining scar with a patch, he walks with a limp because of his prosthetic leg, and missing his right thumb. Moreover, he is a man in his early thirties, once very handsome according to Detective Chacón, who exhibits the attitude of a seasoned and weathered detective who has lived through warfare. There are allusions that he has suffered these injuries while on the job, just as Chacón has received her wounds. On account of his deformed condition and his history, she sees herself reflected in Agent Pierce. His name itself, "Pierce" echoes the abuse and mutilation his body has suffered, and his harsh appearance provokes a sense of discomfort in others when they see him for the first time. In this way, just like her, agent Pierce constitutes the position of the Other. Just as Chacón has endured the loss of a sister, and national exclusion, Pierce is a survivor of the same harsh, brutality occasioned by the state. Both of them wear the state's marks on their incomplete and cut bodies.



Similarly, Agent Pierce is one of the few characters that is not indifferent or unfriendly to detective Chacón. On the contrary, they deeply understand each other on account of their mutual losses. When she decides to share with Pierce that Murrillo, a known fugitive on the run from the FBI, passes her highly classified files about the serial killer Bobby Green, Detective Chacón appeals to Pierce's own sense of pain. To establish fellowship and solidarity between these characters, Murrillo turns to a metaphor based on the conduct of wolves to describe Chacón's reasoning. Before approaching her superior, Romilia ponders:

Someone once told me about the civilized manner of wolves. Supposedly, in the wild, wolves have a strong sense of community among themselves. They travel in packs, take care of their own. They have a hierarchy. Sometimes the chain of command may be questioned by one of the dogs on the lower echelon. They will fight...The winner will see the full neck of and knows the fight is over. He walks away. I decided to show my neck to Special Agent Pierce... More, I hoped to engage him in the field of familiar losses, his eye and leg, my neck, our body parts victims of on-the-job mutilation. (201).

Pierce's response is one of sympathy as he refrains from admonishing, or penalizing detective Chacón for her collaborative work with Murrillo.

In addition to the comradery between these two agents, she admires his resistance and resolve to keep fighting against evil despite his imperfect body. Akin to her procedural limitations within the FBI, Pierce's physical ones further affirm her marginalized position. Just as she is not allowed to charge in with the FBI during apprehensions, Pierce cannot physically rush in with the other agents because of his

prosthetic leg, but he listens to and coordinates the attack from afar through an earpiece.

On account of their similarities, a combination of esteem and attraction develops:

“Perhaps someone who once loved him couldn’t love him in this new state, handicapped, broken but still standing. But after being with him these few days, I had grown used to the eyepatch, the limp. They seemed more a part of him, something integral to who he was.” (257).

At the FBI, detective Chacón also encounters Special Agent Leticia Fisher, an old friend of Agent Pierce and the regional Los Angeles director. In much that same way as Pierce, Fisher is also one of the few figures that fully acknowledges detective Chacón, and just like with Agent Pierce, Romilia admires Fisher’s complete sense of self: “...she looked straight at me. I liked her for this. She could look directly at me and expect straight answers. She could do that here, in this huge city, where she was the boss of the Regional Bureau, the largest FBI offices outside of New York. She was either Latina or African American or both. And she was she.” (244). The presence these two allies serve as a counterpoint to detective Chacón who, as a representative of Central American colonized diasporas, grapples with a partial presence brought about by ostracism.

This need of the self to be integral and fully present reflects Romilia’s national and cultural sense of dislocation and homelessness. The partial acknowledgement that detective Chacón deals with daily manifests itself through the uncontrollable and unconscious changes that occur in Romilia’s own body. In this respect, there are two striking features that articulate detective Chacón’s exclusion, and by extension, that of denationalized Central American diasporas. First, during moments of interrogation, or of shock, Romilia’s body and voice become severed, and she momentarily loses the vital

connection between her mind and body, suggesting a splitting of the self. This rupture is highly symbolic, given that it expresses a disjunction between place and self. In the context of the nation-state system, this disconnection signals a sense of ontological homelessness that also troubles her, given that although she finds herself at the center of a U.S. institution, the FBI, she remains unintegrated. Akin to Murrillo, in this second installment of the series, detective Chacón confronts a similar form of cultural rejection and isolation from the state. Nevertheless, both characters challenge this process and daily frustrations by subversively constructing a sense of place and community through their illicit partnership.

Similarly, the second feature that marks detective Chacón's sense of national dislocation is the grotesque, forensic language used to describe the Whisperer's murderous visions and the cadavers he leaves behind. These descriptions resemble Chacón's own limited and partial self within state institutions that fall short of fully acknowledging her. At the end of the second installment the engravings of Doré that depict the suffering souls in Hell inspire the Whisperer's final crime. Six cadavers are described in detail reflecting the dispassionate language of forensic reports. What binds together these gruesome descriptions is the dismemberment of each body. Instead of being intact, these corpses are flayed, bones are exposed while other parts are left intact, skulls are half torn, sheets of muscle have been peeled away and a penis has been cut off. The last of the six men conveys this disunity: "The sixth is fully gutted. The intestines are gone. You can see the full of his backbone. Two tubes have been severed, like plumbing on the back wall of his ribcage. He hangs from a rope: the rope, tied to his skull, holds

him in a slump. You stare at his nostrils. His jaw is gone. A strange shell-like object hangs next to him, with two severed pipes. His diaphragm.” (*Minos* 218).

The impact these images have on Chacón parallel her own internal disjunction on account of ostracism in the U.S. and the near destruction of her family in El Salvador. While Pierce attempts to engage with her, she notices: “It seemed by voice knew something before my head.... Again, my voice was working through something; I had never had this happen before, that somehow my words trembled with knowledge that my head had yet to confirm.” (218). Representative of displaced Central American diasporas, her voice was rendered unprivileged and almost destroyed by the state’s civil war. As such, these momentary breaks and lapses in Chacón’s voice communicate the trauma passed down to second generations. This passage highlights the challenge that nationally liminal subjects confront when they speak from a disadvantaged position in the U.S. In this light, another difference emerges among Chacón, Pierce and Fisher.

Although they are Chacón’s allies, they also exercise a considerable authority and power over her. When Chacón crosses a line with Fisher, Pierce approaches her about it: “Detective Chacón, you are now an agent, and though it’s temporary, you don’t talk like that to your superior.” He looked down at me. I hadn’t heard that type of authority before. It was a simple authority: one man’s voice backed up by one entity, which happened to be the Federal Government.” (245). Since the genre of detective fiction is also bound with questions of authority, these power differences that detective Chacón frequently encounters with her superiors echo the larger power struggles that Central American diasporas confront as they attempt to establish a sense of home against nation-states that exclude them. Again, this desire for a sense of home is further

substantiated by the excess of pleas to come home exhibited among all primary and secondary characters expressed through the description of lonely drives back home, references to being far away from home in another city, returning to empty houses, answering machine messages asking when detective Chacón gets back, FBI agents returning to their families, and Chacón's mother asking her daughter repeatedly when she'll be back home.

### **Staging Nationhood**

In addition to the dissolution of a fixed territory, the Villatoro crime series undermines the construct of a shared homogenous culture as a pillar for nationhood. It does so by redrawing and confusing racial color lines used to establish an insider-outsider discourse elaborated in the U.S. As a last critique of the nation-state and its claims of cultural homogeneity, through dissonance and an internal confusion, the series calls into question an Anglo-Latino/a binary, and by extension, the alleged essence of the U.S. nation-state. Specifically, it does so by drawing on a central characteristic of noir fiction, shapeshifting. In this genre characters seamlessly switch in and out of their alleged roles confusing the reader's expectations. It becomes difficult to discern where characters allegiances lie, or where they fall along the spectrum of good and evil. In the Romilia Chacón novels, characters seamlessly and repeatedly switch in and out of their professional, cultural and national roles, disorienting the reader. In doing so, the performances of nationality enacted in *A Venom Beneath the Skin* call attention to the tenuous construction of the nation-state and its aspirations to exclude those deemed as Other.

The figure that most illustrates this subversive feature of shapeshifting is Agent Nancy Pearl, a mole that infiltrates the FBI under the auspices of Murrillo. Detective Chacón who now works for the FBI is assigned to work with a new partner, Agent Pearl. On account of Pearl's offensive ignorance and repetitive comments towards U.S. Latinos/as, such as assuming that all Latinos/as are Mexican, detective Chacón finds her unbearable. After Pearl scoffs at a clue written in Spanish, specifically the word "cabrón" written without an accent mark, Romilia contemplates: "That pissed me off. There's nothing like the narrow-mindedness of a person who speaks only one language. And Nancy was beyond provincial; she was *uber*-cracker. I had to explain everything to her about my Latino world, which was starting to piss me off." (131). With multiple episodes such as these that frustrate Chacón, the reader is fooled into believing that Pearl hails from a conservative community and is no ally to cultural difference.

In this moment where detective Chacón's dislike for Agent Pearl reaches its apex, Agent Pearl swimmingly manages to kidnap detective Chacón and hand her over to Murrillo. Romilia's impressions of Pearl, and by extension the reader's, are firmly undone when at the U.S.-Mexico border detective Chacón overhears Agent Pearl speak in an unaccented and Mexican inflected Spanish to a Mexican border patrol agent. Her performance as a culturally intolerant FBI agent gains even more significance when one takes into consideration her background and relationship with Murrillo. As a homeless adolescent, she and her mother were living in a drug house. Murrillo's sellers rescued her from those conditions and gave her lodging in one of his non-profit homeless shelters. When Murrillo finds out that another homeless man at the shelter is raping Pearl's mother and almost abuses Pearl herself, Murrillo protects them by severely punishing the man

(although the novel never mentions the punishment). As she grew older, Murrillo sent Pearl to college and paid for her tuition. After losing touch with her, he catches up with her at the well-known Actor's Studio in New York, a non-profit agency that finds temporary work for actors and hires her as a spy.

The implications of the relationship between Murrillo and Agent Pearl are significant within the context of revising nationhood. As Pearl relates her background to detective Chacón, she expresses often that on account of taking care of her when she was homeless Murrillo is a father-figure. In this sense, Agent Pearl can be seen figuratively as Murrillo's daughter, who as a homeless subject, repeats the same gesture of frustrating racial and national boundaries. In this light, her performances frustrate the social constructs of Latino/a, or Anglo as she breaks with ethno-racial narratives of being. In *Latining America: Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies* (2014) Claudia Milian investigates the tenuous line between Black and Brown bodies as a path to problematize the construct of Latino/a and its alleged stability. In much the same way, the Romilia Chacón crime series reorients the Latino/a and Anglo binary by highlighting how these constructs seamlessly cross paths. Those racial distinctions fall apart suggesting that cultural and national essences are unstable discourses that demand to be revised. Characters like Agent Pearl lead readers to a gray area where the descriptive force of nationality based on phenotype and language usage loses its weight. It becomes more and more difficult to discern characters national origins, such as Pearl who is American, and maintains cultural and linguistic ties to Mexico. The characteristic of cultural and national shapeshifting becomes even more significant when one considers the targets and victims of the Crack killer. Working in tandem with a terrorist group

known as the Church of Ojalá its targets are those figures deemed socially as Other: prostitutes, drug addicts and the homeless. As a fundamentalist far-right Christian hate group, this group champions notions of national purity as one if its followers admit: “Come now, Romilia. You’re from the States. You know how bastardized our society has become. For them it’s *jihad*. For us, Crusade. Because our nation is a freakshow. Not at all what it was supposed to be”. (177).

In contrast to static views of the nation-state system that insists on clearly demarcated territory, the Romilia Chacón series adopts an alternative orientation. Through the trope of homelessness, Villatoro signals an ongoing relationship between the U.S. and Central America that undermines any pretenses of separation between these regions. Murrillo’s position as a perpetual fugitive from the authorities signals inconsistencies and contradictions, seeing that once an ally of the U.S., Murrillo is cast as a delegitimized homeless Other in the U.S. On one level his transnational drug network symbolizes the criminalization of Central American diasporas after the collapse of the Cold War that produced national displacement. More importantly, Murrillo’s nationally homeless position symbolizes an alternative landscape that subverts the nation-state as fixed and bounded. The series implies that despite the U.S.’s frantic efforts to separate itself from Central America, a network of stateless Central Americans deeply calls into question this representation of reality. For excluded national subjects looking to establish a sense of community, the series implies that a sense of home can be elaborated without the moorings of an exclusive and contained national territory.

Similarly, the trope of homelessness articulated through noir detective fiction, also destabilizes national and cultural constructs vital to nationhood. The once homeless



figure of Agent Pearl and her shapeshifting complicates any clear-cut distinctions between Latino/a and Anglo and denotes that there is no such thing as a cultural core ingredient, or national essence associated with phenotype, language or customs. That is, both Pearl and Murrillo seamlessly move in and out of their professional, cultural and national roles, frustrating any fixed meanings of what it means to nationally belong. In the tradition of noir fiction, appearances are partial, and rarely do they offer a complete picture. Beneath them, there lies an alternative state composed of social activity that evades the state's control in this case articulated through the trope of homelessness.

I began this chapter with narratives of national collapse held by those reluctant to revise notions of the nation-state and in favor of cultural homogeneity. In response to those views, the title of the third installment *A Venom Beneath the Skin* echoes those fears of a mythic national interior threatened by a menacing exterior symbolized by Central American diasporas. Villatoro cleverly upsets and displaces this view by blurring the lines between states and nationalities. The genre of noir detective fiction permits him to offer a new perception characterized by a high degree of cultural and national permeability. It is worth pointing that out of all the possible genres, Villatoro chose to use noir fiction where the detective, as a socially liminal figure can contest established values and offer a new perception of reality. This is a genre about transgressions, dismantles frameworks and re-inscribes new social relations. In the Romilia Chacon series, a culturally marginalized detective and a homeless criminal revise dominant pillars of national belonging through an emphasis on interactions that highlight homelessness. They do so through the strategies of perpetual movement and cultural shapeshifting that redefine the parameters of a national home. It is my hope that the unofficial and

alternative networks that these characters inhabit, and by extension millions of other unseen U.S. Central Americans, eventually move away from the shadowy underworld represented in this body of detective fiction and into the wider national imaginary.

### Chapter 3: Masculinity, Displaced Subjects and Rebuilding New Communities

“Manliness, it can be seen, is an entirely *relational notion*, constructed in front of and for other men...”

Pierre Bourdieu,  
*Masculine  
Domination*

In the previous chapter the Romilia Chacón noir detective fiction series allowed me to advance a resignification of the nation-state through the trope of homelessness. Through detective Chacón’s investigations of serial murders of prominent young U.S. Latinos/as and Rafael Murrillo’s incessant persecution from the FBI and DEA, the series fundamentally de-centers the essentialist practice of nationalizing territories, identities and populations. The institutional notion of a completed nation no longer appears to be stable. In effect, the consolidated precepts such as race and language usage that mark nationality are contested through the subversive practice of cultural shapeshifting. As Chacón and Murrillo cut across the U.S., Mexico and Guatemala their cultural and national flexibility suggests a revision of static nation-state system precepts mentioned above. Instead of identities, or territories being defined by bounded parameters, the series opts for an understanding of nationality that is more elastic and in flux, thereby highlighting a robust transnational flow of communities that official accounts conceal from public view.

What detective Chacón uncovers, or lays bare, through her investigative work is a vigorous transnationalism that stretches beyond any clear national territory or foundational identity. As such, it destabilizes the primacy of national space and nationality as they become indeterminate and lose their legibility. For instance, detective Romilia Chacón along with other characters that are allegedly “American”, or “Mexican” showcase a capacity to seamlessly transition in and out of national identities by speaking the official language and practicing the cultural customs that frustrates categorizing these subjects. The strategies anchored in the liberatory trope of homelessness suggest that fixed nationalities become difficult to delineate as they are contingent on context, rather than on phenotype and language usage. The Romilia Chacón series radically breaks away from national categories and frustrates the authority of the nation-state as a regulatory discourse and practice.

Central American populations’ relationship with the limited notion of the nation-state and its exclusionary practices emerges in the present chapter through a discourse of masculinity in relation to homelessness. In this chapter I consider a relationship between discourses of manhood, Central American nation-state building and ex-military subjects’ displacement in the U.S. The harmful effects of dominance embedded in Guatemalan and Nicaraguan subjects with military training surfaces when they find themselves homeless and abandoned in the U.S. As such, I now focus my attention on the trope of homelessness in relation to the subtext of a troublesome masculinity in the novels by Héctor Tobar and Francisco Goldman, namely *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998) and *The Ordinary Seaman* (1997).

My approach reframes dominant understandings of both works by identifying and investigating the impact that an unexplored and problematic male power has on Central American diasporas' engagement with nation-states'. I am interested in the role that a ruinous notion of virility had in nation-state building and the changes that masculinity undergoes in a transnational context. In effect, the subjects that I analyze in these novels are young ex-soldiers and revolutionaries that leave Guatemala and Nicaragua during the 1980s when civil wars in these countries were at their peak. Motivated either by a combination of factors that include disillusionment with their ideology, the sudden loss of loved ones during war, and economic need these soldiers immigrate to the U.S. Establishing relationships and a sense of community in the new host land proves to be a challenge as these subjects hold on tightly to their previous codes of conduct. These codes refer to antisocial conduct, an intense dislike for the new host land and other immigrants, thus maintaining an air of superiority, and an excessive use of violence to affirm and negotiate their presence. These views and practices prevent them from joining and functioning in their new society as they are unconsciously conflicted over alternative ways of re-imagining social interactions and another meaning of masculinity. Both Tobar's and Goldman's central characters exhibit this unsettling male identity to varying degrees that leads to the plight of national homelessness. The processes that I investigate in this chapter is how do these troubled subjects reconstruct a new home and a sense of belonging? How does a perspective of homelessness transform outdated precepts of nation-states? By new home I mean not just as a physical site, but a certain comfort, a connectedness and familiarity between self and place that allows the subjects to interact with larger society on a socio-economic and political level. Central American populations

at large have not been fully woven into the U.S.'s social fabric as they find themselves often undocumented, persecuted, with limited educational opportunities and living under the national poverty line. Given these conditions U.S. Central Americans remain outside of the U.S.'s mainstream national community.

Within this framework, I analyze how former military men, and other male subjects tormented by these ex-soldiers, attempt to extricate themselves from harmful discourses of maleness ingrained in the homeland. Their thought processes and conduct generated in Central American culture drives these subjects to an unhinged, and by extension, homeless state in the U.S. Their habitual way of interpreting their surroundings as we will discuss prevent these figures from putting forth new claims of social membership and civic interaction. Conceptions of masculinity such as the ones evidenced by these subjects impede any steps for U.S. Central Americans to represent themselves politically, institutionally and legally.

The significance of my approach is that it emphasizes a dialectic between homeless spaces and the self by identifying a pattern among Central American diasporas across the U.S. To a large extent their lived experience consists of being forced to inhabit dehumanized living spaces that symbolizes impoverished living conditions, little room for social mobility and immigration detention centers where they are held in a state of permanent distress. Together these spaces symbolize U.S. Central Americans' cultural and national separation from mainstream society. However, despite the brutal circumstances imposed upon them, I argue that Central American soldiers, sailors and revolutionaries in these novels find their masculinity as a site of contest, a cause for anxiety that they confront and rework. As a foundational aspect of their identity in the

home country, their understanding of manhood becomes a troublesome area in the U.S. that contributes to their homelessness and permanent lack of place. My analysis raises a series of questions, such as: What are the effects of not revising notions of power that intersect with gender, masculinity and race in the host land? How does one separate oneself from harmful cultural discourses? What is the relationship between the construction of masculinity and modernization in both host country and nation of origin? How does one contest the union between both these constructs? In effect, I argue that in the case of Central American men with military-oriented backgrounds, a spectrum of masculinities is addressed in the host land as it either provokes national homelessness or extends the possibility to contest it.

As post-colonial subjects the dialectic between a sense of place and an understanding of the self is a central issue, given that Central Americans have been forcibly displaced from their homelands and struggle to find their footing in the U.S. and redefine themselves. I situate these Guatemalan and Nicaraguan subjects represented in the novels under the rubric of post-colonial as their lives and communities have been disrupted by their own country's elites who are supported by U.S. foreign policy in the imperial enterprise of domination. This subjugation in Central America that found its maximum expression in its civil wars during the 1980s was targeted against progressives, leftist-militants and indigenous populations. It is not surprising then that the subjects depicted in the novels hail from each of these three categories. Allegorized in these narratives, recently arrived Central American diasporas continue to grow and are in the process of negotiating their new subject positions and sense of home in unfamiliar environments. As such, the trope of homelessness that I elaborate in this chapter engages

in how U.S. Central American diasporas reconstruct their lives and challenge the ostracism imposed upon them. This endeavor to challenge the harsh conditions of marginalization is figured in these novels in terms of an accumulation of sites that embody homelessness. These symbolic sites include: an uncompleted construction project of a grand hotel-resort, an abandoned train tunnel long in disuse, unofficial campsites underneath a highway bridge, and an unseaworthy ship perpetually docked at a pier.

As these male, solitary Central Americans realize the undertaking of constructing a new home they also challenge discourses of male subjectivity. In many ways Tobar's and Goldman's novels complement and counterpoint each other. Both include young personages whose lives were disrupted by civil war in Guatemala and Nicaragua, and consequently find themselves living in limbo at the outskirts of North American cities. The central difference is that *The Tattooed Soldier* exhibits an incomplete and partial construction of home on account of a troublesome phallic masculinity. The rigidity of the male characters finds its expression in their disturbing relationships with each other as rivals who live as they are perpetually at war in their new environment of Los Angeles, California. Unable to separate themselves from their traditional tendencies associated with power that include sustaining patriarchy, intimidation, violence and aggression towards women, both of Tobar's central characters wind up disconnected from society. The male characters in Tobar's novel drive themselves to homelessness, estrangement and lunacy. By contrast, Goldman's novel, *The Ordinary Seaman* highlights a departure from violent practices associated with problematic conceptions of masculinity. The ex-soldier in this novel slowly undergoes a process of transformation that veers away from a



Marxist, militant virility that condemns homophobia. This shift to the pro-social leads to a new subject position in the U.S. Published within a year from each in other, *The Ordinary Seaman* in 1997 and *The Tattooed Soldier* 1998 stem from the massive migrations of Central Americans and the U.S.'s social rejection of these Nicaraguans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans.

**A Troubled Masculinity and the Development of a New Home in *The Tattooed Soldier***

Critics have extensively studied the aspects of trauma and death in Tobar's novel, but analysis on male identity and the engagements it produces in a transnational context is limited. These scholars explore the impact of trauma that prevents the visibility of Central Americans in the U.S. For instance, in her dissertation *Transnational Lives and Texts: Writing and Theorizing U.S./Central American Subjectivities* (2005) Karina Oliva Alvarado examines the lingering impact that death has on the Central American exile. Alvarado posits that death is what motivated the central character's motive for leaving Guatemala, and a metaphorical social death follows him in the U.S. On account of an unyielding trauma, the protagonist in *The Tattooed Soldier* (1997) remains perpetually trapped in the past where the violent death of his family in Guatemala took place and is perennially beset by that moment. In this way, death in relation to a broken sense of time, according to Alvarado, is the central motif that anchors the work and keeps the subject locked in a gray area between political exile and refugee. Except for the culminating moment of a riot at the end of the *The Tattooed Soldier*, Alvarado does not consider the subjects' interaction, or lack of it, with the abysmal spaces where Central Americans attempt to establish a sense of place that include both Guatemala and the U.S. Moreover,

Alvarado's attention is largely centered on main character's trauma and she does not punctuate the conflicts of the other central personages. Specifically, the ex-soldier Guillermo Longoria, whose presence forms the other half of the novel figures marginally in her analysis.

Akin to Alvarado, in *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America* (2007), Arturo Arias claims that Tobar's novel highlights a Central-American subjectivity that never emerges in the U.S on account of historical trauma. Arias explores how the long-term effects of trauma prevent U.S. Central Americans from entering *latinidad*, that is, a new ethnic identity motivating him to elaborate the construct of "Central American-American". Based on a social history of colonization and subordination since Pre-Columbian times, Arias sustains that Central Americans in the U.S. continue to render themselves un-representable, and in doing so leads to a non-identity. This position that limits Central Americans from coming into view is bound to a long-standing hierarchy between Central America and Mexico. Within the context of the U.S., Mexican-Americans have drawn all the attention and Central Americans have found themselves forced to pass as Mexicans, seeing that their ethnicity as other Latinx groups was repudiated.

The trope of homelessness that I elaborate takes Arias' considerations of Central American trauma in relation to Latino/a identity politics into account. At the same time, I am more concerned in how the trope of homelessness in relation to masculinity highlights outdated and ineffectual precepts for community-building, as militant practices brutalized and displaced thousands. How do the perspectives of homeless Central American soldiers

highlight the need for reconceptualizing paradigms of nation-states that failed to create homogenous societies?

I approach *The Tattooed Soldier* as a counter-discourse to the U.S.'s national, racial and gendered boundaries that exclude stateless subjects. While both Arias and Alvarado share the same perspective of trauma and death as central features in the narrative that mark these characters, I draw attention to another central relationship at the core of the novel, a gendered boundary that has gone unaddressed and serves as a field where the nation-state exerts its power. In this chapter I ponder the link between a disturbing performance of manliness in relation to the development of a new ethnic self and home. In his article "Retracing Homophobic Tendencies in Two Central American Novels: Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* and Javier Payeras' *Ruido de fondo*" (2015) Michael Byrne studies the practice of homophobia in order to maintain an unstable masculinity in military contexts. Byrne centers his analysis on the interaction Guillermo Longoria, the ex-soldier who figures prominently in the novel, and his superior officer the Lieutenant Colonel Villgrán who forcefully engrains in his soldiers a homophobic attitude.

While Byrne focuses on homophobia as one aspect of a problematic male subjectivity, I pay critical attention to it transnationally, and particularly within the context of creating new communities and a sense of home in the U.S. I argue that Tobar's novel deliberately situates us in a context of war where the male characters display their unsettling notions and practices of male power. As they carry out their prolonged battle that started in Guatemala and continues seven years later in Los Angeles these men bring into view a series of characteristics associated with phallic masculinity that include: a dynamic of competition and humiliation, a strong interaction of domination and

subordination, a protection of allegedly defenseless women while also verbally and physically abusing them, a so-called military strategy and raw violence. Guatemala's civil war is transposed to and re-articulated in Los Angeles through the ongoing battle between male characters, the presence of street gangs defined by hostility that echoes the characters' central conflict, and the culmination of the Los Angeles warlike riots that erupted in 1992.

My reading offers a new dimension of these characters' subjectivities and a crucial gender inflected reading that is associated with Central American integration into the U.S. Rather than focusing on the trouble provoked by the single brutal act (the murder of Bernal's family) that haunts Bernal, I approach Tobar's novel from a powerful discourse of male power that constantly guides both characters' frame of mind and behavior. Despite their ideological differences, both men enact a troubling homosocial bond of battle as they carry out their long-term duel that leads to homelessness. I contend that both men fundamentally constitute the same masculine subject that finds himself powerless and frustrated in Los Angeles. As such, I will demonstrate that both male subjects refuse to rework the hegemonic constructions of patriarchy learned in Guatemala.

In Los Angeles they lose sight of their dismal homelessness and abandoned condition in order to prove their sense of manhood in what they experience as a hostile environment. They misconstrue their immediate reality, at times act indifferent towards it and when they decide to act, they do so violently which only accentuates their placelessness. For instance, their dysfunctional reactions result in the loss of employment and drives away close ones. Both men lament being emotional, refuse to speak of their pain,

struggle financially and emphasize their physicality. Their rigidity in their definition of what it means to be a man drives them to the point of insanity where they become inoperant and unproductive subjects who are incapable of transformation, and, by extension, of creating a new home in Los Angeles.

In not being able to contest and replace the scripts of maleness the Central American subjects in these narratives find it challenging to establish a sense of place and countering power in the U.S. In studying how contemporary governments carefully establish social order and maintain regimes, Foucault studies the apparatuses involved in this process. He analyzes the less exteriorized forms of control between subject and the state through studying individuals' relationships with their habits, their ways of doing and seeing things (Rainbow 16). These discourses of how to be are deliberately and subtly lodged in populations' psyche. They function as internal mechanisms of control that dictate subjects' actions, or inactions. During the most intense years of civil war in Central America, the population was exposed to a politics of violence linked with (pro-national) discourses bound to masculinity, both on the left and on the right.

A case and point is the manual *Guerilla Warfare: A Method* (1964) penned by Ernesto "Che" Guevara. In this text Guevara elaborates a series of physical, mental and moral characteristics that armed revolutionaries, namely young men, should possess in order to operate at their full potential. The document rigidly directs how a soldier should think, eat, relax, interact with his fellow soldiers, and above all constructs the image of a "toughened" subject. On writing about how to initiate an attack on enemy encampments, Guevara recommends the following for guerilla fighters: "...he should launch himself into the fight implacably without permitting a single weakness in his companions and taking

advantage of every sign of weakness on part of the enemy. Striking like a tornado, destroying all, giving no quarter unless the tactical circumstances call for it, judging those who must be judged, sowing panic among the enemy combatants....” (18). This description constructs the imagery of robust and menacing male subjects who are capable of occasioning violence on command. Just as one of the subjects that I pay attention to in this chapter is a guerrilla from the socialist Sandinista party who was molded around the ideas elaborated by Guevara, the other is a Guatemalan-indigenous subject who was forcibly drafted into the state’s military. Despite their ideological differences, both political parties fundamentally operate under the same masculinist framework that sustain identities, images and fantasies of powerful men at their core.

Appeals to masculinity advanced by the state’s army that promoted raw violence were not that different from leftist revolutionaries, as Jennifer Schermer notes in *The Guatemalan Military Project* (1998). Writing on the imbrication of the state and the military in Guatemala after the *coup d etat* against president Jacobo Árbenz in 1954, Schermer notes that the military was built on the model of the personalistic *caudillo* of the colonial period (2). According to Natalia Sobrevilla Perea, in addition to the singular charisma of the caudillo, this masculine archetype constitutes the central and local symbol of authority, he is the armed strongman capable of exercising violence to defend the homeland. The caudillo is the protective father whose conduct oscillates between benevolence and brutality. Guatemala was no exception to the influence of this model as Schermer details. From 1871 until present day a long line of male generals and military officers who followed this pattern of heavy-handed leadership and presided over the

development of Guatemala. Among the most notorious are generals Efraín Ríos Montt and Héctor Ramajo that together razed the countryside during the 1980s.

In relation to the discourses and embodiments of manhood practiced in Central America, Raewyn Connell expressly stresses that to understand gender as a phenomenon we must place it in relation to the larger developments of colonial expansion, conquest, resistance, and the subsequent neocolonialism and postcolonial globalization (42). In this way, it is fundamental to study how these characters remain colonized by old discourses elaborated during the civil war and linked to the processes of (post) colonial conquest and expansion. Their male identity derives from a historical context of not desiring others to see them as lesser and weak and extends into forced modernization projects in Guatemala whose consequences lead to mass migrations to U.S. cities. Those that fled include persecuted indigenous populations, progressives and after the peace accords signed in the 1990s, discharged state soldiers and disbanded revolutionaries. In this light, despite their new environment, both characters in *The Tattooed Soldier* exclusively interpret their reality in Los Angeles through a broken lens of what constitutes a legitimate male subjectivity that drives them towards total isolation. They perceive themselves as subordinated men who deviated from the norm of expected and practiced in Guatemala.

As a displaced ex-soldier who was at the center of armed conflict, and his counterpart a bellicose middle-class student, these men find their sense of self in crisis and besieged by the unfamiliar host country. For both disoriented subjects, masculinity constitutes their principal form of engagement (that includes their views, speech and deeds). The practices they enact come to the fore in how they communicate, announce their sense of self, and attempt to secure their place within a new social corpus that does

not acknowledge their previous status. Instead of being recognized as a distinguished middle-class student, or a feared ex-soldier of the Guatemalan state, in the city of Los Angeles both men become in their eyes less manly as newly arrived working-class and racialized immigrants. Unwillingly and permanently removed from their previous identities tied to power and positioned at the margins of a new society, these characters quite often assert their presence through the worst possible actions that they associate with a successful manhood. These acts include severing all emotional bonds, repudiating friends and family, occasioning violence towards women and the defenseless, and ultimately committing murder in cold blood. Moreover, these characters' style of socialization comes at a high price as it is also to the detriment of their own bodies, psyches and environments. For example, in *The Tattooed Soldier* the subjects exhibit a complete disregard for personal hygiene, intense bouts of a crippling depression and living with a constant paranoia of being watched by the enemy. Similarly, their environments also undergo a process of decomposition as these confused subjects lose their employment, social circles and housing. As mentioned earlier, the result is a frustrated resettlement process, seeing that sites of non-residence include a highway bridge, an abandoned construction site and a forgotten train tunnel.

Given this situation, I argue that these subjects' social rejection and lack of incorporation into the U.S. is figured in terms of a homelessness that these men sustain through their troubled conceptions of identity. I study this breakdown of the correspondence between their experience in the host land, their cultural ideal of a robust male presence, and its expression in the U.S. represented through vagrancy. It is my contention that the subjects in *The Tattooed Soldier* engage with masculinity in three



ways: both men perform a harmful scripts of gender oriented around a hierarchical logic of war and in effect constitute the same masculine troubled subject, they fall short of claiming a new space in the U.S. as is represented through manifestations of homelessness, and ultimately undergo a crisis provoked by the antagonisms and tensions of their masculinity. Moreover, their crisis runs parallel to a U.S. that finds itself in decomposition and racial inequality, figured in a multitude of dilapidated atmospheres, on account of old understandings of the nation-state.

Attending to the process of incorporation into the U.S., this study raises the questions of what other alternative masculinities exist that do not lead to social homelessness and ostracism for Central American populations? Why do the subjects in my study strive for others to see them as masculine? How do they communicate their twisted interpretations of power? What instances provoke them to be regarded as dominant men who are in control of themselves and their environments? More importantly, what exactly is masculinity? Are there other options for a more productive and sound definition of new masculine identities within the new social body? How can these masculinities become more flexible, less rigid and open to change? How would these models allow for new identificatory relationships with the host land that lead to a civic incorporation and a new sense of place, permanence and citizenship? To answer these guiding questions in this chapter, I turn to contemporary theories that explain the cultural logic of masculinity and its intersection with the nation-state, a system that finds itself obsessed with order and homogenization.

### **Masculinity and its Relationship to the Nation-State**

In *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (2000), Nick Mansfield outlines the self/Other dialectic elaborated by Freud that undergirds the social hierarchies raised by masculinity that separates individuals. Deemed arbitrarily and without any support as the “norm”, the construct claims a privileged position as all other human beings become secondary. It establishes a grid of sorts in which other positions fall short of the standard of masculine and are deemed as Other or as imperfect. Consequently, anyone who fails to symbolize the masculine is subordinated to a lower rung on the social scale as they embody difference and the incomplete. Drawing on feminist psychoanalysis, Mansfield also sustains that a central aspect of masculinity is linked to an intense drive for order, certainty, stability and control. Within the context of Guatemala’s political regime at the end of the 20th century that forcefully sought to create a Christian, conservative, *ladino* (that is, a non-indigenous) homogenous society, the desire for an absolute social order emerges. The state meets civil disagreement and unrest with brutality that advocates imposition and force. As an instrument of the state, the military par excellence embodies and legitimizes this assertion of power. Tobar’s novel explores the effects of such violent practices when these military subjects are no longer under the state’s service and are let loose in societies.

In effect, *The Tattooed Soldier* pays critical attention to this masculinist tendency to impose stability that manifests itself as characters routinely find themselves frustrated and disoriented in Los Angeles. For example, in one scene the ex-soldier living in Los Angeles is deeply disturbed by a gathering of Guatemalans in a park that openly protest Guatemala’s disproportionate use of state violence. As a response the ex-soldier harbors an immediate rage that upsets his mood and, more importantly, sours his interactions at

the workplace along with his romantic relationship. The disruption produced by being in a heterogeneous environment that clashes with the established social order in Guatemala upsets these characters' misguided sense of manhood. In maintaining the value system elaborated by masculine power the result is often damaging as these individuals harm others and themselves. Little room is left to maneuver outside of the parameters established by an alleged code of masculine behavior within a repressive state. Those who deviate from the norm do so at their own peril and their communities' as well.

In relation to the faltering health of the diasporic characters in this chapter, the collection of essays *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Practice* (2015) edited by Stefan Horlacher explores and lays bare the social problems associated with the construct and the harmful effects it produces in society at large. Horlacher approaches masculinity from the perspective of physical and mental health crises and argues that it accounts for men's susceptibility to alcoholism, violence, suicide and personality disorders. In other words, fixed notions of what constitutes a man drive subjects to (self) destructive attitudes and conduct. From this point of view, I relate these troubled frameworks of male power to homeless Central American male subjects who were revolutionaries, soldiers, sailors that have trouble functioning in society once they are stripped of their previous identities. Disoriented in a new cities, Los Angeles and New York, these soldiers and other male characters seek to desperately regain control of their environment that disorients and frustrates them.

Within the context of literary cultural production, such as the U.S. Central American narratives that I analyze, Horlacher claims that this form of expression inscribes the loss of patriarchal references, and by extension, it's "loss of legitimacy",

and exhibits how different groups of men react to this shift (4). Narrative works have the potential to critique the mechanisms, production and enforcement of masculinity discourses. In Horlacher's view literature challenges dominant discourses of manliness and offers alternative scripts that are not harmful to society or detrimental to the subject that practices it. Contrary to the claim that men autonomously create their own identity, Horlacher asserts that more often it is the social and historical context within the existing power structures that does so (6). Under this framework, I argue that Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* and Goldman's *The Ordinary Seaman* together represent and undermine hegemonic notions of masculine subjectivity.

I understand the construct itself as defined by Raeywn Connell who articulates it as such: "...masculinities and femininities are best understood as gender projects, dynamic arrangements of social practice through time, in which we make ourselves and are made as particular kinds of human beings (44). Connell specifies that gender structures are sustained by society and a larger collective. In this fashion, masculinities are perpetuated by institutions such as corporations, schools, governments and armies (44). This last point resonates with the novels I analyze in this chapter, seeing that the subjects are products of the state's armies who discourage and penalize any characteristics associated with "femininity" in order to foment a politics of violence and aggression. If the male characters are not in the military, they identify with a similar discourse of manhood in which a man must conquer and command. In these narratives the men depart from anything that can be associated with feminine. The desire to move away from the feminine for others to see them as masculine has frequently been practiced in Latin American socio-political contexts. As mentioned earlier, at the heart of

nationalist movements there has been a masculinist discourse, such as in Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador.

In Latin America the master signifier of masculinity has often intersected with the process of nation building, establishing collective regional identities and guided the harmful course to modernization. The activity of socio-political organization has been undergirded by a social hierarchy established by the masculine where anything deemed as Other (such as the feminine, the indigenous and African) must be subjected or eradicated. That which does not reflect the desired projection of the state runs second to the status of the masculine. In *Murder and Masculinity: Violent Fictions of Twentieth-Century Latin America* (2000) Rebecca Biron attends to a troubled masculinist perspective that underlies Latin American writings from the late nineteenth century up to the present. She contends that male authors who have sought to generate national autochthonous identities through narrative representation have done so through the unsettling perspective of Latin America as a female other. Works such as Jorge Issac's *María* (1864-1867) to the canonical works of the literary "Boom", for instance García Márquez' *Cien años de soledad* (1967), manifest this tendency as the central male characters are preoccupied with their relationships in which women serve as a source of literary inspiration, or a frustrated romantic affair. To counter this unstudied pattern in male authorial consciousness, Biron focuses on non-canonical works that reject this form of thought that is associated with the process of cultural and national construction.

The corpus she studies interrogates the intersection between masculinity, violence and the construction of collective political identities (Biron 4). Reinaldo Arenas' *El asalto* (1991) and Manuel Puig's *The Buenos Aires Affair* (1973) along with the other

texts revolve around the murder of woman that, according to Biron, stems from a precarious sense of self that violently rejects any marks associated with femininity. Although at first glance the representations she examines may appear to be a continuation of the previous malice and objectification of women, they question the disturbing male frame of mind that rejects and injures femaleness, and that associates this aversion with national identity.

I turn to Biron's framework given that the male, Central American, diasporic subjects in my study exhibit similar characteristics of a turbulent masculinity, but within a new, transnational context. I am interested in the changes a Guatemalan and Nicaraguan state-sponsored, militant masculinity undergoes in the U.S. How do ex-soldiers, disillusioned with their service and ideology, negotiate and reconcile the tensions and contradictions of their identities once civil wars are over? As they navigate this process the narrators in both Tobar's and Goldman's novels undermine and contest the harmful displays of masculine conduct the characters enact. The narrative voices in these texts quietly ridicule the ruinous models of manhood that clearly lead to marginality for Central Americans in the U.S. Frustrated with their limited position in Los Angeles, the subjects under consideration in this chapter perceive their male power as unstable which threatens their sense of self and those individuals around them. According to her, if the phallus, the central symbol of patriarchal order, is synonymous with manhood, then it is curious that men are compelled to carry out acts that symbolize their close association with phallic masculinity.

In order to maintain the sense of power, as specified by Biron, men's association with the master signifier must appear to be natural and consolidated. When the link

between aspirant and the normative discourse is tenuous, a crisis occurs that leads to (self) destruction. In the case of transnational Central American soldiers that fall short of sustaining their connection with the master image of the masculine, generating a new cultural or political identity becomes a challenge. This is particularly the case of discharged military Central American men and their gendered lens through which they attempted to violently construct the image of a culturally homogenous country. As such, in *The Tattooed Soldier* two displaced Guatemalan subjects, one from the left and the other from the right, are still fighting the same battle seven years later in Los Angeles. They find themselves defenseless in separating themselves from the war that permanently marked the substance of their problematic masculine identities that is bound to a patriarchal order. As Guatemalans during the peak of the armed conflict these men were exposed to the state's efforts to establish a modern society that can only be characterized as savage.

To cite an instance, in *Cruel Modernity* (2013) Jean Franco explores the unspeakable crimes Latin American nation-states carried out against their citizenries in order to un-diplomatically and desperately control and modernize their societies. Throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s covert armed conflicts between heavy-handed military oriented states and progressive citizens that opposed the existing social order was covertly played out. To ensure its "victory" over those that ran counter to the enterprise of forced modernization and seeing that those in power hailed from the armed forces, the state utilized the military as a vital tool to eradicate subjects it deemed as dissident. The horror the state unleashed, the memories of brutalized communities fictionalized in

literary cultural production, and the dissemination of an unmatched savagery linked to a perverse masculinity is the subject of Franco's study.

The training young soldiers underwent coupled with the bestial crimes they committed motivate Franco to advance the concept of "extreme masculinity". At its core lies the degradation of women and femininity, savagery and a sense of solidarity among its participants through violence and male rituals. Subjecting adolescents and young men to participate in these horrid acts disrupts fundamental steps in human development as they no longer feel another's vulnerability and pain. Once desensitized, soldiers operate implacably. According to Franco what governs the consciousness of these fighters is that of an ideal male figure, one who is unforgivingly dominating and ruthless.

The armed conflicts in Guatemala and El Salvador figure prominently in Franco's text, given that both countries created and named their own squadrons of soldiers who operated under the parameters of "extreme masculinity". These names evoked romantic notions of brave military figures as they are derived from legendary accounts of indigenous warriors who resisted the Spanish Conquest. Guatemala named their battalion *kaibiles*, derived from Mam indigenous fighters who resisted Pedro de Alvarado and El Salvador named theirs *Atlcatl* (Franco 95). Together they were dedicated entirely to uprooting those that ran counter to the modernization process carried out under a fervent nationalism, namely communist-oriented citizens and the indigenous. While drawing on Biron's and Franco's frameworks, I am interested the impact transnationalism has on them? How do these ex-soldiers operate in a transnational context? How does it change over time as theses former military men grapple with being outsiders in new and



unwelcoming cities? What internal tensions emerge within these militarized subjects that problematizes national belonging?

Tobar's novel constitutes a mediation on the relationship between ineffectual nation-state building practices, a troubling masculinist subjectivity and the homelessness they produce. In *The Tattooed Soldier* one of Guatemala's infamous *kaibiles* who practiced "extreme masculinity" is unleashed in Los Angeles and the disagreeable scenes he and his nemesis enact are oriented around a logic of war where a hierarchy of male power dictates their motives and conduct. Characteristics such as emotional bonds, romantic partners and mothers, personal vulnerability, that are associated with the feminine are repudiated. Therefore, we find the silencing and violence towards women and brutality towards the defenseless. Performing these scripts also takes a toll on the subjects themselves as is communicated through their physical pains, precarious mental health, and homelessness as these subjects undo each other through battle, despite being in and adapting to an entirely new context.

At the same time, and different from works analyzed in *Cruel Modernity*, distance from the home country leads to a sober re-evaluation of the soldier's hyper-masculine role and the destruction it engendered. In *The Tattooed Soldier* the ex-kaibil acknowledges the devastation he carried out in the name of national construction. National displacement and estrangement in Los Angeles bring him back to his troublesome past that showcases the limits and tensions that a militant identity attempted to suppress. In this way, Tobar's novel highlights fixed notions of masculinity and the dysfunctional social relations that it engenders while briefly recognizing a potential for transformation in Los Angeles.

### **Rent, Rubble and Downfall in Los Angeles**

*The Tattooed Soldier* (1997) by Héctor Tobar portrays the tragic lives of three young characters who are all concerned with masculine identity as they engage in Guatemala's armed conflict during the 1980s. They are the middle-class, progressively minded and newly married couple Antonio Bernal and Elena Sosa that find themselves persecuted by Guillermo Longoria, a pitiless soldier of indigenous descent, trained by the state. The novel takes the form of a thriller that is divided into three sections that correspond to each character's perspective of their lives before, during and after civil war. Despite the marked separation among these sections, they seamlessly carry over into each other as characters' perspectives drift from present to past, and from Guatemala to Los Angeles, California suggesting a lack of psychological and geographical stability. After having a child, the couple is forced to flee Guatemala City, seeing that their socialist-oriented friends are turning up dead and disappearing. While living in the outskirts of the city, it comes to Antonio's attention that he and Elena are under state surveillance. Longoria is assigned to (forcefully) bring the couple in for questioning, but the circumstances go terribly awry, as Longoria and his men shoot Elena and her young son in cold blood. When Antonio comes home from work, he sees the bloody cadavers of his wife and son placed at the front steps of his house. Urged to flee Guatemala by his neighbors, Antonio, who reproaches himself for failing in his role as the protective patriarch gets on a bus but catches a glimpse of the muscular and proud soldier who smugly lingers around content with his crime.

While Bernal fled Guatemala in order to avoid being killed by the state's repressive forces, Longoria's motives for coming to the U.S. are never made clear, leaving one to deduce that he came in search of work. Seven years later both Bernal and Longoria find themselves living reclusively in Los Angeles. Unable to pardon himself for not defending his family and seeing himself as a coward, Antonio is an aggressive homeless man who grapples with depression. He continuously wanders from unsanctioned spaces of residence that include an abandoned construction project, an encampment underneath a highway bridge, an unkept park and an unmanned train tunnel. When Antonio unexpectedly sees Longoria in Los Angeles, the city becomes a new site for the civil war waged in Guatemala, as Antonio is determined to kill Longoria by any means necessary. After Antonio attacks Longoria by surprise, the ex-soldier Longoria puts his past habits of battle into practice. As they carry out their violent conflict, Longoria's stable masculinity stumbles as he struggles to suppress the harm he occasioned. Against a backdrop of an all-out war during the Rodney King riots of 1992, whose significance I will comment on further ahead, the novel closes with Bernal shooting Longoria to death, leaving him emptier than before, and further removed from the social body.

Despite the differences in class, culture, and politics that situate Bernal and Longoria at opposite poles, I contend that both men serve as the literary trope of the double between "protagonist" and "antagonist". I see these terms as tentative, given that both subjects mutually engage in appalling acts that blurs any clear distinction between victim and victimizer as argued by Arias and Alvarado. In my reading of Tobar's novel, Bernal and Longoria complement each other in near identical terms as both subjects

embody the close symbiosis between masculinity and homelessness. In this section I punctuate their continuous proximity with symbols and sites of homelessness that originate in Guatemala and becomes more pronounced in Los Angeles as social rejection and aggression are the central characteristics that define both characters. Inseparable from never having a domicile the other feature that binds both men into a single masculine troubled subject is the context of war that they perpetually generate. The ongoing dynamic of confrontation restarted in Los Angeles leads to the production of troubled masculinity that symbolically turns both men into deformed, sinister subjects that are rejected by society, and to their own harm, repudiate society as well.

The structure of the novel critiques rigid discourses of manhood that are bound to the construction and maintenance of the nation-state. Masculine subjectivity, according to Lacan and as outlined by Mansfield, is built upon a system that values order, stability and finality (Mansfield 95). The Guatemalan regime during the 1980s, administered by colonels and oligarchs, adopted this logic as it sought to culturally homogenize the population, and ignore or destroy subjects that discredited the state's political vision. Voices that presented inconsistencies and ambiguities in official political discourses were suppressed, such as Elena's and Bernal's. *The Tattooed Soldier* frustrates these principles of state control, undergirded by masculine power and order, as the novel's structure is anything but orderly. The work's repetitive, fragmented and non-linear arrangement alludes to Bernal's and Longoria's inconsistent and disintegrating masculine subjectivity. The form articulates the disorientation Central American diasporas encounter. As such, Tobar blurs any clear distinctions between time and place that underscores national placelessness. Rather than proceeding chronologically, the novel starts *in medias res* with

Bernal being evicted from his apartment, an incident that allows the narrator to oscillate between the murder of Bernal's family in Guatemala, and his homelessness in Los Angeles where he plots to execute Longoria. Despite an episodic three-part structure that corresponds to Bernal, Elena and Longoria, the novel never allows the reader to fully settle in one location or perspective. Jumping back and forth, across the years and not proceeding straightforwardly, is the formal trait with meaningful intentions here. The technique invites the reader to occupy the same gray area that Bernal and Longoria inhabit as disoriented subjects rejected from allegedly modern and failed nation-states.

At the outset of *The Tattooed Soldier* (1997) the narrator highlights the intersection between aggression, manliness and homelessness. Antonio Bernal, once a privileged middle-class student in Guatemala, finds himself living meagerly and working as a busboy in Los Angeles, California. As he struggles to maintain steady employment on account of his pride in his previous social position and intense bouts of depression, Bernal finds it difficult to hold steady employment. Consequently, the novel opens with the Korean landlord, Mr. Hwang, forcefully evicting Bernal and his roommate for not paying rent. The episode that introduces us to the lead character is significant as it stages a conflict between two men that revolves around a claim to a home, Bernal's belligerent disposition and an audience of spectators for whom to perform for a gendered masculine role. Bernal and his roommate, José Juan Antonio, hurriedly collecting their belongings that include pictures, mail, uncompleted immigration forms as their Korean landlord, Mr. Hwan, forcefully evicts them from their apartment. The act of an eviction is significant on two fronts. First, it echoes U.S. Central Americans unstable and liminal form of statehood as they are left without a domicile despite pleas for accommodation given their

circumstances of political persecution and economic plight. It showcases the lack of permanence in a designated place and being denied the possibility of establishing new roots and communities on U.S. soil. In contrast to Central Americans' displacement the scene also juxtaposes Korean-Americans' integration into the U.S. Although both Bernal and Mr. Hwan are immigrants, Mr. Hwan is the owner of a considerable piece of property. As the owner of a large building with multiple apartments, Mr. Hwan is much more integrated into the social fabric as he has rights, he has the enfranchisement that Bernal lacks.

Just as important, that eviction that leads to homelessness, marks a considerable shift in Bernal's identity. With his imminent and public removal from the apartment building, Bernal is preoccupied with officially becoming homeless and the negative connotations that accompanies such label. He continually reflects "Voy a ser uno de los 'homeless'..."(5), especially as Mr. Hwan instructs Bernal to go sleep under a highway bridge. In other words, the ousting of Bernal from his humble apartment to Los Angeles' streets starts to signal his gradual passage into the category of the Other figured through his understanding of the homeless as the neglected and the debased. In Bernal's own psyche his social fall is considerable, given that he has gone from a literary intellectual to a powerless homeless man. Deeply frustrated that his middle-class status is no longer apparent in the host country, Bernal continually laments his downfall.

Throughout the conflict with Mr. Hwang, Antonio reflects on how the symbol that defined his identity in Guatemala, specifically his golden round framed glasses, are of no social worth in the U.S: "These are my intellectual glasses", he once told a friend. "I can't decide if they make me look like a chemist or a Maoist. What do you think?" He

had kept his glasses through all his travels, all the way to Los Angeles, and had worn them at his last job, as a busboy at a now defunct diner on the Westside. One of the cooks made fun of him and called him “profesor”. Somehow, the ideas and learning that made him strong in Guatemala had slipped away once he crossed the border...” (4). Bernal’s perception of seeing himself as weak, *déclassé* and mocked by other men deeply bothers him and is further compounded by the immediate reality of becoming homeless. Seeing that his old identity that garnered him social prestige and honor has been erased, Bernal’s position evokes Horlacher’s precepts that troubled versions of manhood are symptomatic of a loss of class privilege and patriarchy. Distant from the social, Guatemalan context that hailed Bernal in high regard, he responds desperately.

Frustrated with this new situation, Bernal reacts angrily as he feels compelled to assert the primacy of his lost position. In this light, this initial confrontation between Bernal and his landlord also signals another aspect related to homelessness which is his latent aggressiveness. Bernal further complicates his eviction not only by arguing with the landlord, Mr. Hwang, but by lunging towards him, grabbing him by the collar and ripping the innocent landlord’s shirt as other tenants pull him off. The attack announces Bernal’s definition and enactment of power as his response to homelessness that is characterized by dominating and hostile conduct. As the unfortunate process of eviction is dragged out by Bernal and his roommate from Mexico, Juan José, not having all their possessions packed, the neighbors step out their homes and slowly begin to form an audience around the dispute. Throughout the scene, references to neighbors watching Bernal lose control run rampant. Neighbors peer out of their doors, stand in the staircases, glance, whisper and slowly gather around the confrontation. Bernal is closely attuned to

the presence of spectators that provokes him to perform brutishly. This dispute sets the stage for Bernal who throughout the rest of the novel understands his environment in competitive terms in which one is either triumphant or defeated. Having lost his family, social status, job and current residence, Bernal perpetually feels overpowered and reacts with a disproportionate rage.

Evicted from his apartment, Antonio and José Juan wander Los Angeles looking for shelter where their ostracism continues to be reaffirmed. After having dangerously crossed the highway, Bernal and José Juan, carrying their belongings in a garbage bag, approach a homeless encampment under a bridge. They are immediately unwelcomed by a menacing resident who emphasizes that there is no space for newcomers and forces them to leave. Again, instances of exclusion provoke the alleged stability of male identity. As both subjects walk away in shame and shock of their circumstances, Bernal notices that José Juan is crying: “He is broken, this is too much for him, Antonio thought, the humiliation is too deep. Mexicanos. When they are little boys their fathers won’t let them cry, ever, and so they fight if off for as long as they can.” (12). Despite Bernal’s unfavorable critique of José Juan succumbing to his emotions, Bernal himself shares the same feelings of helplessness and desperation but refuses to let them surface. Contrary to a code of manhood that both men have been exposed to José Juan lets it go by openly crying. Bernal, on the other hand, sustains the old practices by not expressing himself in an undeniable moment of crisis. Despite Bernal’s efforts to project the profile of an aggressive and unhinged man, he is deeply haunted by never fully embodying his own version of a powerful manhood. As such, the narrator references Bernal’s relapse into boyhood: “Antonio had not felt so lost and alone for many, many years. He wanted to



weep, but held it in. He felt like a child out there on his own, a boy wandering about in his pajamas, separated from parents and home, pining for his pillow and his bed (12). This moment of vulnerability highlights Bernal's internal confusion and deep sense of orphan hood that oscillates between aggressive conduct in public, and a private childlike need for immediate comfort from loved ones. The description extended by the narrator highlights Bernal's psyche as the site, the field where discourses of masculinity are buried and constitute the source of his conflict. In this instance, and throughout the novel, all of Bernal's actions are oriented around what he deems appropriate male conduct that is worthy of social recognition. This representative example also signals salient difference to both characters approach to reconstructing a new home. While exclusion defines both José Juan and Bernal, a difference in their approach and attitude begins to emerge.

As such, nonacceptance continues to be expressed by José Juan Antonio's nickname, *el moro*. Bernal refers to José Juan Antonio because of what he perceives as Arabic features that include almond shaped eyes and dark, curly hair. This deliberate denomination evokes a similar context of expulsion, the loss of one's homeland and the result of aimless wandering. Jose Juan Antonio's nickname evokes banished Jewish and Muslim communities during the Reconquest and proclamation of an exclusively Catholic Spain. Considering Bernal's and José Juan Antonio's dispossession, this nickname echoes their own state of territorial banishment and homelessness. Forced exclusion implies a condition of being cast as perpetual wanderers and vagrants. The name also provides us with a notable distinction between both homeless characters. We understand that José Juan Antonio's reason for leaving Mexico was motivated primarily by economic

factors which makes his departure somewhat voluntary whereas, in contrast, Bernal's expulsion was politically oriented, suggesting that there was no desire to ever leave the home country.

This distinction produces a stark difference in their attitude towards the construction of a new home and a sense of community in Los Angeles. Despite their harsh conditions, José Juan Antonio never loses sight of getting back on his feet and eventually putting together a place to call home. This difference is also marked at the opening of the novel. During the eviction, while Bernal is arguing with Mr. Hwang, José Juan Antonio directs his attention towards the future. Consider that during the eviction, José Juan Antonio is determined to take his hot burner plate to cook meals knowing that he won't have a place to plug it in. While, on the other hand, Antonio insists that they won't need it since they won't have shelter: "Never mind that *chingadera*...Leave it behind." (6). The demand on part of Bernal implies that they will lack shelter and have no need for the object, whereas José Juan Antonio looks past their immediate situation with the expectation of eventually having a dwelling. José Juan Antonio lives with hopes and expectation of rebuilding and recreating a sense of home. As the novel progresses it will be evident that José Juan does so through his Mexican community as he initiates a romance with a Mexican woman who finds him steady work and a room for rent.

The difference in this perspective between Bernal and José Juan Antonio is more pronounced when they reach a homeless encampment in an abandoned construction site. While Bernal who is inoperable continues to lament his condition, José Juan Antonio attempts to not only make the best of dreadful circumstances, but also to set forth a claim of ownership. That is, he attempts to reconstruct a sense of place by attempting to

transform an unfamiliar space into an inhabitable and amenable one. While spending the night at the construction site, Bernal's attention is drawn to the squalid sights of the camp, such as a woman that sleeps with two men in her tent. In contrast, by the time Bernal wakes up the next morning, José Juan Antonio has explored his new surroundings and is enthusiastic with what he has seen and its future potential: "...I wanted to show you something. I found something really neat. *No me lo vas a creer....* Look he said, spreading his arms wide to celebrate his discovery. 'There was a floor here. Tile. It used to be a kitchen. This was somebody's house. (14). Later he confirms: "We have a home, our own little *rancho*' It's ours. We own it. A nice piece of property next to downtown." (16). As Margarethe Kusenbach argues in *Home: International Perspectives on Culture, Identity and Belonging* (2013) home is experienced not only simply as shelter, but as an experience where one has a specific relationship that connects people with places (4). By establishing a parallel with a familiar and comforting geography, that is a "ranch" in Mexico, José Juan Antonio is actively engaging in the process of overcoming the rupture between territory and home. In enthusiastically claiming they have their own little *rancho* he attempts to establish a sense of familiarity with his new surroundings to ameliorate his sense of uncertainty and vulnerability that diasporic, homeless subjects experience. By contrast, Bernal does little if anything to establish a relationship with his surroundings. Despondency, indifference and depression keep him from exercising a productive degree of agency. As Antonio is deeply depressed by the death of his family and his dysfunction, he sleeps most of the day and follows José Juan Antonio's initiative to explore their surroundings.

Similarly, this abandoned construction site echoes Central Americans unfinished construction of place both in home and host countries. The space in which Bernal finds himself in consists of what was once to be a grand hotel and park, suggesting that Elena's utopic dreams of a new society and a family life in Guatemala never came into fruition. With this sense of defeat, the dynamic process of building a new home is brought into relief by constant references to the partial edification of buildings. As José Juan and Bernal walk around the site the following morning, they focus their attention on the exposed visible structures that include grids, frames, lines, squares, rectangles and unfinished lots that were to underpin the base of the hotel and resort. This derailment of a utopic dream is further suggested by the names of the street signs of the massive hotel complex, such as "Sapphire Avenue", "Emerald and Diamond Streets" that connote idealized and glittery images of prosperity and fruition. Juxtaposed with the grimy and broken conditions of the site and coupled two newly homeless men, these street names stand even sharper in contrast.

Sordid backgrounds such as this abandoned construction site are a common feature throughout the narrative. Dingy halls, poor lighting, yellow stained walls, for instance, characterize the apartment building that Bernal and Longoria were evicted from. Wretched settings that the narrator deliberately lingers in describing, and that characters are forced to reluctantly inhabit, serve to reinforce a sense of repulsion in the reader as well. Rather than to extend hospitality to newcomers these lugubrious ambiances repel. As such, their function is to parallel and reinforce the characters' central conflict in attempting to construct a new sense of community and place against a backdrop of deplorable conditions. The environments that Tobar purposefully elaborates generate

harm to immigrant subjects' psyches, bodies and limit their capacity for social interaction and political representation. The horrendous backgrounds, that will continue to proliferate as the novel advances, are suggestive of outdated practices for integrating immigrants into an allegedly advanced and modern U.S. The uninhabitable spaces sketched by Tobar highlight the lack of institutional social support and for receiving undesired, working-class immigrant populations that forces them to live homelessly. Disfranchisement, destitute poverty coupled with limited pathways for legitimate means of employment are the barriers newly arrived Central Americans encounter in North American cities. The prominence of repugnant backgrounds and social interactions communicate a subtext of social rejection figured in terms of homelessness. They raise the question of what physical and discursive sites of representation are available to massive undocumented populations that are erased from the national imaginary.

### **Fraternal Twins**

I have just outlined the intersection between homelessness, phallic masculinity and aggression that mark Bernal's consciousness. However, an exploration into this character is incomplete without considering his replica, the ex-soldier Guillermo Longoria. Rather than seeing them as complete opposites as Arias and Alvarado have, I postulate that both men constitute a singular and troubled masculine subject despite the class differences in their background. In effect, the novel abounds with countless instances where Bernal and Longoria closely reflect each other in their vicious enactment and representation of manliness that drives them rapidly into homelessness. Despite their ideological, class and cultural differences, both men find it difficult to escape a sense of authority rooted in and inflected by conquest, dictatorships and military values.

In this section I will highlight how both Bernal and Longoria form a mirror image in their performance of power. The strong resemblance between them expresses itself through the following traits: an anti-social conduct, dysfunctional social interactions, violence towards the defenseless, the abuse of women, a barbaric repudiation of maternal figures and a sustained dynamic of war. In conjunction with these behaviors that drives them into homelessness and isolation, I will also discuss how the narrator sharply undermines both characters' masculinity, despite the grandiose images that they cultivate of themselves. Just as important, I will highlight the collapse and unsustainability of their brand of manhood. Comparisons with other characters' that also follow and, more interestingly, deviate from Guatemalan gender roles subvert the brute violence both subjects put into effect. Lastly, the relationship between homelessness and a troubled identity finds its maximum expression through the debris and death provoked by the Rodney King riots. The riots symbolize the perpetual dynamic of combat and antagonism regarding race relations in the U.S. that fundamentally prevent Longoria and Bernal's membership into society. Just as important, the proliferation of homeless locales, the waste that fills them that includes dilapidated construction materials, Bernal's occupation of a sewage tunnel suggests an outmoded and inoperable nation-state system of a so-called modernized U.S.

The narrator presents Antonio Bernal and Guillermo Longoria as stark opposites in terms of class, culture, politics and even appearance. Despite these vast differences, at their gender core they are identical. Their troubled view of masculinity, that surfaces in their interactions with other men, the elderly and women, leaves these subjects living crisis-ridden lives. Their vicious conduct, advocated by their former nation-state,

frustrates the construction of (transnational) communities that correspond with withdrawal from the world, isolation and empty homeless locales. Antonio Bernal, a resident of Guatemala City, is a middle-class, university student of mixed ancestry and considered a *ladino* (a person of European and indigenous ancestry). In the context of Guatemala, Bernal's phenotype accords him a position of social privilege. Physically he is tall and lean, his gold-rimmed set of glasses is the symbol that defines him as an intellectual. In the eyes of Elena, Bernal's wife he has a gentleness that the previous men she dated completely lacked. She sees him as a man who is more inclined to listen than to argue, unlike her previous virile partners: "That was the problem with revolutionaries: the same masculine chemical energy that made them so brave in the face of dictatorship also drove them to distraction whenever there was a pretty woman around. It seemed that the revolution would never be free of machismo...." (Tobar 87). Bernal constitutes a radical departure from the leftist, macho charismatic leaders that Elena has been drawn to, making him a figure that is allegedly not unstable or hurtful. Moreover, Bernal studies literature which reinforces Elena's perception that he will be sensitive to a partner's feelings.

By contrast, Guillermo Longoria, the young soldier that murders Bernal's family is unschooled, indigenous and hails from the countryside. Through his memories we understand that Longoria has suffered destitute poverty, seeing that his parents are exploited farmers. His social position contrasts starkly with Bernal's, given his socio-economic background. While a set of glasses conveyed Bernal's social position, a tattoo of a jaguar on his forearm comprises Longoria's symbol and accords him recognition. As Michel Foucault mentions, the soldier is someone who could be recognized from afar,

someone who bears certain signs, body language and marks that are immediately identifiable (Rainbow 179). To a Guatemalan citizenry, the animal connotes a branch of the state's military known as *los kaibiles*, as U.S. trained unit known for their capacity to carry out the most barbaric acts during the civil war conflict. Longoria's affiliation with the state, as being one of its deadliest instruments defines him.

Although both men have opposite histories, Longoria as a bloodthirsty soldier and Bernal as gentle, they are indistinguishable particularly in the new host land. In Bernal's case, his precarious position of liminality leads him to remove his mask as a timid, middle-class student and reveals a monstrous, unrecognizable subject. That is, the loss of his home and community incites an ignoble conduct, chillingly suggesting that when Bernal perceives himself to be away from civilization and class-privilege he loses his principles and adopts a nihilistic view. A desire for destruction and revenge defines Bernal, rather than engaging in the construction a new community. In this sense, at their core both Longoria and Bernal interpret their reality through the same script that impedes their possibilities of establishing connections with others and a sense of place in Los Angeles. I understand "place" as defined by geographers Robert Prucecell and Lynn Meskell, where subjects, despite linguistic and cultural challenges, engage in a social process of establishing connections, realize their hopes of prosperity and transform a new space into a familiar, meaningful and desirable environment. The barrier that prevents both Bernal and Longoria from making this transition is their troubled interpretation of masculinity that results in homelessness. Their resemblance is brought into relief once both men find themselves living precariously and meagerly in Los Angeles. Despite their class and cultural differences, what characterizes both men is their aggressive, silent and



antisocial nature. Both Bernal and Longoria are convinced that they are superior to the rest of Latino/a immigrants. Bernal does so because of his middle-class background and Longoria shares the same attitude on account of his military position which, in his eyes, accords him an air of distinction.

A case in point is Longoria's disposition and conduct at his place of employment, a courier service to Guatemala and El Salvador known as *El Pulgarcito Express*. The seedy and vile owner, William Duarte, a right-wing Salvadoran nationalist welcomes Longoria with open arms and enthuses over Longoria's status as an ex-soldier. The feeling, however, is far from mutual as Longoria finds Duarte unbearable and overly talkative. Despite Longoria's dislike and cold disposition towards Duarte, Longoria's specific function in *El Pulgarcito Express* is to intimidate customers. Like so many other interactions throughout the narrative, undergirded by a harmful sense of authority, social relations are characterized by an underlying aggression, antipathy and an aversion towards others. When a woman accuses Duarte's employees of stealing a money order that never arrived to its recipient, Longoria is the one that addresses the complaint with the aim to intimidate her: "Longoria stared straight into her angry eyes. This was his practiced soldier's gaze, his *cara de matón*, the look that said he was one of the serious ones, the type of grin after he hit you over the head with his rifle butt. Anyone from Central America recognized that look...Dead dictators and demagogues lived in these cold brown eyes...His stare always chased complainers away, which was precisely why he had been stationed at the front counter" (26). Analogously, Bernal holds the same attitude of aggression towards individuals that populate his environment in Los Angeles. While also temporarily working in the service sector as a busboy, Bernal finds the work

demeaning: “Restaurants he did not like because he found it difficult to be polite and obliging. He could not hide his indignation when people spat orders out for coffee...He pushed his glasses up on his nose and gave the rude customers his meanest I-spit-in-your-face stare” (53).

Coupled with their antisocial frame of mind both men are constantly struggling to control their violent impulses. In the case of Longoria, he constantly hears the voice of Dr. Wayne García, a self-help author that he reads including a work titled *Success and Self-Fulfillment Through Mind Control*. As the narrator describes: “Dr. García helped Longoria understand his inner urges...Dr. García taught Longoria that the mind was like any machine and that he had to control the machine instead of allowing it to control him.” (21). Despite his internal struggle to restrain his violent urges, he succumbs to them frequently. Even more troubling is that the violence Longoria and Bernal occasion is towards the defenseless that showcases their anxiety, and by extension, renders them inoperable in building a new home and community. Those who witness these unjustified and anti-social outbursts are revolted by their brutality. For instance, while working at *El Pulgarcito Express* an elderly woman openly accuses Longoria of murdering her son in Guatemala, and outright calls him a killer. Unable to reign over himself, Longoria reacts disproportionately violent: “Standing over her, he swung his arm in a broad arc and slapped her across the face, the whack filling the room. There was an audible gasp from the people in line...The old woman was lying on her side, coughing softly. Longoria noticed a pebble on the floor in front of her - a tooth” (161)

Cast in the same mold, Bernal operates identically like Longoria, seeing that he also occasions violence to the defenseless. After the eviction from his apartment, Bernal

and his Mexican roommate José Juan Felipe find themselves occupying the unfinished construction site mentioned earlier. Surrounded by unknown homeless figures, Bernal feels threatened and is determined to ruthlessly establish his presence. Akin to Longoria, he hears an internal voice that pleads him to remain calm. The voice he frequently hears is that of his deceased wife's that knows his counterproductive tendencies. Despite the efforts of self-control, Bernal also succumbs to his villainous instincts. After an elderly homeless man steals from Bernal's and José Juan Felipe's tent, Bernal attacks the harmless figure: "If felt good to hit this man, to feel his own arms doped with adrenaline, to feel his wrists cut through the air as he pummeled the man's face. (43). After the attack, José Juan Felipe stares in disgust at Antonio for his extreme reaction.

Interestingly, it is in these moments, akin to Longoria, that Bernal hears discourses of male authority that push him to act: *It was my temper coming out again. My famous uncontrollable temper.* The men in Antonio's family had a genetic propensity to bouts of rage. They liked to scream, to shout, to bare their teeth to their wives, sons, and business partners. *Elena said she was afraid of my "reacciones violentas"...* these outbursts were blamed on Antonio's peasant ancestors in Zacapa, a dry region on Guatemala's eastern frontier, where men still settled accounts with rifles and machetes....When Antonio or his father or one of his uncles raised his voice at a family gathering, people said, 'That's the Zacapa coming out.' " (44). The implication is that these discourses that stem from the military (in Longoria's case) and from an alleged family male inclination towards rage (in Bernal's case) impede these subjects' integration in Los Angeles communities. They are solitary figures unwilling to change their attitude and conduct. Their treatment towards women further isolates them and drives them deeper into homelessness.

Despite his harshness, Longoria has a romantic relationship with Reginalda Peralta, a twenty-three-year Salvadoran who is the antithesis of his stoicism and silence. Reginalda is lively, fashionable and communicative. After Longoria barely escapes Bernal's first assault, suddenly the ex-soldier has to come to terms with his crimes as he has no recollection of Bernal. Despite Reginalda's pleas for Longoria to therapeutically talk about his past related to the attack, Longoria becomes more uncommunicative. Even worse, his impulse towards violence and particularly her is accentuated, namely during the Rodney King riots (I will comment on these riots further ahead as they conclude the novel). After Longoria is unable to get a hold of Reginalda at night, he suspects that she is unfaithful and his rage surfaces: "If he saw her, he would want to kill her. At the very least slap her. She better have a good explanation for not being home after midnight." (277). This aggression is further compounded when he suspects that she looted during the riots when he sees all sorts of new packages in her apartment. As an immediate response, compounded with his irrational suspicion that she is with another, Longoria punches her without hesitation when he sees her.

Coupled with his aggression towards female partners, an intense repudiation for maternal figures, that stems from his military training, also defines Longoria. However, Longoria's repudiation does not stem from an internal source, rather from military training and its tests. As Frank Barrett argues in "The Organizational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity: The Case of the U.S. Navy" (1996), military institutions constantly provide settings, such as actual combat missions, for soldiers to solidify their masculinity. In the same fashion, in *Murder and Masculinity: Violent Fictions of the Twentieth Century* Rebecca Biron argues that when the construct becomes unstable and

ever-shifting, as it frequently does, it requires performances that stabilize it once again

(11) Similar to navy officers whose sense of self finds itself in question among his peers, Longoria is eager to re-establish its credibility. To do so, Longoria finds himself forced to savagely cut ties with motherly and nurturing symbols. After Longoria carries out a massacre in the highlands of Guatemala, his commanding officer assigns him the task of killing one of the last survivors, an indigenous woman. After being forced to cook for the soldiers at gunpoint, and Longoria begins to take her away for the execution, the woman attempts to escape. Yet, as he kills her to prove his worth as a soldier, the narrator brings up images of maternity and warmth linked to Longoria's childhood: "Longoria grabbed the older woman by the collar of her blouse and led her away.... To look at her was to remember the market women he had known as a boy, the outstretched arms that gave him sweet tamales, mouths opening to a silver-tooth grin. Market days were special days then, the happiest he could remember, filled with wonder of so many new sights..." To affirm himself he must murder the memory of maternal figures that nourished him. As the woman escapes, the laughter of his peers further provokes Longoria: "Longoria heard a chorus of derisive whistles from the other soldiers....*This woman has humiliated me.* If he didn't kill her now, he would be a laughingstock like the Kanjobal, who was crying like a baby over the kneeling figure of his prisoner, unable to carry out a simple order." (251).

Although not in the military, Bernal shares the same twisted view and relationship with women as Longoria, suggesting that "extreme masculinity" permeated society as Bernal practices it as well. That is, the ways of being fomented by "extreme masculinity" are contagious as Bernal exhibits the same ill-will and repudiation towards the feminine

figures in his life. In the course of their short-lived marriage, Elena slowly learns that Bernal suffers bouts of depression and irritability. His attitude sours the relation between husband and wife, as Bernal takes out his dissatisfaction on Elena. After the couple flee from the city, and frustrated with the care of a baby, life in a small town and their lives in danger, Bernal despises Elena, particularly when she undermines him. She boldly criticizes him for never helping with household responsibilities: “You never help. You never lift a finger. All you do is criticize and complain.” “I put food on the table. I work. I bring in money.” “Your mother’s money you mean.” (129). Elena’s comment addresses Bernal’s mother, another woman that challenges his male authority.

After fleeing from Guatemala, Bernal deliberately cuts ties with his mother. Their relationship is complicated, given that Bernal never sees himself as fully independent from her authority. Repeatedly and reluctantly he follows whatever she instructs and without the slightest protest. For instance, after one of Elena’s friends is murdered because of his leftist politics, Bernal’s mother urges the couple to flee Guatemala City. Given her favorable socio-economic position, she pays for the house the couple temporarily resides in and refuses to accept no for an answer: “A stern and attractive woman with gray strands in her hair, Antonio’s mother was now the provider of cash and shelter and would not be disputed. Without money and with a baby on the way, they had no place else to turn. Antonio had resigned himself to the plan, his face a white flag of surrender.” (108). Seen from this angle, Bernal believes that his mother fundamentally undermines his role of the patriarch.

Consequently, he rejects her and refuses to communicate with her once he lives in Los Angeles. After the eviction from his apartment in Los Angeles, Bernal finally

decides to read an unopened letter from his mother from months ago. In the letter she describes how she and a local priest arranged a funeral for Bernal's wife and son. Adding insult to injury, Bernal's mother paid for the funeral expenses and expensive gravestones etched out of marble and golden lettering. In Bernal's eyes, the act constitutes a grave insult. Convinced that his mother undermined his role of the father figure, Bernal becomes enraged: "The hypocrisy. This woman who never cared about his wife was looking after her grave. If he were to see his mother now, he would give her a real *maltratada*, one of his raging fits that made people step back in shock." (182). He tears up the letter that fills him with shame and punishes himself for not fulfilling a father and husband's duty: "I didn't bury them properly. Even after they were dead, I failed them." (182). Moreover, Bernal blames his mother for his family's death because she forced them to flee to the small town of San Cristóbal away from the capital. He sharply repudiates her and dismisses her concerns for his health: "He could see his mother's blue handwriting on each bit of paper, snatches of her voice, giving unwanted advice, making judgments. Poor little Antonio, small man lost in an alien city, so pathetic he should see a psychologist. Pleading with him to come home so that she could take care of him again." (182).

It is noteworthy that throughout the novel there is no mention of Antonio's mother's name. Without a proper name that identifies her, she symbolizes a presence that plagues Bernal's problematic sense of self. She constitutes a voice he deliberately ignores and looks to quiet, as he violently tears to pieces her letter, and longs to intimidate her. A similar pattern emerges in Longoria. The presence of an indigenous woman represents a feminine voice that humiliates him in front of his military peers. As such, he kills this

nameless indigenous woman that symbolizes his link to the maternal. With the violent repudiation and murder of women, both men never escape the yoke of masculinity, a system that demands separation from maternal figures, or any or romantic partners. This demand that comes at a high cost as it further drives them into alienation, a characteristic tied to national homelessness that Tobar continually foregrounds.

This placelessness finds its articulation through secondary characters that parallel or stand in sharp contrast to Bernal and Longoria. These characters are Mauricio López, a former Guatemalan military friend of Longoria that is also living in Los Angeles, and José Juan (*el moro*), Bernal's Mexican roommate. After the attack Longoria suffers from Bernal in the park, his argument with Reginalda, Longoria visits López, who suffers from a crippling depression. Mauricio López's tragic condition of losing his young family and the personal crisis that it produces foreshadows Longoria's own unraveling. Arriving in the middle of the afternoon to Lopez's house, Longoria is surprised by its unkempt appearance that contrasts with the cleanliness practiced by a soldier. Outside rose bushes abound and the backyard is filled with miscellaneous and scattered garbage. Inside the house is partially furnished, its walls are crumbling and looks like it has been robbed. Longoria becomes even more distressed when he sees López' heavily medicated, ungroomed, and wearing soiled clothes. Longoria learns that López's son was the victim of a drive by shooting. After the incident, Mauricio's wife walked out on the marriage which left Mauricio with a severe depression that triggers memories of his crimes in Guatemala. As in so many instances, Longoria turns to aggression as he sees the facade of male power crumble through a distraught and inconsolable López.: "Longoria popped the lid off the bottle, and blue capsules tumbled into his palm. 'Take one of these and



shut up before I slap you. Stop acting like a woman.’ He flung them at López, who raised his arms meekly in self-defense.” (198). Similarly, Bernal showcases this same thought processes and behavior that leaves him permanently irreformable and detached from Los Angeles. Towards the end of the novel, Bernal and José Juan Antonio are chased away from the hotel construction site and take refuge in an abandoned train tunnel at the outskirts of the city. José Juan leaves the tunnel and when he returns, the contrast between him and Bernal is considerable as their trajectories diverge.

José Juan shares with Bernal of an anecdote oriented around the concept of finding one’s new place in the host country as images of housing abound, such as a massive apartment building, a Hollywood mansion, a guest house, and an available room for rent. A Korean landlord, the owner a of a huge building complex, hires Juan José to hang up a few signs. The next day a gardener hires José Juan to work in opulent hacienda in Beverly Hills. With a sense of wonder, José Juan describes the house as: “...one of those haciendas in the Mexican soap operas, a big, beautiful white house with the prettiest red roof tile.” (261). At the mansion, José Juan meets an attractive, Mexican maid who is interested in romance. José Juan manages to live with her in a vacant guest house while the owners of the mansion are out of town. Eventually, she finds José Juan steady work and housing, a bedroom that he and Bernal can rent.

José Juan’s tale contrasts sharply with Bernal’s disheveled state. Bernal has come to terms with his homeless identity and refuses change until he accomplishes his task of killing Longoria. Despite the good news that José Juan shares with Bernal, the latter decides to remain homeless as he continues to wage war against Longoria, a war that is not even driven by conflicting ideology, but on the antiquated masculine notion of honor.

In *Masculine Domination* Pierre Bourdieu traces a relationship between, manliness, violence and honor: “the point of honor presents itself as an ideal, or more precisely, a system of demands which inevitably remains, in many cases inaccessible. *Manliness*,...as the capacity to fight and exercise violence (especially in acts of revenge), is first and foremost a *duty*. (51). For Bernal, fleeing from Guatemala immediately after the murder of his family tarnished his honor as a husband and a father. He failed to comply with the demands of the protective patriarch by fleeing to Los Angeles without confronting Longoria. With a wounded sense of himself and honor, Bernal’s sole duty is to avenge his family. For Longoria, after barely escaping the first attack from Bernal in Los Angeles, he is determined to maintain his soldierly valor and honor intact. In other words, even though Longoria lives in the U.S., he is compelled to revive the soldier, an identity whose integrity must be continually affirmed, yet falls apart in Los Angeles as the unspoken tensions between his community and crimes surface. As opposed to ex-military subjects that Franco analyzes and that remain in their home countries, Longoria recognizes his crimes, but cannot face them directly. As such, he desperately turns to an unsalvageable sense of honor. For both Longoria and Bernal honor functions as the dynamic that leads them into war, more than a system of economic and political oppression, an event undergirded by a destructive masculinity that reaches its apex and crash during the Los Angeles riots of 1992.

### **A Petite Honor**

After suffering the first unexpected attack from Bernal while playing chess in the park, Longoria’s sense of male power and security loses its footing. Despite playing a game that focuses on strategy, Longoria is blindsided by Bernal’s attack which leaves the

former shaken as it forces him to question his violent past evidenced in his one, meaningful relationship with Reginalda. After Bernal's attack he weeps in her presence, but resists to talk about his crimes. In this way, Longoria's breakdown provoked by extreme masculinity runs parallel to the physical breakdown of Los Angeles provoked by the riots. Far from extreme and grandiose, his sense of self diminishes considerably leaving him lost and disoriented to which he responds with violent methods that he can no longer carry out. The smashing of *El Pulgarcito Express* during the riots also underscores Bernal's precarious manhood as he is incapable of defending the locale and a female co-worker from rioters because of his wounded arm. Vulnerability disturbs him, as according to his military background, an ex-soldier should always be ready for warfare. In Longoria's mind not being able to defend himself produces a public humiliation as rioters forced him to retreat. The question of a masculine honor that demands to be upheld is not only highlighted, but also thrown into question by the narrator that constantly undermines Longoria and Bernal's efforts, suggesting that their violent methods for creating place in the host country are ineffectual. With a cutting sense of irony, both men are mocked as they emphasize their masculine honor through the preparation and the enactment war. For instance, since Bernal has never shot a gun, he practices by shooting at a bottle from a distance. As Bernal continually misses the target he steps in closer and closer: "At this range he could easily hit the bottle with a rock." (268), the narrator comments. By the end of his shooting practice, he finds himself almost pressed up against the bottle, at which point the narrator adds: "Antonio felt tall again. He remembered the soldier was a pipsqueak...With a gun anyone could become a killer. Anyone who held one became invincible... Even a poor timid bus boy who slept in

a cave.” (269). The possession of a gun foregrounds the phallocentrism that dictates the harmful dynamic between Longoria and Bernal. As Bernal now symbolically holds power, he rejoices while, on the other hand, during the attack on *El Pulgarcito Express* and throughout the riot Longoria repeatedly laments that he finds himself defenseless without his gun.

On the subject of Longoria’s soldierly honor, the narrative voice is just as scathing. The reader comes to find out that Longoria never saw actual enemy combat. During a brief visit to a training camp in the U.S. as a soldier, Longoria also does not fully grasp the lessons of military strategy, or “psychological operations”. His lack of military strategy is further reinforced in Los Angeles where he plays chess, but repeatedly loses to the older men that laugh at him. Even more insulting is that Longoria drinks coffee on the days he plays chess, convinced that it makes him sharper. In addition to critiquing Longoria’s poor military strategy, his physicality is also a target despite his own perception of having the nobility of a soldier’s bearing. While Bernal stalks Longoria he notices that he is a foot taller than Longoria and his voice is also soft. Together these features miniaturize the figure of a deadly *kaibil* soldier. The final insult on part of the narrator is after Bernal manages to shoot Longoria. As Longoria slowly dies, he psychologically and physically musters all the strength he can to walk home, convinced that he’ll be safe there. As Longoria bleeds, stumbles and sweats the narrator casually and coldly remarks on the soldier’s former vigor “Before his arm was injured, he had bench-pressed two hundred pounds.” (298). Both men’s twisted sense of duty that they risk their lives for is also undermined when one takes into consideration Elena Bernal’s open refusal of gender roles. Throughout the *Tattooed Soldier* she resists the

imposition of gender scripts that limit her role in building a new, progressive Guatemala. In her short relationship with Antonio Bernal, she is his opposite as she embraces Guatemala's non-European heritage (that *ladino* racist ideology suppresses), reluctantly marries Bernal, is not defined as maternal, is sexually experienced while Bernal is a virgin during a long period of their courtship, disobeys Bernal's commands, and calls out his economic dependence on his mother. In other words, Elena Bernal resists the existing order, an order that crumbles for Bernal and Longoria during the Rodney King riots as they cling to their inoperable system of masculine values. Her death suggests the violent eradication of Guatemala's young, progressive intellectuals in order to maintain an old, conservative national ethos.

The backdrop of the riot that fuels Longoria's desire to increase his honor also functions as the context that irreparably disrupts the foundations of his phallic masculinity. As Longoria flees his workplace on foot, he is aghast and has trouble making sense of the looting and destruction, something that he deems inconceivable in the U.S. The question of anarchy figured in the riots brings us back to Mansfield's claims that masculine subjectivity is built upon a system that values order, principle, stability and finality (95). In stark opposition to a masculinist framework, the riots serve as the antithesis of Longoria's worldview as Los Angeles finds itself out of control and without any strict system of organization and racial harmony. Frustration with his system of thought and meaning overwhelm him. As such, Longoria's final motive is to reach his apartment, his last refuge that provides him safety and stability. Despite having shelter, the concept of a stable home is tenuous for Longoria. His ever-present relationship with homelessness signals his lack of place in society. For instance, at the outset of the novel,

a homeless heroin addicts disturb Longoria as they set up a small settlement of milk cartons, boxes and plywood in the alley next to his apartment building. His interaction with the homeless couple is tense, seeing that he argues with them for stealing the electricity from his building to power a small television in their shack.

As Longoria loses his employment, Mauricio's friendship and Reginalda's love, the question of homelessness comes up again at the end of *The Tattooed Soldier*. While Longoria slowly dies from a gunshot wound that Bernal inflicts, he hallucinates. The hallucinations underscore the dissonance between visions of the U.S. as a regulated, idyllic home, and the chaos of the riots, suggesting a frustrated desire for a sense of home. Lacan's psychoanalysis sustains that masculine subjectivity dreams of a world that can be governed and controlled by a strict system. Stability, fixed principles and a sense of finality are the achievable goals that the self longs for. The relationship between destructive masculinities and the reconstruction of new home come to the fore as Longoria's desire for an idyllic home is unachievable. As a young soldier Longoria went to Fort Bragg, a military camp for training. His memories of the camp consist of clean ample lanes, cleanliness, his own room in the barracks and shiny vehicles. A stay in Fort Bragg filled Longoria with the idea of the U.S. as the ideal home with its comforts and luxuries. However, that contrasts sharply with the mayhem of the riots whose precepts Longoria cannot understand, suggesting that there is no difference between Guatemala and the U.S. Drawing on the relationship between the trope of homelessness and transnationalism, Longoria's condition disrupts the dominant view as the U.S. and Guatemala as territorially and culturally disconnected stark opposites. The resolution of their conflict in the U.S. questions the distance between the two nation-states as it

foregrounds a sustained engagement from earlier decades in Guatemala that robustly manifests itself in the present-day U.S.

### **An Aging Nation-State System and the Undoing of Extreme Masculinity**

Tobar's representations of harmful masculinities sit alongside the question of a limited national inclusion, on account of both being undergirded by old conceptual frameworks. The riots provoked by the police beating of Rodney King brings us back to the central questions: Where and what is home for Central Americans excluded from participation in nation building processes? What new meanings of the nation-state does the trope of homelessness offer? What other possibilities for nationhood need to be elaborated for Central American communities, along with other racialized ones, living in catastrophic conditions? Although the novel appears to be pessimistic, it serves as a loud cry against an eroding nation-state system that offers little support to U.S. Central Americans thereby omitting them from the national imaginary.

In this light, Longoria and Bernal's disconnected lives from the larger social fabric is echoed by another band of homeless subjects that symbolize African American communities. The trope of homelessness serves as a critique against legitimized state institutions that partially recognize excluded voices. After the Rodney King verdict is announced declaring the White officers not guilty of beating King, the African American homeless subjects that have accompanied Bernal at each homeless site react by rioting. These characters emphasize limited incorporation into society that refuses to fully extend a sense of place and inclusiveness to non-White populations, consequently, and akin to Central American communities, they go largely ignored by government officials. It is not coincidental then that one of these characters is nicknamed "The Mayor" on account of

his demands at the Office of General Relief Assistance where, on a weekly basis, he asks for an increase in relief payments for the dispossessed. As a representative of the state, the RA is an office that is supposed to provide housing and basic needs of food, clothes and utilities, but fails to do so in *The Tattooed Soldier*. The juxtaposition of the riots and the war between Bernal and Longoria coincide, seeing that both actions are oriented around a sense of isolation, relationships of domination and social powerlessness. Given this lack of influence, the Mayor reacts with a maddened violence against the state. Upon the Mayor's return from the riots, he tells Bernal: "Hey my little Spanish friend, we're back from the war... Back from the revolution.... The battle for the Park Center... That's what they call it. The historic battle of Park Center. When the people got theirs." (275). Rioting in Los Angeles' Civic Center, a symbol of the nation-state as an institution, echoes the same sense of placelessness that both African Americans and Central American diasporas encounter in an old nation-state system, one that still refuses to renovate its aging precepts for inclusivity and that symbolically crumbles during the riot.

Coupled with the horrid and unwelcoming homeless sites throughout the novel, it is no wonder that Los Angeles is presented as a landscape of modern decay, as the narrator spotlights the unwelcoming spaces that working-class and undocumented immigrants encounter. During the riots, the objects that abound are scattered chunks of concrete, brick and crumbling walls that the looters use to shatter storefront windows. Flakes of ash and smoke also drift as rioters set fire to buildings and cars without the presence of the police to watch them. The accumulation of these sights suggests that Los Angeles, and by extension the U.S. as a nation-state collapses during the riot. All semblance of a cohesive national home and its sense of security falls apart. The trope of



homelessness unsettles the idea of the U.S. nation-state as a tenable inclusive home that refuses to fully incorporate expanding Black and Brown diasporas. Seeing that the U.S. falls short of renovating its so-called democratic precepts of cultural inclusion, *The Tattooed Soldier* presents a Los Angeles whose edifice is in ruins. Tobar also disrupts any national demarcations between Central America and the U.S. as homelessness shatters any visions of stability. Although one turns away from homeless subjects and their locales, their presence remains and indicates larger institutional failures. As unhinged and homeless person without a sense of community or permanence, Bernal's and Longoria's perspectives emphasize the deep cracks of the U.S. current social order. The aging forms of modernization and masculinity from previous decades and their ineffectualness are synthesized in the last image of *The Tattooed Soldier*. By the end of the novel, Bernal is occupying an abandoned train tunnel. Located at the outskirts, the tunnel's composed of dilapidated, crumbling cement walls and muddy floors ridden with brown puddles of putrid water. Disconnected from Los Angeles, the tunnel is where Bernal carries a dying Longoria. As Bernal begins to hallucinate, he hears the voice of Elena, suggesting his permanent disconnection from society.

### **Hybridity, Masculinity and the Nation-State in *The Ordinary Seaman***

The cost of a non-negotiable demeanor comes at a high price as it prevents forming new communities in the U.S. Because of a harmful masculinity, social relations in Tobar's novel are soured by a reticence to communicate, a cold indifference and

violence.<sup>2</sup> While *The Tattooed Soldier* explores the relationship between masculinity and national homelessness through a relation of war, *The Ordinary Seaman* does so through the hypermasculine enterprises of sailing and maritime exploration. Inoperant frameworks of gender in relation to aging paradigms for constructing nation-states also figure prominently in Francisco Goldman's novel, as the central symbol is an antiquated ship that is permanently docked with a stranded, hypermasculine Central American crew. Oriented around heroic and swaggering male explorers, *The Ordinary Seaman* mocks

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<sup>2</sup> Although transnationalism is prominent in the work of previous critics, a problematic masculinity in relation to nation-state building and its impact in national homelessness has not been explored. In "Refugees of the South: Central Americans in the U.S. Latino Imaginary (2001) Ana Patricia Rodríguez interprets *The Ordinary Seaman* through as the exploitation of Third World labor, and in doing so sees the novel as an allegory of homelessness and abandonment in a post-modern world (404). As a response to this condition, a contact zone between Central Americans and other Latino/a groups forms in New York creating new cultural alliances and overlap between the North and South. On account of this blending, she posits that the work's aesthetic weaves together the Central American testimonial, journalistic texts and interviews of survivors.

Drawing on precepts of deterritorialization advanced by Linda Basch, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, Michael Templeton examines the brutal conditions that the crew in the *Ordinary Seaman* bear as they unseat established notions of a fixed territory in relation to nationhood. The process of deterritorialization is bound the way capitalist social bodies regulate power and knowledge at the level of desire advancing what Deleuze and Guatarri denominate "desiring-production" (Templeton 3). As opposed to a fixed nationalism, the process of becoming transnational, that draws on the ontological underpinnings of deterritorialization, frustrates nationhood by never becoming a fixed subject, but rather one that is perpetually in the process of becoming (3). Templeton argues that the protagonist becomes transnational through this mentioned framework while the rest of the crew are reduced to machine and objects as is evidenced on their injured bodies.

Marta Caminero-Santangelo and Kirsten Silva Gruesz explore the construct of Latino/a in *The Ordinary Seaman*. In "Central Americans in the City: Goldman, Tobar and Questions of Panethnicity" (2009) Caminero-Santangelo argues that the possibility of building collective panethnic alliances are truncated in *The Tattooed Soldier* but become a possibility in Goldman's novel. In "Utopía Latina: *The Ordinary Seaman* in Extraordinary Times" (2003) Silva Gruesz traces the influence of José Martí's "Nuestra América" as the subtext that undergirds *The Ordinary Seaman* that advances a critique of historiography, arguing that a Latino/a presence emerges from within U.S. history.

these models of male behavior. Accordingly, the novel moves in a bi-directional fashion as: 1) it opts for a revised subjectivity distant from Marxist, militant precepts for modernization in Nicaragua that failed, and 2) within the context of the U.S. continues to be a hindrance to the settlement process in the host country. Teasing out the tensions and inconsistencies of militant male thought corresponds with the integration (but not assimilation) of Central American diasporas within the U.S. national fabric. In its articulation the *Ordinary Seaman* turns to a use of language that intentionally disrupts the norms of monolingualism and monoculture as pillars of nationality. Goldman's use of language, that corresponds with Esteban Gaitán's (the protagonist) transformation leads the reader to a gray area of indeterminacy that veers away from any national "essence". In challenging the liminality of a Central American sailors through a poetics of parody, Goldman advances a non-normative view of national belonging disrupting binary classifications of insider and outsider.

In *The Politics of Postmodernism* (2002) Linda Hutcheon identifies a series of characteristics that define postmodern visual arts and narrative, such as works that exhibit self-reflexivity, a juxtaposition of past representations to problematize dominant views of the present, a disillusion with direct political action and narrations left with unresolved endings. These features strongly resonate with the *Ordinary Seaman* as the novel consciously reflects on itself as a representation that evokes a remote colonial past of maritime exploration and "discovery" that is placed in relation to the present-day migration of homeless Central Americans to the U.S. The novel revises the prevailing opinion of the U.S. as disconnected from a remote Latin America and undoes the idea of

a national home by foregrounding transnationalism through the refashioning of masculine identity. I will consider this revision of gender further ahead.

As part of novel's self-reflexivity, the narrator often speaks directly to the reader foregrounding the deliberate literary construction of the text. Most explicitly in the "Acknowledgments" section that closes the novel Goldman calls attention to the research necessary to write it and the multiple sources that influenced him. In this final section, he playfully acknowledges that the *Urus*, the ship around which the action revolves that disappears at the end of novel, is an invention whose whereabouts are unknown even to him. In this way, Goldman leaves the conclusion of the novel open and unresolved as the characters' futures are not specifically laid out. Esteban Gaitán the protagonist has also lost all faith in Sandinista ideology that left him with a sense of ontological emptiness and destitute. Of the postmodern characteristics that Hutcheon advances the one that is most central and relevant to my study is the subversion and re-writing of gender. Fittingly, Goldman humorously de-naturalizes and ironizes the dominant features of a militant male identity that Esteban thought as 'natural' in Nicaragua. Homeless in New York, Esteban questions his dominant views and practices, given that they hinder the process of establishing a new community, inciting a change in his identity.

As such, I contend that *The Ordinary Seaman* reimagines a U.S. nation-state building and belonging for subordinated Central American diasporas that is inseparable from reworked, hegemonic constructions of masculinity. Goldman's novel undercuts images of courageous sailors and explorers by presenting a defeated, homeless crew of Central American sailors, and their North American captains whose over-inflated male identity frustrates their projects and enterprises. That is, gender serves as a problematic

site that impedes the process of redefining national belonging for homeless Central Americans. Moreover, Goldman does not simply draw on the figures of the triumphant, or defeated explorers, but willfully uses these archetypes to refute and mock Marxist military constructions. As such, the target of Goldman's critique is the protagonist Esteban, a homeless, young former elite combat *sandinista* revolutionary who defines himself by his military past yet undergoes a considerable and liberatory transformation as he navigates and works through the tensions and contradictions of his own militant subjectivity.

In the middle of Nicaragua's civil war during the 1980s, Esteban a disillusioned, *ex-sandinista* from an elite military unit finds himself on a plane to New York with the aim of working on a cargo ship. Throughout his journey, Esteban is profoundly tormented by the death of his fellow *sandinista* romantic partner (la Marta) who was killed in combat. Esteban heads to the U.S. accompanied by a few other working-class Nicaraguans, Hondurans and one Guatemalan who together constitute the ship's crew. Except for Bernardo Puyano, an older gentleman who has worked as a waiter on ships and as a cook, none of the men have sailed before setting the stage for their in-expertise. Once situated in New York, the crew meets their alleged captains, the young Americans Elias Tureen and Mark Baker who both hail from middle-class backgrounds, yet struggle financially, a feature that impacts their male identity. Docked in the most ruined and marginal zone of the Brooklyn harbor lies the *Urus*, a massive and worn-out ship that needs major repairs before being able to sail again. Without an established residence, the crew is forced to reluctantly live on the ship. As they wait for motor parts and occupy themselves by working on minor repairs, their travel visas expire, and they are left living

on the ship indefinitely. On their part, Elias and Mark maintain the facade in their social circle as maritime magnates, while in private they bicker over their risky investment in the *Urus* and their illicitly contracted crew. Elias, who hails from a wealthy Mexican and English family, complicates an Anglo-Latino/a relationship of exclusion. In the process of establishing a home in the U.S., Central Americans not only contend with a racist White imaginary that excludes them, but other more established Latino/a groups and their labor practices that also marginalizes them. Elias', and Mark, exploit the recently arrived Central American crew, perpetuating a colonial relationship of domination among Latinos/as. Hired as cheap labor and unable to protest, Elias, as privileged Latino subject, positions the Central American crew as homeless.

Frustrated with being homeless, Esteban leaves the ship at night to haphazardly explore the pier and warehouses where the ship is marooned. His mishaps and the collection of objects that he finds humorously demystify the image of Esteban as an elite guerrilla fighter. After a few nightly excursions Esteban slowly makes his way into New York City and a hair salon, *Salón de Belleza Tropicana Unisex*, where his militant, Marxist masculinity clashes with the owner's and manicurist's views. Gonzalo is a gay Cuban, and Joaquina is a young Mexican manicurist who Esteban is drawn to. Once Joaquina and Esteban find themselves in a romantic relationship, Esteban returns less to the ship. While the protagonist survives his homelessness and begins to establish a new life, the rest of the crew suffers physically and psychologically on the ship. Elias and Mark have a fallout as their grand projects and hopes for social mobility are unrealized, leaving *The Ordinary Seaman* without any gallant heroes. Bernardo, an old waiter, dies from a fire wound out of the captains' neglect, and leaves Esteban with a deep sense of

guilt. Yet the novel ends with hopes for new possibilities of reinvention, as Esteban finds a new partner, and Elias, after the birth of his newborn son, is determined to change his corrupt methods.

Drawing on the postmodern characteristics elaborated by Hutcheon, *The Ordinary Seaman* has a strikingly unorthodox form that emphasizes a de-naturalization of gender, specifically hyper-masculine Central Americans, as it borrows images of sailors and exploration from multiple sources. These include the *Crónica de Indias* accounts, British travel novels such as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) while also drawing on contemporary writings that documented the actual events of the Central American crews' real-life plight. These accounts are Bernardo Ivan Carrasco's, "Los últimos días de un viejo lobo de mar", a survivor of the event, and *Trouble on Board* by Reverend Paul Chapman who also recorded the incident. Drawing inspiration from these texts, Goldman challenges and inverts the "discovery" of the Americas by bold European sailors. Instead, he puts at the front and center a Central American crew that arrives to New York only to be homeless. In doing so, he highlights a transnationalism tied to Central American maritime subjects and national homelessness.

As the reformulation of masculine precepts is related to challenging an apparent disconnection between the Americas, Goldman articulates this vision through a deliberate use of language that integrates a Central American inflected Spanish into English. He purposefully incorporates the voice of an amusing narrator who resists using a normative English by incorporating expressions that can be divided along two categories. The first of these are informal expressions that are directly translated from Spanish to English without any effort to make a seamless translation. Goldman veers away from the idea of a

smooth and imperceptible translation, opting to leave it unpolished with its seams visible. These are expressions specific to Spanish that disorient English monolinguals if they are translated word for word. Examples include: Son of a million whores (11), that's what he's like, full of inventions (212), having heated up his head with preposterous notions (205). The second linguistic recourse consists of leaving individual words in Spanish untranslated and unitalicized, thus not marking them as different, or separate from English. On the contrary, they're used casually in conversation, and include examples such as: Vos, we're getting paid to work, y que? (28), What in putas are you saying, mano (223), Que se jode that ridiculous huevón (242) , Ja! That cabrón stays forever too (243). The effect of these deliberately hybrid non-translations integrates Central Americans into the U.S. fabric through language usage. That is, Goldman highlights the inverse, he brings our attention to how Spanish impacts English, rather than how English is incorporated into Spanish. The strategy of liberally weaving Spanish into his prose stands in contrast to the language of *The Tattooed Soldier* where the characters' lack of integration corresponds to a marked separation between Spanish and English, separating Longoria and Bernal from society. Secondly, for the English monolingual reader, the Spanish expressions lead to a gray zone of cultural indeterminacy and estrangement. They make readers pause and stumble as they try make out the meaning of these expressions within the larger context of the narrative. Narrating Esteban's homeless position requires breaking the taken-for-granted understanding of English and leaving behind binary-oriented uses of language. Taken together, the narrative strategies disrupt the national norm of English as separate from, and unimpacted by Spanish and Central American populations in the U.S. Within the context of transnationalism that sustains a



simultaneous engagement with one's country of origin and the new settlement context, the flexible use of integrating both languages gains significance. The literary strategy runs parallel to Esteban's own transformation as he re-works the identifications and practices of his subjectivity that find themselves in conflict with his new surroundings in New York.

Akin to the unorthodox synthesis of English and Spanish, the second and most dominant formal trait in *The Ordinary Seaman* is a convergence of disparate voices. As a group of abandoned sailors, especially throughout the first half of the novel, Goldman produces the sensation of being lost at sea. Although the book is divided into four large sections, it veers away from a chronological order. Within the first two sections, perspectives continually shift, leaving the reader with a sense of being lost at sea. Characters' long-winded and disconnected interior monologues contribute to the effect of leaving one with a sense of wandering aimlessly, echoing the homeless and stagnant position of Esteban and the sailors on the *Urus*. Through this poetic, immobility on account of masculinity is the characteristic that defines all the characters conflicts, and not only physically, but also socially and economically. Accordingly, as opposed to the motion of advancing forward associated with sailing, *The Ordinary Seaman* opens with a complete standstill. At three in the morning, Esteban waits alone for the airport in Managua to open. Sitting in the darkness, and watching the workers prepare for the day the description is deliberately uneventful. By five in the morning, which is when the airport officially opens, Esteban is the first person in a long line of passengers that have also arrived. He loses his first place in line, however, as he is forced to wait for someone

else, the travel and employment agent that has his visa and plane ticket. Waiting helplessly in lines announces his position of perpetual stagnation.

The central symbol of immobility in relation to destructive male practices used for nation-building is the Urus. As such, the narrator lingers on the run-down pier and the ship that fuse into each other, constituting a site of homelessness. Metaphors of decay and waste abound in the pages that describe the misery and destruction found in such location: "... They came to pot-hole ripped parking lot partially enclosed by brick wall, a rusted chicken-wire fence lying on its side all the way across it like the undulating spine of a long-dead dragon. At the far end was a cluster of sheds and low buildings with smashed and boarded-up windows, a ruin that looked like a row of concrete-encased rolls of toilet paper that had been pounded down with a giant sledgehammer..." (19).

Descriptions of the ship itself are similar and present the picture of a rotting, metallic behemoth that lies inert. Accordingly, the Urus' deplorable conditions symbolize the limits of Central American nation-states that strove for an elusive modernity. The political ideology and social plan of a new Nicaraguan society during the late 20th century shattered to pieces leaving only destruction, decay and a large segment of the population forced to flee. With this context in mind, Esteban's frustrated hopes of new society are figured in terms of the Urus, an exhausted and inoperant apparatus whose weight presses down heavily on him.

Drawing again on the emancipatory concept of homelessness, the Urus simultaneously extends to Esteban the possibility of challenging his circumstances of national liminality and immobilization. While the ship represents the collapse of a failed social project, the Urus also accords the potential for change, it brings about an

intermediary shade where Esteban can rework his masculinity and refashion a new subjectivity that unseats the primacy of the traditional nation-state system. *The Ordinary Seaman* critiques the idea of Western nation-states as independent and isolated, and instead represents that ideology as exhausted, ineffective, dwindling and in decline. Seen from this angle, Esteban's re-evaluation of his relationship to Nicaragua and New York broadens the debate of U.S. Central American subjectivity and calls for new meanings of national belonging. Esteban's conflict exposes the ontological structures of a damaging masculinist framework provoked by the Cold War, a characteristic that is specific to Central American diasporas. The militant persona elaborated in the homeland highlights the deep instabilities inherent in the modernization process, as it displaces its own populations both in the "home" and "host land".

The plight of a double displacement for U.S. Central Americans, within an oppressive nation-state regime, surfaces in Esteban's relationship with the rest of the crew that refuses to change their view and practices as they hold on to their old methods. In comparison to the rest of his companions, Esteban is the only one that manifests a sustained desire to contest his exclusion and search for an alternative form of belonging. After a few months of being marooned on the dock, Esteban decides to leave the ship in the middle of night. Prior to this decision, he and the crew had attempted to go into New York but were assaulted and robbed by youth gangs leaving them even more abandoned on the ship and wounding their sense of self. Unconvinced by Captain Elias claims that the ship will sail, Esteban leaves the ship again. Esteban's differentiation is figured in his distance from the crew and his efforts in (re) acquiring a sense of agency. While the rest of the crew engages in so-called masculine behavior, such as exchanging obscene sex

stories that allegedly happened to them, Esteban keeps his distance and remains a marginal figure in their circle. Except for Bernardo, the crew members are not that different from each other, as they are not accorded striking, or meaningful characteristics. They function as a counterpoint to Esteban and seldom occupy the foreground, or the reader's attention, representing U.S. Central Americans that remain out of public and social spaces. To a large extent they consist of stock characters, as is evidenced by their nicknames that they gave to each other based on their physical appearances, such as: El Cabezón, El Panzón, El Barbie and Roque (Balboa). As Esteban begins to make his way into New York, his views and military training comes to light.

Seeing that a conservative, destructive and militant masculinity led to Esteban's homelessness, the narrator mockingly undercuts this paradigm. In getting off the ship and exploring the pier, Goldman draws on the *Crónica de Indias* accounts from the colonial period that apply to Esteban's problematic views in two ways. First, this collection of writings was created under the context of conquest and expansion, precepts that Esteban operates under as former guerilla fighter. According to Mercedes Serna in *Crónicas de Indias* (2005), its creators were male explorers who presented themselves as admirable, praiseworthy heroes to the Spanish crown. Soldiers, sailors, and adventurers were motivated to write for fame, glory and honor, or in some cases a justification of their actions, such as Hernán Cortés in his *Segunda carta*. In this account, he paints the image of himself as a brave and capable military strategist courageously expanding the Spanish empire. Esteban radically departs from this self-aggrandizing, monologic elaboration of a male explorer. Just as important, *Crónica de Indias* narratives also included the question of a change in identity, as European soldiers engaged with communities, languages,

customs and practices they were not familiarized with earlier. Contrary to the masculine desire for order, comingling and convergence occurred. Situated in New York, and with subjects whose views and lifestyles differ radically from his, Esteban finds himself negotiating and confronting the tensions of his militarized subjectivity.

As a former, highly trained soldier who largely defines himself by his military status, Esteban's mishaps on the pier and in New York City contrast sharply with this inflated vision of himself. Far from being a capable guerilla, Esteban's entrance to New York is far from heroic. When introducing himself to the rest of the crew, Esteban proudly defines himself as a former BLI soldier (*los Batallones de Lucha Irregular*), a status that, according to him, commands immediate recognition. This branch of the *sandinista* military constituted an elite unit capable of engaging in combat despite the harshness of any environment. A deft and high degree mobility in any terrain is what characterized them, such as mountainous and jungle-like regions. As Esteban sets about exploring the pier, he comes across a warehouse filled with cargo with miscellaneous objects (men's underwear that is too small to wear, berries and a Parcheesi board game, to name a few) that he brings back to the crew. In one of these excursions he sees a truck driving slowly with live ducks in cages. As the crew has only been eating sardines and rice on the ship, Esteban is determined to hunt. The humorous scene undercuts the image of Esteban as a BLI soldier as he struggles to capture live ducks that quack loudly, flap their wings, bite his fingers and make him fall hard from the moving truck. Two men who drink in the pier serve to further undermine the image of Esteban's soldierly image as they laugh watching Esteban catch the ducks. When they ask Esteban where he's from and Esteban says "Soy Sandinista" they laugh even harder saying "...Watch out! Watch

out! Sandinista be comin...Ahwuuuu! Kill us all!”), adding a twist of irony to Esteban’s proud source of identity (199). Struggling to capture the ducks inevitably reminds Esteban of the military instruction that killed la Marta, as she too was a militant *sandinista*. Her death constitutes Esteban’s main source of torment as she died in combat under alleged precepts and discourses of “military art” elaborated by the left in the name of constructing a new state. As such Esteban reflects on a former, high-esteemed commander Milton who killed women and children during an attack, stripping him of his post. The narrator further undermines a prestigious military character when Esteban reflects on its limits of combat that parallel Milton’s: “Later they heard Milton had left the country and was in living in Miami working nighttime security guard in a perfume warehouse. A perfume warehouse? That’s where arte militar finally got Milton. Pues, at least it isn’t a Parcheesi warehouse.” (208).

In addition to the physicality of a soldier that the narrator subverts, Esteban’s hierarchically oriented relationship with women is also called into question. During one of his late-night excursions, Esteban manages to stay out until daybreak and comes across Joaquina, a young woman who hails from Mexico City that works as a manicurist. A conversation over the interpretation of a word serves as their introduction, but more importantly parallels a gray area in which Esteban stumbles as he is not sure how to conduct himself around her. Staring intently at a sign, Esteban tries to understand the meaning of a word used to describe a lost cat as olive green, or “aceituna”, a classification that disorients him. He ponders: “But olives can be black or green. If black olive, why list the cat’s color as olive and not black? And who’s ever heard of an olive green cat? !Tú güey!”. Joaquina’s interjection and brusque manner in attempting to

explain the nuances of the word perplexes Esteban, given that the concept is new to him. Their relationship follows the same pattern of disorientation and new references, on his part, as she offers him temporary work that consists of cleaning up the doorway of the salon where drunks urinate and leave their cigarettes and empty bottles. During the task of cleaning and after she invites him into the salon for warmth from the cold, Esteban's confusion intensifies. The former soldier is unfamiliar with a dynamic in which a woman supervises him and makes work-oriented decisions. His former sense of surety is further undermined by Joaquina's Mexico City inflected Spanish. Her consistent use of slang such as "chin(gado)", "friolín" and "Orale" frustrates him as he does not quite understand. The interaction brings to light the principles of masculine stability and certainty of meanings that Esteban no longer possesses. Simultaneously drawn to and disoriented by Joaquina, the narrator states: "He thinks, Bocona, mandona. He really doesn't like the way she speaks to him, mouthy, bossy, patronizing, eh." (214). As such during this first interaction he oscillates between distance, silence and a dismissive attitude towards her: "She's one of those chicas plásticas. Not the type that sees into your heart, your values, sees who you really are." (219). Gradually, Esteban's view towards Joaquina changes as she introduces him to a more egalitarian gender dynamic, as a transnational context challenges his understanding.

Just as a male soldier struggles taking orders from women, the narrator draws our attention to Esteban's interaction with gay men. From Esteban's homophobia, one can see that as a *sandinista* his engagement with homosexual communities was limited. Accordingly, the salon, as a place where an external change occurs (figured through new hair styles), serves as a setting where Esteban changes his attitude towards

homosexuality. His view towards the men who frequent the salon for manicures with Joaquina illustrates this point. Upon seeing the male clientele Esteban thinks: “Qué cosa, qué cosa. That macho prepotente getting a manicure first thing in the morning! (219)”. However, help from an unexpected character reconfigures Esteban’s traditional view.

The central figure that transforms Esteban’s views is Gonzalo, the owner of the salon. In terms of ideology, Gonzalo is Esteban’s stark opposite as he is a gay hairdresser that was excluded from a communist, masculinist Cuba. To subvert Esteban’s ways of thinking, the narrator again mocks Esteban. Interested in Joaquina, Esteban goes back to the salon to see her again but is uncomfortable with his homeless appearance and decides to wait for her outside. Contrary to Bernado’s (the old sailor) directives of being bold in order to court a woman, Esteban veers away from this model by not even entering the salon, indicating that masculine courage collapses in practice. Moreover, Esteban is threatened by Gonzalo when he first sees him through the window of the salon and mistakenly perceives him as a rival. Gonzalo’s attractive and virile appearance contrasts with Esteban’s own position as a homeless subject who stands outside waiting for Joaquina with a flower: “Gonzalo has shoulders as broad as an Olympic weightlifter’s under his white sweater, a waist as thin as a schoolgirl’s, and legs and nalgas so muscular they ripple and stretch his jeans... So, he thinks, Joaquina works in there with this cabrón, superwomanizer written all over him, eh?...That hijueputa even has emeralds for eyes! Straight, noble nose, lips ripe with self-love, no? His face reddens as Gonzalo aims his green, curious stare right at him. Suddenly he sees himself as Gonzalo must see him, pathetic and scrawny as a street orphan.” (236). Frustrated, Esteban heads into a Latino restaurant to wait for Joaquina. The humor in Esteban’s gross misreading of Gonzalo



comes to light when a waitress informs Esteban that Gonzalo is gay, and that there's no need to see him as a rival for Joaquina, mockingly undermining any militant dynamic of competition.

Rather than a rival, Gonzalo is the central figure that offers support and shelter to Esteban by buying him clothes and letting him sleep in the salon, instead of spending anymore nights on the *Urus*. Gonzalo's generosity knows no bounds as he goes one step further by cutting Esteban's hair without charging him so that the newly arrived sailor can be presentable to a potential employer. Gonzalo's actions quietly have their impact on Esteban and the militant, masculinist rhetoric that did not yield results in Nicaragua, and is further disrupted in a transnational context. If Esteban would have maintained a homophobic disposition, as the sailors on the *Urus* do, it would have served as a hindrance to his settlement process in New York. Gonzalo's assistance calls attention to Esteban's renegotiation of masculinity: "Esteban...says nothing: It's as if he's completely overlooked all the implication of being in the United States. What, he's going to have to betray old War Gods to stay in this country with Joaquina? Vos, now that the world is changing, he's going to have to figure out on his own what should stay the same, no?" (267).

Esteban's ongoing mediation of his masculine identity is also figured in terms of the troubled relationship between Elias and Mark, the alleged captains of the *Urus*. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator brings us closer to the interaction between these two characters and their dysfunction. The limits of Elias and Mark's male identities that correspond to an outdated nation-state system surfaces in three ways: 1) their failed enterprise of reviving the *Urus* through corrupt methods, 2) the domination and

oppression of the Central American crew and 3) their own contentious relationship oriented around a hypersexuality.

Akin to the crew, Mark and Elias find themselves as stagnant, given that despite their middle-class backgrounds they see themselves as un-accomplished as they have not been economically successful. After graduating from college, both men see themselves as living in the shadow of the women that surround them. Despite presenting himself as a wealthy maritime magnate, Mark is aware that his wealthy wife, Kate Mueroy, supports him economically. Kate is a well-respected and established photographer who also works as a professor. On his part, Mark lives miserably, given that his girlfriend left him, and aside of the inheritance money that he invests in the *Urus*, is lonely and unaffluent. The narrator mockingly highlights Mark's economic immobility by comparing to him to his sister, Linda, who despite her limits ascended considerably. On account of having polio, one of her legs is longer than the other, making her walk with what the narrator comedically describes as a pirate limp. Moreover, Linda is not setback by foul rumors regarding her sexuality and manages to become a surgeon. In comparison to the women in their lives, Elias and Mark are ineffectual. As such, Elias has the idea of buying an old cargo ship (the *Urus*) and reusing it to smuggle cargo, a backwards plan that is undergirded on his traditional precepts of male behavior that foments uncalculated risk.

As such, the appropriation of the *Crónica* genre comes to the forefront with Elias who presents himself as a hyper-masculine, adventurous explorer that contrasts with Mark's sensitive and quiet demeanor. Elias is defined by constructing the image of a middle-class, cosmopolitan subject, given that he hails from a Mexican-British family and studied navigation in Mexico before arriving to New York. He and Mark met in

college, and eventually form a (conflictive, paternal) friendship, as Elias constantly reproaches for his interaction with women that Elias deems as graceless. Physically beaten by his father, the quiet Mark develops a new identity in college as a sympathetic resident adviser, but quickly feels himself overshadowed by Elias, who performs a hyper-masculinity. Although situated in upstate New York, Elias walks barefoot in the winter and refuses to use a jacket. He breaks the rules of the residence hall and challenges Mark's authority by blasting Mexican bolero music in the evening and drinking tequila. A hyperbolic sexuality is the main area that bothers Mark, as Elias sleeps with many of the women in their dormitory, cultivating the image of a carefree seducer and conqueror of women.

One summer, Elias takes Mark on a trip to rural South America, as Elias aspires to open a tourist hotel and establish a medicinal plant business in the Amazon. With its burlesque tone, the description of the trip is one of the most striking passages in the novel, seeing that it reads like a *Crónica de Indias* as Elias establishes a new relationship with an autochthonous subject, who the narrator jeeringly names Cumpashín. Although written in Spanish, phonetically the name evokes the English word compassion, mocking a view of pity adopted by colonial explorers towards the Other. Throughout the long-winded description, Cumpashín introduces Elias and Mark to his children named Thriller and Elvis demystifying and ridiculing any sense of wonder with the Amazon. As Elias defines himself as a skilled practitioner of homeopathic medicine, he and Cumpashín engage in curing a man's gallbladder pain with a stone.

Elias and Mark's past comes to the forefront in relation to their subjugation of the Central American crew on the *Urus*. The oldest of the sailors on the *Urus*, Bernardo, by

accident severely burns himself while cooking and eventually dies from the untreated wound. In this context, the function of the Cumpashín episode contrasts sharply with Elias' view of himself as a healer and his indifference to Bernardo's life-threatening burn. To not get caught for illicitly hiring a crew of undocumented Central Americans, Elias refuses to take Bernardo to the hospital. Instead, he mildly cleans the wound and gives Bernardo a homeopathic medicine and tells him to rest, a laughable treatment that yields indignation. In this context, Elias' Biblical name gains significance as he is named after a prophet capable of miracles, a characteristic reflected in his dog's name "Miracle" that he brings to the ship during his sporadic visits. Yet, Elias falls considerably short of carrying out any miraculous deeds in dire moments. Instead, Bernardo's life-threatening injury and the impossibility of resurrecting the long-deceased Urus, signals Elias ineffectual masculinity and, akin to Esteban, targets him as non-functional. Elias also falls short of saving Bernardo. Despite his immediate dislike for the older sailor, Bernardo serves as a father figure for Esteban, given that he urged him to get off the ship and pursue Joaquina. The sailor's death serves as a catalyst for a change in both Elias and Esteban. The novel closes with an open ending that suggests a change in Esteban and Elias' masculine and non-functional ways of operating. After a sea visitor discovers the crew, Esteban never returns to the ship, and Elias's wife has a newborn son, whose presence suggests that Elias is willing to be an upright father and husband.

The title of the novel reflects failed nation-state building projects and the necessary reformulation of a hyperbolic and tired performance of masculine identity that undergirds them. Rather than the ordinary sailors, seafarers or mariners, the word seaman (that sounds like semen) has vulgar and irreverent connotations. Despite Esteban proudly

defining himself as an elite BLI soldier and Elias presenting himself as a shipping magnate, both men ascribe to masculine principles that left them with waste symbolized by the Urus. The heroic images they cultivated of themselves are underlined by the harsh conditions of homelessness that lead to Bernardo's death. At the same time, the hope for building a more hybrid and alternative nation-state that extends a genuine sense of home, that makes room for Central American diasporas is also articulated in the technical definition of the term "Ordinary Sailors". It describes those new sailors who just started the profession and find themselves at a threshold, at a transition period as they can undertake a new role and male identity to challenge their homelessness in the new host land.

**Chapter 4: A House is not a Home: Patriarchy, Borderlands and Redefining National Family in *Frontera Street***

What was once thought of as a border, that which delimits and bounds, is a highly populated site, if not the very definition of the nation, confounding identity in what may well become a very auspicious direction.  
-Judith Butler (2004)

The previous chapters of this study attend largely to masculine subject positions that reframe the question of home within a transnational context. Among these narratives penned by male authors two features are consistently at the forefront: homeless, battered bodies, and the loss, or emergence of a new, female partner. This pairing suggests that the reconstruction of an alternative national home for Central Americans is consolidated through a politics of desire as establishing a new relationship leads to the start and promise of a new life. Indeed, in the closing scene of Villatoro's third installment of the detective series, *A Venom Beneath the Skin*, a homeless Rafael Murrillo has survived torture and is near death before detective Chacón comes to his aid. In the same fashion, Tobar's and Goldman's soldiers and sailors have been physically assaulted and suffered the brutal conditions imposed on their bodies as they have lacked shelter and weathered cold weather, hunger and a lack of hygiene. As these novels contest fixed ideas of national territory and inclusion, the representation of national homelessness for U.S.

Central Americans expresses itself in terms of physically assaulted bodies, harsh environmental conditions and, most tellingly, armed battles. As such, quests for the reconstruction of home are plotted around competition, rivalry, and the recovery of honor as is evidenced in these novels where men productively reevaluate the notion of home, and their subjectivities in new, transnational settlements. A destructive drive, encoded in male aggressive actions against others, is a central characteristic that defines heterosexual masculine subjects' desire to reconstruct new communities in the U.S.

Concomitant with this impulse for confrontation with others and a questioning of masculinity among these male, solitary subjects is the loss and fruition of love. In all of the previous novels a string of broken and new romantic partnerships emerge that include the following: Rafael Murillo and Romilia Chacón (Romilia Chacón crimes series), Antonio and Elena Bernal (*The Tattooed Soldier*), Guillermo Longoria and Joaquina Peralta (*The Tattooed Soldier*), Esteban Gaitán and Joaquina Gonzalez (*The Ordinary Seaman*). Despite these sentimental yearnings for a partner, to a large extent the subjects in these novels are withdrawn figures who undergo changes in their subjectivities and search for a new community by themselves. In these narratives the lone, fearless and unaccompanied male subject engages in the revision of a national home. This pattern in the previous novels leads one to ask, are there other ways to reconstruct a sense of place and new communal ties? Are there other visions that do not include physical battles to re-establish one's footing in a new environment? To answer these questions, I turn to Tanya Maria Barrientos' *Frontera Street* (2002). She is to date the only Guatemalan-American female novelist and her novels have gone understudied, largely because they are at first sight conventional and non-experimental in form, but more importantly because she is an

anomaly that frustrates national and ethnic classifications. As a Guatemalan-American, she writes about Chicanas, or put in another way, identifies with them, dissolving any differences between Latino/a categories. These cross-associations regardless of ethnicity and nationality are the cornerstone of *Frontera Street* as they provide a way for building a new national community built on collaboration and interconnectedness among Chicanas and Anglo women.

In comparison to the preceding chapters of this study, Barrientos' debut novel *Frontera Street* (2001) veers away from a masculine archetype and approach, given that transnational migration along with the vision and construction of a new home is a project also undertaken considerably by women. Rather than rebuilding a new home through a bellicose dynamic, in *Frontera Street* female homeless subjects' drive to reconstruct a new home rests on a dynamic of collaboration and friendship. Although the social positions of the characters differ in terms of nationality, culture and class, Barrientos highlights solidarity and interculturality. As such, in this closing chapter I contend that these subjects' crises of homelessness coincide with national crises of identity at large, as a dominant Anglo imaginary finds itself dislocated by the influx and visibility of expanding Latino/a communities in the U.S. This growing body of Central American immigrants challenges a dominantly White imaginary, and its uneven relations of power imposed upon newly arrived, working-class Brown populations. I argue that homeless female characters effect this negotiation of the nation within the site of the family. These women reconfigure a national family by rejecting the presence of a patriarchal father-figure, and paternalistic ideologies that do not respect difference and diversity, deployed by privileged White female characters in *Frontera Street*. To this end, *Frontera Street*



highlights that far from being consolidated, national and cultural identity finds itself deeply unsettled. Barrientos figures this national anxiety through subjects' re-evaluation of home and a redefinition of family that threads Anglo and Mexican women together, placing them at the center of this debate.

Just as important, while the previous novelists' approached homelessness exclusively from the perspective of the displaced Central American subject, Barrientos opts for an inversion of this arrangement by placing an upper-class, Anglo-European subject in the position of homelessness who seeks refuge in a Chicana community. This reversal of subject positions is significant as it raises a long history of unequal power relations between the U.S. and Mexico that is characterized by subjugation and exclusion. Particularly, Brown populations that remained in what became U.S. territory and those that came afterwards were denied paths to economic opportunity and forced to occupy a liminal position within White American society. As a response to this exclusion, Barrientos maneuver is to unsettle this post-colonial and unequal power relationship, albeit without her own shortcomings.

In this sense, *Frontera Street* gains significance as the trope of homelessness and seeks to affect a cultural and societal transformation tied to the power struggle oriented around national belonging. In Barrientos' novel, subject positions of homelessness provoke the dissolution of territorial, national and cultural divisions, creating a space for excluded Brown women. In this case, the disintegration of divisions in a border town in Texas corresponds to a (post) colonial legacy of subordination figured in terms of an abusive employer-servant relationship and the ambiguous relationship that it produces among these subjects that renegotiate their sense of home. Despite the abusive memories

of former households, Barrientos suggests a reconciliation between subjects that complicates and undermines the colonizer-colonized dyad. She does so by foregrounding the structural inequalities that women, both Anglo and Latina, confront in their original homes. In this sense, Barrientos' narrative twist's aim is twofold as it places a culturally dominant subject as an outsider who also suffers from a sudden loss of community, a painful rupture that leads her to find solace and support among working-class, Chicanas. This reversal of subjects' positions does not mean remaining within a binary-oriented view of Anglo and Latino/a as separate cultural units, but instead incites a negotiation, an ongoing process of reconciliation and a re-elaboration of national identity and family. The complex and undefined relationship between two allegedly opposed women is central as it suggests another construction of the U.S. that situates Brown Latinas as integral to the national imaginary.

Drawing on Chandra Talapade Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003) precepts on Third World Feminism's focus on decolonization, I do not operate under the assumption of "women" as a stable and monolithic category. In my analysis of Barrientos' narrative, I focus on the stark differences in class and ethnicity between the two female protagonists that creates a highly ambiguous, unequal relationship - one that constitutes the central conflict as these women rebuild a new family. While a chief focus of the novel is to challenge phallogocentric and paternalistic principles for structuring family, the complex relationship between women also undermines a male-female binary. Class and racial differences among female characters also drive these same characters to engage in damaging colonial practices of domination that drive working-class Brown women out of the household and

into precarious positions of homelessness. Similarly, White women's interventions to provide well-intentioned, but mistaken assistance to racialized and lower-class struggling women also produces harm as it divides families and further troubles psyches. In addition to violent rejections occasioned by fathers, it is also these benevolent, but troubling interventions by privileged women used to reconstruct a new home that *Frontera Street* frames, contests and looks to heal from.

In this light, what fundamentally characterizes *Frontera Street* is the relationship between young, banished, female subjects, who are antithetical in terms of nationality, ethnicity and class, yet come together to reconstruct an intercultural family, community and an amenable place to call home. Underlying their quest, Barrientos addresses a larger social and racial anxiety of U.S. identity that despite official accounts is in the process of change on account of a Latino/a presence. Her preferred site to stage this cultural transformation is within the family as this social unit mandates who will form the nation and will remain outside of it. Susan Strehle comments in *Transnational Women's Fiction: Unsettling Home and Homeland* (2008), nations and homelands are often constructed around narratives of the family with the intent of having stories of home reflect stories of nation (3). Drawing on the work of Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), Strehle highlights that the trope of the familial unit creates a hierarchy rendered as natural that renders subordinate women and children within domestic spaces, denying them any sense of national agency (3). In other words, the home and family are undergirded by a patriarchal foundation that dictates women's roles within the nation, and, by extension, falls short of its alleged promise of security, equality and belonging for all citizens. Extending this

same line of thought, in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996) Avtar Brah notes that home for women functions simultaneously as a place of safety and of terror. In their homes, ambivalence and a tenuousness mark their sense of belonging, given that if they deviate from the gendered expectations and demands laid upon them, they are stigmatized and banned from the family. Brah posits that the family system that rests on a patriarchal ideology secures the subordinate position of women within the household (76). From this angle, the traditional framework and daily practice of family is an ambiguous terrain as female subjects long for belonging, but not at the cost of a perpetual submission. *Frontera Street* interrogates and challenges this tradition of national narratives, given that it highlights patriarchal relations both in Mexico and the U.S. that impose constraints upon female subjects', provoking their condition of homelessness.

For displaced women that deviate from social scripts of conduct elaborated by patriarchal thought, the family is associated with ambivalent memories, suggesting the need to reformulate this unit. I argue in this chapter that despite the stressful conditions that familial repudiation provokes, it also offers a potential for the re-evaluation and the revision of dominant views for national identity. Within this spirit, *Frontera Street* advances a feminist and intercultural view of the U.S. that incorporates dispossessed female subjects through a transformative politics produced by the sudden loss of community and the mourning of familial bonds. Such a politics serves as a starting point to suggest a reformulation and redefinition of a national "we", seeing that it brings together subjects whose class and cultural backgrounds differ considerably. As Judith Butler posits in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), loss and

vulnerability extend us the possibility to reimagine our definition of political community (19). In Barrientos' novel, subjects suffer from the sudden loss of their families and communities. Daughters from separate spheres of society, mourn deceased loved ones, absent partners, distant parents and broken familial units that together result in a painful departure from their original homes.

Such dislocation leads them to go outside of their immediate boundaries, represented by the long-standing, class and racial divisions in an allegorical U.S. - Mexico border town, and enter new social territories. As apparently antithetical subjects engage with each other, they re-establish new bonds in order to reconcile a post-colonial relationship based on servitude, patriarchal law, and banishment. Taken together, these structures marginalize women's agency within the home, and by extension, their role in constructing and transforming the nation.

How does Barrientos articulate her vision of a transcultural U.S? How does she establish new communal ties between women who find themselves on alleged opposite fronts? I insist that Barrientos' strategy lies in the exploration of troubled and intercultural memories related to the home and family. This return to their pasts facilitates an interaction of mutual understanding among women from different statuses who share the same outcome of communal dislocation. As such, the construction of a new home coincides with revisiting painful memories of original homes and national foundation. Young displaced women remember the unequal power structures that subjugated, tormented and ultimately forced them to flee. This preoccupation with the past that I chart, also leads me to claim that the relationship between home, memory and a new vision of the U.S. is a prominent feature in the novel. Consequently, I propose that the

necessity to reimagine national community is figured in memories of abandonment by significant others, recollections of oppressive patriarchs and matriarchs, the recovery of unread letters and gaps of knowledge in one's identity. Confronting these painful histories is what guides characters to establish new synergistic ties that also helps them acknowledge each other's torment occasioned in the home. Accordingly, together these marginalized women construct an alternative community in the borderlands. Writing on the topic of national belonging, Anne Kuhn notes in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (2002) that addressing scenes of memory adds up to an impetus towards fusion, not fragmentation (168). As such, in *Frontera Street* these harmful memories of familial disintegration drive subjects to invest themselves in the reconstitution of family and place. In this process, women from different cultures and social classes come into contact as together they quest for a new form of social union based on solidarity and reciprocity.

### **Memory and Borderland Theoretical Approaches**

In my approach to *Frontera Street* I use Memory and Border frameworks as both approaches engage in the enterprise of redefining national identity, particularly for diasporic women such as Barrientos whose narrative voice has gone unrecognized. In *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home* (2005), Vijay Agnew argues that encountering our troublesome memories intersect with the place(s) that we call 'home'(3). As the female subjects in *Frontera Street* often remember their painful pasts, or find themselves perpetually caught in it, they engage in a power struggle that reveals their collective need to constitute part of the national community. In doing so, feminist voices underscore the material and symbolic struggle against patriarchies (Hua 202).

Barrientos constitutes one of these feminist voices as she seeks to promote agency to subjugated (Brown) within the context of the Southwestern U.S. by exploring their complex memories of family. Despite the class, ethnic and cultural differences among the characters, the central characteristic that binds all the protagonists are their recollections of being abandoned and socially rejected by their families. However, their histories of painful exclusion from the family that results in a state of homelessness is oriented towards the transformation of the present and the reconstruction of a new community. Seen from this angle, remembrance in *Frontera Street* by marginalized women functions as an overlooked archive that challenges a dominant patriarchal ideology for national community (Hua 202). As such, Barrientos' characters' troubled and complex memories of homelessness and dislocation coincides with rewriting dominant notions of national home and belonging. Indeed, the exploration of their pasts suggests a desire to heal and recover and engage in an alternative construction of community situated at border spaces that foment new social interactions.

Borders and spaces that foreground interactions between subjects that have been separated yield a possibility for social transformation. These relationships can bring about new concepts and practices, concealed by dominant accounts, and instead emphasize reciprocity and cooperation. As the epigraph of this chapter indicates, borders are highly contested terrains that, rather than being the hegemonic norm, highlight the exact opposite. According to Butler, borders foreshadow and announce the central tendencies of the nation and its cultural shifts. Set precisely in a symbolic border town in Texas, Barrientos' narrative underscores crossings and multi-directionality, both nationally and culturally, for those that engage in the construction of an alternative definition of home.

In this light, Barrientos' work partially coincides with borderland, feminist frameworks for rewriting traditional notions of national and cultural membership, particularly the ones advanced by Gloria Anzaldúa.

In her seminal text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2007) Anzaldúa elaborates the multiple forms of dispossession for Brown, lesbian women that originates from their homes and extends into their so-called communities. On account of these inhospitable environments she imagines a different vision of national community that undermines an Anglo, Mexican, Indigenous and sexually oriented divisions, opting for a feminist construction or synthesis of these cultural units, unsettling binary-oriented thought. How do these precepts elaborated by Anzaldúa apply to Barrientos fiction? Anzaldúa's paradigm challenges fixed cultural lines that also mediates the cultural dyad of Anglo-Latino/a from a feminist perspective, one that particularly applies to women of color. Both Anzaldúa and Barrientos highlight an ambivalent relationship between Anglo and Latino/a subjects that has its roots in a colonial structure. As a working-class, Mesoamerican woman of color Anzaldúa underscores the precarious position of women who fall under this classification.

Just as important, both Anzaldúa and Barrientos find themselves caught in a web of male-dominated structures both in the dominant culture and their own. Mexican and Chicano cultures often subordinate women within the household, relegating them to a subservient and passive role while men, in response their own daily subordination by dominant society, claim a commanding role in the presence of their partners and children. If women deviate from these scripts laid upon them by the head of the household, they are cast out of the family and denied communal support. Deviations from social scripts is



precisely what provokes homelessness for one of the central characters in *Frontera Street*. In much the same way, Anzaldúa describes a complicated relationship with the home (culture) as women live in a constant fear of losing it and of being rejected by their clan if they reject their lesser place.

Away from their immediate culture, Brown women contend with a punishing racism that limits their social mobility and casts them in low paying positions, such as live-in maids or employment in the garment industry (the same exact conditions that Barrientos' work describes in detail). From this position of marginality, Anzaldúa elaborates a counter stance deemed as a "mestiza consciousness" that looks to dismantle gendered and national classifications built upon a hetero-masculine order, an order that has little room for those groups that represent a cultural and national change. Subsequently, contradiction and ambiguity occupy a central position in her paradigm, questioning the validity of a monocultural and mono-national archetype as a hybrid subjectivity stretches beyond an Anglo-Mexican binary. Similarly, in *Frontera Street* an allegorical U.S.-Mexico border town that threatens the stability of these cultural categories then comes to be highly influential as it foreshadows a shift in rethinking national membership. For Brown women that have been subjected, Anzaldúa's theoretical insights places them at the forefront of a political project that legitimizes their cultural difference.

Mary Louise Pratt shares with Anzaldúa a need to disrupt a (gendered) racial hierarchy that subordinates the cultural Other and women, particularly within territories that function as borders. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Pratt examines the process by which Europe constructed itself as the center of civilization and

positioned non-European societies as the Other, specifically within the context of the Americas. She challenges this dominant view by underscoring a series of travel writings during Latin America's colonial period that undermine European narrative authority. They do so by appropriating common tropes of representation, ironizing them and infusing them with indigenous culture. The collection of texts that Pratt explores disturbs the master discourse of Europe as separate from colonized communities, challenging any clear dichotomy. Instead, she details a continuous and spontaneous interaction between the 'explorer' and the 'explored' that finds itself undergirded by an asymmetrical relation of power. This point is of particularly important in *Frontera Street* as the relationship between Chicanas and wealthy Anglos rests on an unequal power structure that binds together subjects who were separated by territory, ethnicity and class, but now find themselves interacting and living in each other's presence. Going one step further, in Barrientos' fiction not only do they interact, but depend on each other for communal support and to challenge their circumstances of being homeless. In the novel gender oppressive conditions prove to be more significant than class and ethnic privileges.

These instances and encounters between subjects that have been separated before allow Pratt to advance the concept of "contact zones" which she describes as: "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination - like colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today." (4). With respect to *Frontera Street*, an existing unequal power structure gains significance as it continues to reverberate in U.S.-Mexico border where a post-colonial dynamic of uneven exchanges and suppressions continue. In response to the asymmetrical relationship, the contact zone

presents a shift in power relations as it entails a transformative exchange that marks both parties, undercutting any alleged, clear distinction between them. For Pratt, the operative term is “contact”, as opposed to an interaction characterized by unfairness and remoteness, underscoring an unconscious change that takes place altering both groups’ identities:

“By using the term “contact”, I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters. A “contact” perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other..., not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices....” (7)

Relations that highlight proximity and collaboration are a fundamental characteristic in Barrientos’ fiction, given that they draw our attention to a complex and processual interaction between dominant White society and subordinated communities of color in the Southwest. Not only does she draw attention to this relationship, but reimagines and re-inscribes relations of domination, dissolving any clear divisions between disparate sectors of society. Specifically, Barrientos imagines a mutual healing process, a reorientation of society based on solidarity and cooperation and an identification as women.

In her elaboration of the “contact zone” in colonial travel writing, Pratt acknowledges the gender imbalance between male and female aristocrats that found themselves in the Americas. While men of high social standing had the opportunity to move freely in the Americas without any social restraint, women, in contrast found themselves subjugated to stay within the confines of the household and urban spaces. As Pratt showed, Flora Tristan and Maria Graham managed to challenge these limits, however, by coming actively interacting with locals and recognizing their economic

plights, despite stark class and cultural differences. What's more, such interactions underscored emancipation for women and laborers, seeing that female narrative accounts share the preoccupation of reorganizing society along peaceful, harmonious and cooperative lines (156).

Of primary importance in Tristan's and Graham's writings are what Pratt calls the concept and practice of the "feminitopia". Both narrative voices spotlight women in the Americas that openly participate in activities typically carried out by men, such as militant battle. To do so, these figures develop cultural strategies, such as inventing and wearing specific types of non-traditional attire, that enabled them to participate in areas of public life that Tristan and Graham understood as prohibited to women. Furthermore, these figures that Tristan and Graham find intriguing also managed to construct private spaces of sisterhood within the home that undermine, and if not all together did away with a male presence. The "feminitopia" they elaborate in their writings hone in on episodes that showcase sisterhood, female autonomy and empowerment, thus openly challenging social conventions of the time and disrupting an unequal power relationship. These narrative accounts foreground the involvement, resolve and enfranchisement of women within burgeoning nations. However, Pratt underlines that despite the admiration and exemplary conduct Tristan and Graham document among women in the Americas, a Eurocentric framework continues to frame their observations rendering their subjects as "backwards" and in need of correction. Both accounts stress the lack of education or "proper" socialization in the women that they gaze at, thus marking a difference in social status and maintaining the onlookers' position of power and distance.

Within a borderlands, post-colonial context, Barrientos' narration exhibits similar characteristics of Pratt's "feminitopia" as a group of marginalized women contest gender scripts imposed upon them by participating in commerce and displacing the father-figure from the family. In the process, they challenge male-dictated templates for their conduct that limit their role in both the public and familial spheres. As characters challenge these strictures, they claim their role and position within the national imaginary and reconstitute U.S. national-cultural identity that incorporates Chicana culture without subsuming it. While they develop an intercultural sisterhood in this process, they also engage with axes of class and ethnicity. However, as a wealthy-Anglo widow interacts with working-class Chicanas, Barrientos' understanding of ethnicity and class to a large extent remain intact, problematizing her "feminitopia" and the disruption of an Anglo-Latina binary. Irreflexive of class and ethnic privilege among her characters, Barrientos' definition of feminism does not consider her widow's privileges as a wealthy, Anglo woman that can move freely between different sectors of society while Brown characters' lack this mobility. Furthermore, Barrientos romanticizes and idealizes Chicana women, indicating an ideology that maintains binary and cultural poles.

Despite these conceptual oversights, *Frontera Street* serves as a site that foregrounds a tense Anglo-Latina relationship to one characterized by a two-way juncture that challenges a post-colonial politics of control and subordination for women conditioned to passivity in the household and in public. At the heart of Barrientos' fiction is a relationship of cooperation and harmony for women that have abruptly lost their homes, families and communities. Through their own construction of a "feminitopia", they challenge the condition of homelessness that is enacted by adolescent and young

women that have been rejected by their fathers, abandoned and left pregnant by deceptive partners and recently widowed. Consequently, these characters find themselves at a transition as they move outside of their cultural and class conditioning that situates them in an in-between, undefined and liberatory space.

### **Third World Feminism, New Definitions of Latino/a Literature and a New Reading of *Frontera Street***

To be positioned in an undefined zone is also what characterizes Barrientos' literary corpus. Strict classification of her work and producing scholarship on it seems to be a challenge for fellow scholars as her novels remain largely understudied and undertheorized. I am inclined to postulate that Barrientos' writings have gone uncommented, particularly her debut novel *Frontera Street* is due to a couple of reasons that include 1) her uncritical view of feminism that does not engage with Third World Feminists' frameworks that critique White privilege and 2) traditional definitions of Latino/a literature that guide most critics' analyses.

In *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1983) Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga compile a collection of writings that critique Anglo-American feminists that fall short of including women of color. The voices in this anthology call into a question the inherent and unconscious discrimination of an Anglicized feminism that goes along without registering a multiplicity of ethnicities, such as African, Native and Asian American perspectives that simultaneously grapple with patriarchies from several cultures. A case and point would be a Hmong-American woman caught up in White-male patriarchy within the workplace coupled with a Hmong patriarchy within the home. Just as important, class differences figure prominently in

Anzaldúa's and Moraga's texts as women of color also contend with the economic hardships that distances them from social circles inhabited by middle-class, White women. In signaling these markers of difference, Third World Feminism calls attention to the significant problem of a so-called liberal feminist discourse that excludes Brown, Asian, Native-American and Black women's subject-positions. To recognize a wider plurality of voices, the writings in *This Bridge Called my Back* highlights White women's lack of reflexivity towards racialized women, and by extension, White feminist's exclusion and subordination of these subjects. Daris Davenport's essay "The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin", for instance, identifies a latent vulnerability that Anglo women have of men and project that oppression on to women of color as a superiority complex.

Being a woman of color is no guarantee that one engages in the critiques Third World Feminism advances and this is the case with Barrientos. In her narrative she works under the framework of dominant feminism that does not entirely recognize ethnic differences and power imbalances between an Anglo widow and racialized Chicanas as they construct a "feminitopia" in the borderlands. Barrientos' definition of feminism proceeds without factoring in ethnicity as a category that fractures a hegemonic, Anglo women feminist discourse. For Barrientos' feminism is driven by a biological essentialism, rather than by cultural constructs of race and ethnicity that she does not fully explore. In not recognizing ethnic differences that are bound to power, *Frontera Street* steers away from staging ethnic tensions that systematically disrupt Anglo-Latina poles, rendering her national vision suspect. Despite their different ethnicities, Barrientos' conceptualizes her characters as identical and reciprocal. Yet, her characters'

privileges, or lack thereof them, contradict this view. A wealthy, White widow, one of her main characters, remains unreflective of her privilege as she moves freely between Anglo and Chicana circles. While, on the other, in the backdrop of a racist border town, the Chicana characters proceed cautiously and with limits as they are rejected from monied, Anglo circles.

The second reason why most critics have not explored *Frontera Street* is because they have operated under a traditional understanding of Latino/a literature. The most common tendencies have been to accept that Latino/a voices focus on Brown, working-class subjects exclusively within their own communities. Recent studies however unsettle these once dominant understandings of the Latino/a writing and, by extension, the construct itself. Marta Caminero-Santangelo's *On Latinidad: U.S. Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity* (2007) questions the alleged cohesiveness and pan ethnicity of the term "Latino", given that Latino/a authors tend to write mainly about their own ethnicities. For instance, the Dominican-American novelist Junot Díaz strictly writes about the Dominican diaspora in the U.S. As such, readers and critics of Latino/a literature expect to hear a credible and "authentic" voice of an ethnic community. In contrast to this tendency that has become the most practiced approach, Caminero-Santangelo, explores Latino/a writings that focus on interconnections and overlaps among different Latino/a groups. For instance, in Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier*, her attention is on the dynamic between Guatemalans and Mexicans, rather than expressly on Guatemalan subjects. In this way, Caminero-Santangelo challenges the assumption that Latino/a novelists are attached to and representatives of their country of origin.



Similarly, in *Latinx Literature Unbound: Undoing Ethnic Expectation* (2018), Ralph Rodríguez challenges the meaning of Latino/a literature as it pegs and limits authors to their respective ethnic communities, origins and preoccupations. To distance himself from this conception, Rodríguez homes in on Latino/a writers that defy and frustrate critics expectations and national classifications of Latino/a literature. For instance, in the second chapter of his study, Rodríguez centers his analysis on authors that highlight the slipperiness, impurity and in-betweenness of authorial identity. A case in point is Eduardo Halfon, given that his transnational upbringing and literary content radically undermine cultural and national identity as a fundamental marker of Latino/a. Of Guatemalan descent, Halfon came to the U.S. as a child, returned to Guatemala after his undergraduate studies, lived in Spain and now resides back in the U.S. Coupled with a constant shuttling between countries, his novels, such as *The Polish Boxer* (2008) situates the reader in locales outside of the U.S. or Spanish speaking countries. More importantly, according to Rodríguez, Halfon further contests authorial, cultural authenticity as he blends his protean identity with that of his narrator, blurring any clear lines between the two.

It is with Rodríguez' and Caminero-Santangelo's questioning and redefinition of Latino/a literature that I approach Barrientos' *Frontera Street* as a novelist of Guatemalan origin debut novel does not concentrate on Guatemalans in the U.S., but on the interaction between Anglo, Mexican and Chicana women, subjects that collectively reevaluate the concept of a national family. I am convinced that not writing about Guatemalan communities is one reason that has kept most critics from analyzing *Frontera Street* as Barrientos challenges readings that are based on strict national

classifications. Instead, she highlights cross-identifications and ethnic lines that dissolve as she writes about Chicana and Anglo interactions. She also presents a disorienting variance among the previous Central American writers on account of her background. Barrientos hails from a middle-class family of Guatemalan parents who grew up in El Paso, Texas and distant from any large Central American communities. Moreover, unlike the previous novelists that migrated constantly to Guatemala and El Salvador or created ties with their parents' country of origin, Barrientos did not. Nevertheless, as Barrientos engages in this enterprise of unsettling the construct of Latino/a, *Frontera Street* also shares the same dominant feature of the preceding novels. In other words, a dispossessed newcomer searches for a home and community against the backdrop of an unwelcoming environment. Barrientos does so through a genre that has been dismissed.

Although she has penned two novels, *Frontera Street* (2002) and *Family Resemblances* (2003) published by New American Library, a division of Penguin Books, critique on Barrientos works is scant. Arturo Arias in "Epicentro: The Emergence of New Central American - American Literature" and Ana Patricia Rodriguez "Central American U.S. Latinos" briefly mention Barrientos as a U.S. Central American novelist, but do not center their analysis on any of her novels, leading us to a gap on any critical readings of her work. Not until recently has there been any scholarly mention of her work, given that *Family Resemblances* deals with Guatemala's armed conflict during the end of the twentieth century, it figures in a chapter of *Espectros: Ghostly Hauntings in Contemporary Transhispanic Narrative* (2016) edited by Alberto Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda L. Peterson. *Frontera Street* also occupies a slim space in *The Routledge Concise History Latino/a Literature* (2013) as Frederick Luis Aldama classifies it as new

Latino/a form of lowbrow literature titled “chica-lit”, a formulaic romance genre that focuses on Latina characters, families and heritage (129).

In *Latino/a Literature in the Classroom: Twenty-First-Century Approaches to Teaching* (2015), Tace Hedrick expands on Aldama’s definition of the genre. She asserts that “chica-lit” complicates conventional interpretations of Latino/a literature that largely focus on first-generation immigrant, working-class characters and their subjectivities. In contrast, works deemed as “chica-lit” privilege second-generation, middle-class lifestyles, values and habits, particularly those of young Latinas (202). In doing so, the genre complicates dominant representations of Latinos as economically disadvantaged communities by introducing the category of class. As such, “Chica-lit” constitutes a body of works penned by self-identified, and assimilated Latinas that underscore “style” as a characteristic that defines their female characters (202). By “style” Ticks refers not only to clothing and accessories, but also language usage and values. In *Chica Lit: Popular Latina Fiction and Americanization in the Twenty-First Century* (2015) Hedrick also claims that the central tension in these works is how materially successful and culturally assimilated personages maintain their “Latina-ness” and “American-ness”, Consequently, an ethnic crisis finds itself at the center of these novels (xii). The conflict often resolves itself through the attainment of both romantic and professional success. According to Ticks, this narrative structure keeps chica-lit outside the field of Latino/a Studies as scholars see it as a commercial strategy and literature with “lite” content.

On the surface, this body of fiction asserts integration into the middle-class, consumption and upward mobility as exercised by young Latinas who are looking to enjoy their Americanized lives. However, Hedrick argues that just because these

novelists do not highlight an explicit political struggle does not mean that the genre does not engage in challenging and revising how Latino/a is represented. Restricted by the demands of the market that demand raced commentary to a minimum, and the dominant racial ideology to be left intact, Chica-lit finds itself limited in explicitly voicing opposition. Those conditions do not exclude the possibility that the genre does not contain ruptural elements, and instead what it does is provide the reader the illusion that they are engaging in a quick and easy read (21).

Tick's framework for conceptualizing "chica lit" brings me to my reading of *Frontera Street* that simultaneously shares this quality of subtly challenging the status quo, national belonging in this case, but at the same time does not share the genre's defining features. While social class is present in Barrientos' novel, it is not the central preoccupation, nor is consumption, the latest trends in fashion, romance or professional success. In response to Aldama's claim that *Frontera Street* is chica-lit, I argue that the novel functions as a national allegory on account of three dominant characteristics. First, Barrientos situates her diegesis in a non-concrete border town that she calls "Los Cielos", implying an undefined area that alludes to border towns between the U.S. and Mexico. This feature stands in sharp contrast to the existent cities that we have seen in previous chapters that include Los Angeles, New York and Nashville. Similarly, the narrator makes no reference to factual political events or civil unrest during any particular time period, placing the reader in locale that it is outside of a specific time frame. For instance, Francisco Goldman framed *The Ordinary Seaman* under the backdrop of Nicaragua's civil war during the 1980s and Hector Tobar situated *The Tattooed Soldier* squarely in the middle of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Just as important, at the center of *Frontera Street* is

a teenager who is in the process of defining her identity. Her search for her identity foregrounds a web of other secondary characters' identities that remain rigid or are also undergoing a change. Lastly, Barrientos' novels explore the social taboo of intermingling and contact with the Other that is deemed one's opposite. Rather than only constituting Chica-lit, these characteristics are symptomatic of allegories and as such allow me to approach *Frontera Street* from this angle that reimagines U.S. cultural and national identity.

As an allegory, *Frontera Street* specifically takes the form of the *bildungsroman* as one teenager's search for family and identity runs parallel to, and threads together the other protagonists' enterprise of reconstructing family and grappling with their memories of banishment from the home. In the process, these subjects elaborate a culturally, hybrid national family spearheaded by women who engage in the following: a rejection of the father-figure, a non-acceptance of a well-intentioned, but paternalistic intervention imposed upon Chicana women and families, a negation of cultural assimilation to fit into society, and the recognition of a national family as one that is intercultural and whose identity is perpetually in process. Indeed, in *Developments: Encounters and Formation in the Latin American and Hispanic/Latino Bildungsroman* (2014) Alejandro Latinez sustains that the coming-of-age genre is bound to the development of national projects (1). Texts written by diasporic subjects question the concept of national unity and belonging as they unsettle a sense of community, and the image of borders that delimit a territory (9). As such, the Latino/a coming-of-age narratives challenge the U.S.'s claims to be a solidly consolidated nation, and, by extension, nationality, as Latino/a migrant populations repeatedly encounter ethnic and gender discrimination, leaving them outside

of the national imaginary (9). Ethnic and gender discrimination figures prominently in the work of Pin-chia Feng. In *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston: a Postmodern Reading* (1998) Feng traces the challenge women of color in the U.S. as they grapple with harm occasioned by race, class, and sex/gender oppression (2). Feng sustains that as racialized female characters reconstruct a sense of self, they also reshape the genre by veering away from its traditional structure and characteristics. Indeed, these texts move away from the male protagonist and his heroic quest that unfolds in a linear fashion as he engages in the acquisition of knowledge and the process of social integration (2). While the traditional bildungsroman also takes for granted a coherent subjectivity that is to a large extent is already developed, narratives by women of color foreground the opposite. These texts, on the other hand, concentrate on female, displaced characters that engage in the formidable enterprise of reconstructing their broken subjectivities (9). In doing so, feminine accounts underscore the various negotiations and troubled memories of women as they recreate new networks in unwelcoming conditions. Feng's approach is applicable to *Frontera Street*, seeing that Barrientos challenges a racist phallogentric discourse that excludes Brown women from occupying a space in the national imaginary. As a result, the novel's subtext critiques paternalistic paradigms for structuring family that include the presence of a father-figure, an imposition of assigning identities within the household, and unwelcome economic interventions, given that these strategies continue to produce homelessness, liminality and estrangement.

### **Departures and Undone Families**

*Frontera Street* (2003) by Tanya Maria Barrientos chronicles the lives of three young female characters whose subjectivities are unsettled by suddenly losing their homes and families, and grapple with the lingering impact of these memories. Seeing that their lives were dictated by harmful, paternalistic principles, they find themselves without familial support, or flee from their oppressive homes in search of refuge. Alienated and estranged from their original residences, these women struggle to survive on their own, dream of an ideal family, and find themselves interacting with a cultural Other in a border town. Together they form a familial triangle made up of the wealthy widow Dee Paxton, and the working-class Mexican (American) mother and teenage daughter, Alma and Socorro Cruz. After her husband's death, Dee who has been living in Dallas and pregnant, returns to her hometown of Los Cielos to find solace and resides in her childhood home, an empty and unoccupied mansion. Profoundly distraught by the loss of her husband and community, Dee steps outside of her Anglo and wealthy circle known as the Westside and into the Mexican neighborhood. She responds to a job ad at Frontera Street Fabrics, a small shop where a cohesive group of Mexican (American) women work, among these is Alma. While Dee works at the fabric shop during her shift, she heads back to Los Cielos, keeping her identity and background secret. At the shop, Dee digs up a box with pictures of Alma and unknown man along with religious memorabilia. Infuriated that Dee uncovers her past secrets, Alma berates Dee, making her faint and sending her to the hospital. After the incident, the women at Frontera Street fabrics insist that Dee live with Alma as she is pregnant and on her own. Alma reluctantly abides and lets Dee live with her and Socorro in their modest house as she remembers what it was like to be pregnant and alone after leaving her parents' home in Mexico.

As an adolescent, Alma's teenage daughter Socorro struggles with her identity as she writes letters to her unknown father who never responds and receives a scholarship to study ballet at a prestigious art school in the Westside, Arts High. While not divulging her background, Dee develops a close relationship with Socorro by advising her on how to assimilate at a school made up of a wealthy and White student body. Socorro's search for self-knowledge is more apparent, given that as a fourteen-year old girl, she is on the cusp of turning fifteen. As such, she is preoccupied with planning her *quinceañera*, a significant rite of passage that signifies a transition in identity. However, she may not have the celebration, seeing that an unscrupulous businessman buys the Frontera Street fabric shop, leaving Alma without a job.

To make ends meet, Alma rents her house to a friend who runs a small dress-making business but makes the small house uninhabitable. As Dee, Alma and Socorro find their sense of home once again disrupted, Dee divulges her identity, and suggests that Alma and Socorro live in the empty, Westside mansion with her. Alma becomes enraged as she abhors the Westside and distrusts Dee even more for lying to her and providing a well-intentioned, but paternalistic solution. Socorro, on the other hand, embraces the idea as Dee also offers to pay for, and have the *quinceañera* at the Westside's country club, placing Socorro at a familial, class and cultural crossroads. When Socorro and Alma find themselves displaced again from their community, the relationship between Alma and Dee becomes more complicated, as Alma had once worked as a maid for Dee's abusive mother, and is haunted by those memories figured in her panic attacks and terrifying apparitions of *La Llorona* (a ghost of Mexican folktale that threatens to take away Socorro). The troubled collaboration between Dee and Alma



comes to its apex when Dee invites Socorro's estranged father to her *quinceañera*, convinced that Socorro must be acquainted with her father. Despite their conflict over different visions for a family, Alma and Socorro are with Dee when she gives birth to her son, highlighting solidarity and friendship among women who find themselves with newborn children and without familial support. The novel closes with a gathering at Frontera Street where Dee has a seat in a *tamal*-making circle made up of women who no longer seek a father-figure or paternal intervention to complete their new intercultural family and community.

Indeed, *Frontera Street* falls within Feng's framework of the unconventional *bildungsroman* for women of color as it veers away from the genre's dominant characteristics. Barrientos' strikes a balance between the contents of the diegesis and the architecture of her novel, highlighting the troubled memory and subjectivities of outcast women who find themselves without families or supportive networks. Barrientos first breaks away from the traditional and straightforward configuration of the *bildungsroman* by opting for a fragmented structure that consists of short vignettes, each one from Dee, Alma's and Socorro's voices that shift from the present to the past. These twenty-eight fragments that constitute the book coincide with these characters' fragmented subjectivities, underscoring the father-figure's harmful principles for structuring family and its lingering aftermath on these subjects. As such, the collection of these vignettes deliberately interrupts narrative continuity as they often describe at length characters' memories of banishment from their homes that unsettles their psyches in the present. Barrientos' further deviates from the genre by abandoning a third-person omniscient narrator. Instead, she divides the novel into three perspectives narrated in first person,

specifically Dee's, Alma's and Socorro's voices that undergird the diegesis. This strategy is fitting, seeing that it contests the control and closure of an authoritative all-knowing narrator, inviting the reader to occupy the same gray area these the characters inhabit as they grapple with their subjectivities, question the way they see themselves, and also the Other now that they find themselves in a borderland space. As such they engage in the project of re-creating a new family but have contradictory approaches in doing so. Fittingly, the narrative segments are juxtaposed among each other to create a montage of perspectives that fall short of fully understanding or communicating with each other. Each character's projection of an ideal family is at odds with the other's, generating opposed views that provoke the complicated relationship among Dee, Alma and Socorro. The dispute consists in abandoning or maintaining the structure of a two-parent family that includes the presence of a father-figure patriarch.

As Barrientos' view of the nation requires the presence of the Other, in this case Brown Mesoamerican working-class women, that suffer violent denials and exclusions from their families. Drawing on Stuart Hall, the emergence of subjectivity, that contests official monocultural representations of national identity, demands that one interact with a constitutive outside, with the Other that has been excluded and abjected (17-18). This encounter is precisely the focus of *Frontera Street* as the reconfiguration of national identity requires a sustained relationship with one's alleged opposite that complicates a Latino/a-Anglo binary. As such, Barrientos' strategically deconstructs the social positions between the dominant and non-dominant subjects to create a shared experience of national exclusion. The family (its loss and reconstruction) becomes the site in which this negotiation of national and cultural identity is staged. In doing so, homeless female

characters contest the alleged stability of an Anglo-Latino/a binary through their ambiguous interactions and practices they engage in as they recreate a national family.

Indeed, one of the most unusual features of *Frontera Street* is its beginning that inverts the traditional model of immigration narratives. Barrientos does not cast a working-class, Latino/a immigrant as an outsider, but rather places a monolingual, wealthy, Anglo woman as a newcomer who searches for a new home and family. Recently widowed, and without the presence or support of her mother, Dee Paxton returns to her hometown of Los Cielos, specifically its opulent neighborhood known as the Westside, but feels estranged and disconnected from this locale. Although Dee is upper-class, she suffers intensely from not having familial and communal network, symbolically categorizing her as homeless. The male figures in her life, her husband and father are deceased while her mother is perpetually out of town throughout the narrative. In search of solace from her grief, she makes her way into a Mexican neighborhood of Los Cielos where she is an outsider, suggesting the cultural challenges that Brown, immigrant newcomers face within the U.S. As a subject that has lost familial ties, she cannot return to her community and will feel alienated among Chicanas. The inversion of the immigration paradigm is more apparent when we take into consideration that Dee not only crosses over into the Mexican neighborhood but does so in search of work. She shows up in front of a small shop called Frontera Street Fabrics in response to a job ad. Her motive to head into an unfamiliar territory echoes Latino/a immigrants' plight that come to the U.S. in search of economic opportunity despite the cultural, class and linguistic barriers.

Within the context of a classed and culturally divided Los Cielos, Dee also goes squarely against normative hiring practices that women of her social standing exercise, particularly what wealthy Westside residents call the “Pick and Pray”. The routine consists of heading to the U.S.-Mexico border and hiring working-class women as part-time weekend maids with hopes that they don’t steal goods from one’s house. Curiously, Dee finds herself in the position of exploited Brown women that follow a circular migration pattern on account a work cycle. Dee heads into the fabric shop with hopes for part-time employment and will eventually make her way back to her abandoned house in the Westside at the end of her shift.

Coupled with Dee Paxton’s desire for work, another striking feature of her situation that mirrors immigrants’ plight is that she is also in the process of learning Spanish, highlighting the language barrier immigrants contend with once they set foot in the U.S. While Dee gets closer to approaching the fabric shop, she recalls that although she studied Spanish in high school and gave orders to her maids, she struggles to have a firm command of Spanish and is therefore carrying a Spanish dictionary. Speaking with an employee of the store in Spanish, Dee manages to communicate that she is interested in the position for the job. This unorthodox introduction of *Frontera Street* is the exact inverse of Tobar’s *The Tattooed Soldier* where Antonio Bernal, a working-class Guatemalan immigrant, strenuously tries to understand and speak English with his landlord as he is being evicted from his apartment. Yet, simultaneously Dee’s circumstances echo Bernal’s situation, given that both characters personal relationships and sense of home is suddenly truncated, leaving them disenfranchised. At the outset of

the novels, both Antonio Bernal and Dee find themselves as homeless, outside of an established social order and without a sense of community.

Barrientos' rearrangement of this immigrant trope sets stage for a reconsideration in social relations between allegedly opposing Anglo and Latino/a populations. By positioning Dee as a homeless subject in search of community, Barrientos explores the position of a dominant Anglicized national body that also finds itself culturally disoriented and without a familiar sense of home. In "There's no Place Like Home: The Discursive Creation of Homelessness", Celine-Marie Pascale argues that homelessness no longer conveys a sense of a home lost, but rather a lack of place and a lack of community to which to return (259). From this perspective, homelessness does not so much mean a loss of housing as it does a lack of social networks and a lack of belonging (259). In *Frontera Street*, a lack of network is figured in terms of the loss of family.

Because of this communal displacement figured in Dee, Barrientos leads us to a negotiation of unequal power relations between Anglos and Latinos/as since Dee reevaluates her notions of where she fits in without her former community. Through Dee's dislocation at the beginning of the novel, Barrientos sets the stage for challenging power relations based on class and race in the U.S. through the disintegration and recreation of family. Barrientos begins to unsettle an unequal power relationship through terms of vulnerability and loss figured in Dee's precarious position. Barrientos creates an opening for a change in the dominant view of national membership in the U.S., beginning with a profound sense of mourning.

Dee's sudden relocation, loss of family and mourning bring us back to Butler's framework for reformulating national community that rests on a sense of relationality and

new ties with the Other. A collective and national “we” is constituted through a recognition and interaction with the Other that has been missing, specifically through grief that creates a sense of solidarity and ethical responsibility (21-22). In the Westside of Los Cielos, Dee returns to her mother’s opulent mansion that provides a residence, but a partial one as it reminds Dee of her absent family that provokes her to interact with an unfamiliar community. Despite the vastness of her mother’s mansion, Dee finds no refuge in this empty space as she remains outside of the social fabric, further accentuating her crisis of homelessness and bereavement. The act of mourning characterizes Dee in the opening pages of the novel as she agonizes over the loss of her husband (Mitch Paxton) who died unexpectedly of a brain aneurysm. Dee frequently finds herself painfully longing for her husband:

“The same day I took all of Mitch’s clothes out of the closet, emptied every drawer of his socks and T-shirts and piled garments onto his side of the bed. Then I took off all my clothes and laid down next to the mound of jeans and shirts and ties and jackets. I pulled the sweaters and sweatshirts close to me, slid my arms through the tangle of sleeves and inhaled the ghost fumes of musty aftershave buried in the fibers of his shirt collars. I stayed there all day, clinging to the warm scarecrow body made out of Mitch’s things, pulling them over me like a blanket and wondering if I’d ever have the strength to get up again.” (49).

This profound grief that characterizes Dee provides an aperture for re-evaluating dominant notions of national membership. They prompt Dee to find a new basis for family that challenges the normative, discriminatory racial politics of her social conditioning. Mourning allows her to undergo a transformation in where she submits herself to the possibility of establishing relationships with those outside of her immediate and familiar circle, figured in the Latino/a community of Los Cielos. Dispossessed from her former sense of place, Dee crosses over into the other side of town, a relationship that White citizens frown upon on account of the racial and class tensions. This social unease

that suggests renegotiation of national community is figured in the complex relationship between Dee and Alma based on class and ethnic privilege.

While the women at the fabric shop are open to Dee, Alma has her reservations and maintains her distance from Dee, seeing that Dee is secretive about her life. Despite her initial stance, Alma is also sympathetic and understands Dee's position as she too has found herself pregnant and alone. After an American exchange student, Paul Walker, impregnated Alma and promised to marry her, Alma's father demanded that she stay at a convent during the pregnancy and give up the baby for adoption. In disagreement with this only choice, Alma fled to the U.S. in search of Paul Walker. In secret, Walker had bought Alma a small house for her and Socorro, but rejected them as his official family, seeing that he was already engaged to another woman. Consequently, the condition of not being able to return to one's home or having familial support produces a sense of solidarity and ethical responsibility in Alma towards Dee. Alma has had a charged relationship with patriarchs, alleged father-figures and their rhetoric that violently outcasts young women when they are most in need. Alma endured her lower, middle-class father's heavy-handedness and inflexible rules. He refused to pay for Alma's college tuition after she expressed that she was interested in studying archeology (a small detail that gains significance as archeology alludes to Alma's relationship with the past, one that she keeps buried and contained in a box with old letters, photos and memorabilia that Dee uncovers and interprets, provoking their differences in reconstructing national family).

Class, however, produces starkly different manifestations of patriarchy. In her crisis of homelessness, Dee finds herself reflecting on this system of domination that

quietly operated during her socialization. As Dee suffers her disconnection from her family, she inevitably recalls a set of soft paternalistic rules that slowly resulted in her dislocation. Her memories are inseparable from the gendered social scripts laid out for her that extend back to her childhood, adolescence and make their way into adulthood. When Dee finds herself alone in her mother's mansion, the devoid space serves as a catalyst that provokes these memories that are associated with an unserviceable gendered conduct that lead to her social isolation. That is, Dee was socialized to find and depend on a husband as pillar for family and her identity. As such, the narrator dwells at length on describing these recollections. The thread that ties them together is a central characteristic that defined Dee. Namely, an eagerness to not disrupt a patriarchal system by strictly following a set of instructions laid out for women of her social class. She recalls: "...I was the sort of girl who liked to follow rules. It was a talent I nurtured. *Sit up straight. Cover your head in direct sun. Say li-brar-y, no li-berry.* Commands like that never chafed me the way they did other kids. I didn't see them as reins pulled tight: I openly craved them. (64). At every stage of her life Dee complied with what was expected of her: she never rebelled against her parents, went to college, met her future spouse there and was a stay-at-home wife. Moreover, Dee took much pride in taking her husband's last name and being Mrs. Dee Paxton. Mitch's last name and the status of being a wife constituted her identity that now finds itself undone and unattached to the unsecure anchorage that defined it. Dee's crisis underscores Barrientos feminist critique of a paternalistic framework for structuring families that determines and subsumes women's identity.



Such a disintegration of identity resonates with Alma as she underwent a similar trajectory because of patriarchal domination that rejected her from home. The narrator strikes a connection between both characters by juxtaposing their memories of home, establishing a similar picture of their pasts, despite their class and cultural differences. More importantly, Dee and Alma's position of homelessness underscores a contradiction within patriarchal ideologies. Whether one passively accepts patriarchal directives as Dee did, or rejects them like Alma, both women are forcefully released from the family and designated as homeless when they are pregnant. These outcomes highlight the impossibility to remain and function within this system of domination that denies women a prominent space in the familial order or any sense of psychological and physical security.

Still, a stark difference remains between Dee and Alma that will complicate their friendship and collaboration. As opposed to Alma, Dee has fond memories of her father and deceased husband. These memories drive her to impose a father-figure framework and phallogocentric order on Alma and Socorro that Alma refuses to accept. In other words, Dee's foundational plan for recreating a family is built on a lost plenitude of the past, on a familial projection that she cannot return to, and that more importantly is not applicable to Brown women as it purges them from the national body. As such, Dee's intervention is paternalistic and falls short of recognizing the histories and experiences of homeless Brown women in a middle-class, Anglicized U.S., complicating her solidarity with Alma. These tensions and negotiations in Dee and Alma's opposing methods to recreate a national family are inscribed in the adolescent Socorro's search for identity, memory and parental figures. Rebuilding family in *Frontera Street* manifests itself in the practice of

child-rearing. Dee and Alma collaborate in raising Socorro, while they all live in Alma's house and work at Frontera Street Fabrics. These relational politics for rebuilding home and family, however, are unsustainable as their foundation rests on concealing one's identity and imposing a paternalistic intervention that disregards Alma's and Socorro's experiences as Brown, racialized women.

While Alma and Dee temporarily reside in the Frontera Street neighborhood, they engage in Pratt's precept of "the contact zone" as both women from starkly different social classes, who have been kept apart, come into an improvisational contact with each other. Their contact, however, heads into a different direction than the texts Pratt analyzes, as Dee and Alma's collaboration manifests itself in the context of raising a family situated in the borderlands. Dee and Alma's interlocking practices take place within the site of the family as they restructure it and in collaboration raise and educate an adolescent, bringing these two subjects together in a joint, feminist-oriented reconstruction of the nation figured in Socorro. Seen in this light, Dee also implicitly represents another parental figure that the adolescent Socorro seeks out as the teenager struggles to uncover her history and identity.

Alma's history of broken and unrealized families, originating from her parents' home in Mexico and continuing with Paul Walker's abandonment in the U.S., is inscribed in Socorro's partial memory and unresolved identity. Consequently, Alma worrisomely reflects on her daughter's sense of incompleteness at the outset of the novel:

As a little girl she was satisfied with the flimsy family history I provided, a past that did not go beyond the happy stories of my childhood Christmases, and quiet summers in the cool Mexican mountains. She believes her grandparents are in heaven, because that is what I've told her. As she grew older, she asked to know more....and when she asked about her father, I told her that his name was Paul Walker and he was a good man. Now, almost fifteen, she is demanding to hear

the rest. I know the day is coming when I will have to tell her my whole story...But I hesitate because it is full of so many shortcomings, regrettable truths that are bound to change how she feels, about him and about me. (11)

Seeing that she is not familiarized with her father, Socorro searches for her father and seeks to establish communication by writing him letters. She gives them to Alma to send, but Alma hides them, keeping the distance between daughter and father. Socorro's frustration in her quest for her father and, by extension, guidance, expresses itself in the wide orbit of other parental figures in her social circle, specifically other mothers. As Alma refuses to share the necessary information about her past, Socorro looks to other matriarchs in the Frontera Street neighborhood, but they fall short of providing her the information she seeks, or another model whose practices she can emulate. Fittingly, these figures' defining characteristics are one-sided and exaggerated, rendering them as Latina mother archetypes. One of the lengthiest vignettes in the novel lingers in describing the religious archetype of Séptima and her episode known as "the miracle muffin" or "the holy toast". Séptima dwells at length in describing her incident in which a burned English muffin captures the face of Jesus Christ, rendering it a holy relic. As a result, her house becomes a place of pilgrimage for Catholics, drawing an extraordinary number of visitors and even the cameras of *Univision News* and the show *Unsolved Mysteries*. Moreover, Séptima engages in a heated debate with the local priest who denies that the piece of toast is miraculous. In the middle of all the attention and Séptima's newfound fame, the sensation comes comically to an end as a hoard of ants steals the muffin from its plate and eats it.

While Séptima's example downplays the religious model as one to emulate, or that offers guidance to Socorro, the next maternal example is linked with cuisine.

Illuminada, another mother in the Frontera Street neighborhood routinely tries new diets. In the process, only she eats healthy food, but compensates her frustration by cooking a variety of traditional southwestern cuisine that is savory, but unhealthy. Moreover, she insists on sharing the dishes with others who do not appreciate the temptation. As Alma and Socorro frequent her house, they face a spread of dishes that includes homemade tortilla soup, *nopalito* salad, *mole*, *carnitas* and *horchata*. As the reluctantly women eat her food, a comical twist is added as Illuminada explains how low in calories her new diets claim to be. Such a model of caretaking and offering support that at first seems generous is harmful model as it is detrimental to one's health.

In contrast to these figures that Barrientos' frames as exaggerated and one-dimensional is Dee who has a significant influence on Socorro. Socorro's sense of incompleteness and search for her identity is inscribed in her burgeoning relationship with Dee. In their search for an ideal home and family both characters make their way into the terrain of the Other as Socorro gets accepted into the exclusive Westside's arts and performance-oriented Arts High School. When Socorro's neighborhood friend, nicknamed Peeps, goes to the school for a music audition, Socorro accompanies him for moral support. At the school she finds herself in a ballet audition and unwillingly is accepted into the school. As the only two students not from the Westside, Socorro and Peeps are granted scholarships, but find themselves contending with social exclusion they face in their neighborhood and also at the Westside as they are ridiculed by both groups, echoing Dee's same conflict of being split between the Westside and Frontera Street.

While not disclosing her background as a resident of the Westside, Dee orients Socorro with the Arts High School context and culture, and in doing so helps Socorro

make friends. A case in point is when Socorro gets invited to the Westside's country club. Unaware of this upscale environment, Alma prepares a brown bag lunch for Alma to take with, but Dee assures Alma that they will serve food, and nothing is expensive, such as milkshakes and french-fries. However, in secret Dee tells Alma to order anything as parents have tabs at the country club and easily pay for everything. In addition to the social aspect, Dee helps Socorro intellectually as she reviews her French homework and practices the language with her. Dee's assistance in raising Socorro also extends into monetary support. Given that Socorro's ballet shoes are expensive and overused, Dee buys her new shoes and a specialized ballet duffle bag like the ones all the other dances carry. Alma recognizes and is appreciative of Dee's help in advising Socorro at Arts High, given that Alma knows that Dee's cultural knowledge is one that she cannot offer Socorro, no matter how much she wants to take care of her daughter. These gestures in child-rearing change Alma's initial view towards Dee, integrating Dee more into the family and establishing a sense of solidarity and friendship between them.

Still, this bond between Dee and Alma is not tenable as Dee's politics of help rest on a paternalistic approach that are figured in her overstepping intervention when the house on Frontera Street becomes uninhabitable, and when Alma cannot afford to pay for Socorro's *quinceañera*. Socorro's preoccupation with her coming-of-age celebration occupies a central place in the novel and, also a characteristic that defines Socorro. As such, Socorro's partial memory, the negotiation of cultural identity, and the search for an idealized projection of home are figured in her ideal *quinceañera*. As a significant event in her young life, Socorro's is obsessed with planning her coming-of-age celebration where she looks to integrate both her friends from Frontera Street and the Westside. As

Socorro longs for a two-parent, traditional family, Socorro desires to stay within the formal and conventional structure of the event. Fittingly, she has a vision of the gathering that includes a classical music quartet and tasteful, subdued decor.

This wish and deliberate choice on Socorro's part is underscored by a sharp juxtaposition of her neighborhood friend Cecilia, nicknamed Cece, who is also planning her dream *quinceañera*. Curiously enough, the only traditions that Cece plans to keep is to wear a White dress and have the first dance with her father, foregrounding the fatherly presence that Socorro seeks. With the exceptions of those two features, and as opposed to Socorro, Cece's looks to break away radically from tradition, represented in her exaggeratedly different and risqué, night-club themed *quinceañera*. After the dance with her father, she envisions shoeless dancing to high-voltage rock, a booth for painted, temporary tattoos, and plans on changing her formal white dress for a mini-skirt and halter top.

Socorro's plans for her festivities are jeopardized as Alma realizes that she cannot pay for the event. Upon hearing of her financial troubles, Socorro's dad offers to have a joint *quinceañera* for both Socorro and Cece, a decision that both Alma and Dee are not content with but agree to out of obligation and to not seem indifferent or ungrateful. The unorthodox possibility of a joint *quinceañera*, a single celebration for two girls, further highlights Socorro's partial and fragmented identity, one that she refuses to accept. Akin to Dee, Socorro's frustrated desire for a whole sense of home remains firmly intact and is represented in the envy that she harbors towards Cece: "Cece's family just stood there...linked together like beads on a gold chain. The perfect little trio. Didn't I deserve a family like that, with a father who would give me a gown for Christmas and candy hearts

for Valentine's? Why didn't I get to live in a house with a man in charge, instead of one with confused women? (146).

On the Westside, Socorro's desire for a traditional, two-parent nuclear family also manifests itself through her relationship with a new friend at Arts High, Holly Severson. When Socorro visits Holly's opulent mansion for the first time, the Severson family embodies Socorro's dream. At first, Socorro is taken back by their abundant wealth seen in the vastness of their property and its green lawn. Within a dry climate of the Southwest, a green lawn is a luxury as it requires costly irrigation work. The formality in which the Severson's engage in, such as having their maid ring a bell once their meals are prepared also disorients Socorro. The presence of the maid further unsettles Socorro as she is a Latina whose first language is Spanish. While the Severson's are kind to the maid Consuelo, they maintain a certain distance. Socorro, on her part, wants to speak to her in Spanish, yet hesitates to do so as she does not want to be marked as working-class, Latina during the dinner. In this way, Socorro like Dee, hides and minimizes her identity to fit into and be part of the Severson's family that she longs to be a part of.

Once everyone sits down to for dinner, Socorro interacts with Holly's parents and her brother. Charming and welcoming, the Severson's welcome Socorro with open arms at their house as they discuss their lives. As Socorro does not hail from a college-educated family or community she is attentive to Holly Severson's brother who was back home from Princeton and studying for upcoming exams. Socorro's drive for to belong to an idealized family comes to its maximum expression at the end of her visit. Throughout the meal, Socorro cannot help, but to notice the beauty and solidity of the Severson's wooden table. As they are having dessert, Mr. Severson familiarizes Socorro with a

tradition that signals dinner guests' sense of belonging and family with the Seversons. Once a guest has had five or more meals with them, they etch their name into one corner of the table. Enthralled by this practice that suggests integration and familial membership, Socorro's lifts up her mat to see a collection of names with the year and dreams over the day when her name will be inscribed in that table: "I put the place mat back down and the rest of the evening enjoying Mr. Severson's corny jokes and looking forward to the day I'd get to etch "Socorro" into the hard old wood." (153).

However, Dee's and Socorro's practice of assimilation and concealing one's identity to fit into a home and family has its limits as a foundation. After an unscrupulous businessman buys Frontera Street Fabrics from the owner, he forces the women out of the shop and disrupts their feminitopia and sense of autonomy they had established. To make ends meet, Alma rents her house to friend who runs her dress-making business from it but makes her small house uninhabitable. With Alma's financial troubles becoming more apparent, Dee is convinced that the solution is to reveal her identity and have Alma and Socorro live with her at the mansion on the Westside based on her idealized projection for an intercultural family. She frequently imagines her ideal of home that includes integrating the Westside and Frontera Street: "For an instant, I pictured Poppa standing next to me to the piano... I watched as he introduced himself to Alma and Socorro and Séptima, whom I knew he would love. I thought of how much I would have liked my child to see that, to see the two parts of my life come together under one happy roof." (160). Yet, Dee's approach to construct this intercultural family is troubling as it based on deceit and coercion that brings Alma back to a painful past.

### **A Reluctant Homecoming and Unwelcome Memories**



Alma is infuriated after Dee informs her of her identity as a Westside resident, and is even more perturbed by Dee's paternalistic solution of paying for Socorro's *quinceañera*, but reluctantly accepts so that Socorro has her celebration. Dee's intervention subordinates Alma and produces another rupture of community as it takes Alma and Socorro away from their Frontera Street community, echoing Dee's homeless position. In the beginning, Dee's presence at Frontera Street problematizes the practice of assimilation as an ineffective foundation to recreate a national family. The reversal of this living arrangement, namely, Alma and Socorro's residing in the Westside, foregrounds a harmful, post-colonial politics of familial unity through domination and forced incorporation. With benevolent intentions, Dee subtly coerces Alma to take residence in the Westside. Consequently, Dee's practice for structuring an intercultural family injures Alma as it provokes her terrifying memories of powerlessness and exclusion that she encountered as a maid in the Westside, complicating their collaboration in raising Socorro. The design of an intercultural national family based on principles of forcefully integrating the Other only provokes vulnerability and harmful memories, rendering it another ineffectual approach.

As Dee and Alma drive to Dee's mansion, Alma recognizes the location and is overcome by traumatic memories, seeing that she had worked there as a maid for Mrs. Campbell, Dee's mother. Dee's full name is Dee Campbell-Paxton, and as they return to her house, Alma is brought back to a source of pain and suffering, echoing Dee's mournful position at the opening of the novel as she is forced to leave her home, relationships and community. This return to the Westside parallels the fear of losing one's family and home. Drawing again on Feng's observations, a distinctive feature of

the *bildungsroman* by women of color is a subject's unwilling return to a dark past and its terrors. The subject's conflict to heal from these repressed memories, exclusion and domination is figured in the presence of ghosts (22). In the context of the U.S-Mexico allegorical borderlands that Barrientos evokes, Alma's ghost is *La Llorona*. The myth of *La Llorona* hails from Mexican folklore as the ghost that threatens to take one's children. According to tradition, after her partner refused to marry her on account of her lower-class status, she drowned his children, making her a symbol and archetype of the Terrible Mother. The appearance of this ghost in Barrientos' novel serves to further underscore a parallel between Dee and Alma, given that in this latter half of the novel Alma is the one that finds herself in a homeless position. Still, Barrientos' undermines and reframes this motherly archetype to contest a phallogentric paradigm for establishing a family. In contrast to the legend, Alma is not by any means obsessed with Socorro's father and firmly rejects his presence (as an allegorical *bildungsroman*, Socorro and Dell will as well and I will discuss this point further ahead). Throughout the diegesis, this phantom torments Alma's stable sense of home and family. *La Llorona* first appears to Alma after she finds herself pregnant with Socorro and worried that her father will force her to leave home as the child is out of wedlock. The phantom continues to appear at transitional phases in Dee and Alma's lives, such as when Socorro gets accepted to Arts High and when Dee begins to live with them. However, *la Llorona's* appearances are at their most intense the night before the move to Dee's mansion producing insomnia and terror in Alma before the move.

Coupled with the fear of losing Socorro, this phantom's vision, before the night of the move to the Westside, also parallels the terror of abuse and rejection that Alma faced

as a maid. Despite Dee's claims that the house has changed, returning to Dee's home further unsettles Alma as the distress manifests itself on her involuntary bodily reactions:

“The muscles between my shoulders clenched into a painful knot the instant I opened the coat closet and smelled the strong ammonia of mothballs and saw old coats hanging in the space where Mrs. Campbell used to keep the baggy pink uniform she made me wear. My stomach twisted itself into an even tighter knot when I stepped into the kitchen, peeked inside the cabinets underneath the sink, and saw the same blue plastic bucket I had set there years ago.” (184).

The return to Dee's mansion serves to underscore the re-establishment of an unequal power relationship. Dee unwillingly forces to re-embrace her identity as a maid that she had rejected. Fittingly, out of all the objects that Alma brought with her back to Dee's house, she makes the most use of her apron, signaling a return to a power colonial social order in which Brown women are allowed in the home, but only as domestics. This practice evokes Raymond Rocco's concept of “exclusionary-inclusion” where racialized subjects are allowed into the national body, but only partially and at the bottom of a classed hierarchy. Curiously enough, as everyone gets situated in the house, Alma decides to start preparing dinner, reverting to her former, subordinate role. Without any effort, Alma dreadfully remembers every cooking utensil and ingredients' place in the kitchen, and by extension, her former position. As sharing meals at the table is a foundation for family, Barrientos often returns to this practice, highlighting the complex negotiation between Dee and Alma as they construct a family in relation to their unequal power relationship. As Alma serves their first meal at the Westside, Dee ironically comments: “Alma... this looks fabulous.” (189). Rather than communicating gratitude, the compliment has the opposite effect as it resituates Alma under the yoke of servitude, and underlines Dee's privileged position as the decision-maker and head of the household.

### **A Rejection of the Patriarch and the Recognition of an Intercultural Family**

Although with good intentions, Dee's paternalistic overreaching reaches its culmination when she secretly invites Paul Walker, Socorro's father, to the *quinceañera*. The act underlines the unequal power relationship among Dee and Alma in the household as Dee deems what is best for Socorro. The night of the *quinceañera* is one of the longest vignettes, given that it ends Socorro's search for her father, signaling a new self-reflexivity in Dee and Alma's subjectivities that throws in doubt their need for a father-figure. Despite the elaborate decor and setting, the celebration goes awry as Paul Walker shows up, infuriating Alma, and deeply unsettling Socorro as the adolescent uncovers the gap of knowledge in her memory. This gap consists in another act of rejection from the home, as Paul Walker ignores Socorro as he has another family who is White. Akin to Alma, negation from the home and from one's father also manifests itself on Socorro's uncontrollable bodily reactions. Upon discovering that Paul Walker has another family and has no interest in establishing a relationship with her, she reacts in an involuntary fashion: "My head felt like it was about to explode, and my eyes burned from the tears welling up inside them. I blinked and felt them fall onto my cheeks, starting another crying jag that I knew I wouldn't be able to control. I began making wheezing sounds that came out like something between a laugh and a howl." (243). The confrontation with her father shatters any visions of a perfect and complete family she sought, yet at the same leads to a change in the way she perceives her family and her mother. Within the parameters of *the bildungsroman*, Socorro exhibits a new self-reflexivity as she understands why her mother kept her father's identity a secret from her. Socorro's applies

this new awareness to her mother who cannot pardon Dee for her encroachment, imploring Alma to understand Dee's solitude and lack of family.

While Alma had decided to move out of Dee's house the night of the *quinceañera*, Socorro convinces her otherwise and Dee unexpectedly goes into labor that same night, finding herself alone in the hospital. Despite Alma's hatred towards Dee, Barrientos underscores a politics of collaboration and mutual understanding, given that Alma and Socorro make their way to Dee's bedside during her pregnancy. Moreover, a cultural overlap has occurred as Dee prays to la Virgen of Guadalupe, suggesting that she is borrowing from Alma's religious beliefs. The interaction based on co-presence and healing from the past further manifests itself as *La Llorona* appears during the childbirth threatening to take Dee's baby, but Alma refuses to let the ghost do so: "You will not take this child! I blared at La Llorona, who stretched her skeleton arms toward the tiny infant. "This baby is part of *my* family! And you will not have power over us any longer!" (249). Challenging *La Llorona* symbolizes questioning and healing from a colonial past of domination that rendered Brown women as domestics incompatible with the national, Anglicized home.

At the beginning of *Frontera Street*, Dee finds herself as homeless and establishes an interaction with a new and Other community, represented in the Frontera Street neighborhood. As Alma and Socorro accept her, Dee hides her identity and, when they move the Westside, overreaches by making the decisions and forcing Socorro to meet her father. Yet Dee undergoes a transformation as well, given that she no longer imposes her framework for family on Dee and Alma, suggesting new sense of respect towards the Other that she previously lacked. As such, by the end of the novel, Dee and her new baby

son, move out of the Westside. In a similar fashion, Alma is in love with a new partner, Socorro's music teacher, whose presence is kept to a minimum throughout the text to foreground her interaction with Dee. Alma turns down his marriage proposal but moves out of Frontera Street with him to a newly built neighborhood with new townhouses. Dee moves there as well, creating a new community and family that highlights social harmony and cooperation between women from different cultures, ethnicities and classes who come to a mutual understanding as they will raise their children together. This arrangement endeavors in contesting an Anglo-Latino/a binary and hierarchy from within the site of a family situated at the borderlands, bringing us back to Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of "mestiza consciousness" that advances breaking down cultural dualities and healing from original split that troubled women's subjectivities and impeded their sense of home.

Nevertheless, in the process of reconfiguring home for women rendered homeless, Barrientos' goes along without problematizing ethnic tensions, sustaining an Anglo framework of feminism unaware of White privilege. As Dee gains an insight into the racialization that Alma and Socorro confront and stops forcing her order for a family, Dee remains a character that has free access to both working-class Chicana and upper-class Anglo spheres without any complications. In sharp contradiction, Alma remains excluded from the Westside and continues to refuse it as it rejects her. Operating under a framework that does not fully acknowledge ethnic differences, the union between the Frontera Street community and Dee is not entirely convincing. At the end of the novel, the integration comes off as a total and symmetrical fit, leaving out any ethnic tensions between communities that are not so easily resolvable. Even more troubling, are passages

that racialize subjects, particularly from Dee's perspective. A case in point is when Dee begins to understand Socorro search for her identity and wants to console her yet renders her as Other: "I wanted to hold her, to stroke her *beautiful brown face* and tell her just to give it time" (97) (my emphasis). At one point, Dee gives Socorro and Cece a makeover: "When Cece came over, Dee would huddle with both girls in Socorro's room for hours, giving them what she called white-girl makeovers. (105). Passages such as these denote that Dee, and by extension Barrientos, to an extent reifies ethnic binaries.

In spite of this conceptual oversight, I contend that through the trope of homelessness Barrientos allegorizes the reconstruction of a national home and family through four strategies: challenging harmful and outdated discourses of assimilation, uncovering memories that undermines idealized projections of family, displacing the presence of a father-figure and its abusive ideologies, and advancing the recognition of difference that results in friendship, solidarity and an intercultural family. The result is an attempt to establish a more stable and permanent sense of family and home for subjects that had once been rendered nationally homeless.

### **Concluding Remarks: An End to Central American Homelessness**

In *Latining America: Black Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies* (2013), Claudia Milian hones in on Anglo's and U.S. Latino/a's representations of Central Americans. She argues that Central American dark bodies are rendered as abject and repulsive, maintaining these migrants excluded from the construct of Latino/a and the wider North American social fabric. Second-generation Central American's narratives, however, contest these exclusions from what I see as a discursive site of homelessness, one that has gone unaccounted for and unexplored. In doing so, the trope of homelessness serves as a counterpart to the instances that Milian traces as the representations in my study hail from those very Central American communities that both Latinos/as and Anglos eliminate from the national imaginary. In other words, second-generation Central American novelists offer a point of contestation to their position of cultural and national Otherness figured through a position of homelessness.

As such, the trope of homelessness that I trace serves as a contour that describes Central Americans' dispossession within the U.S. and in doing so unravels national, territorial and cultural systems, rendering them unserviceable. These novels, by second-generation Central Americans underscore a spectrum of homeless contexts that, despite their variations, resonate and are inseparable from each other. Taken together these



representations constitute a larger process that reframes national belonging and creates a space for expanding Central American populations. In the search for a new home, homeless subjects engage with discourses of transnationalism, extreme masculinity, Third World feminism and develop interconnections with other Latino/a communities. My aim has been to underscore how a position of homelessness can reconfigure and unsettle the notion of a national 'home', showcasing it as an incomplete and unfinished process. The most dominant characteristics of homelessness highlight the dissolution of national borders and the reconfiguration of subjectivity.

As displaced subjects challenge their marginalization, they engage in the enterprise of confusing territorial boundaries, undermining official mappings between the U.S. and Mesoamerica. In the Romilia Chacón detective series, a constant and unauthorized mobility on part of Chacón and Murillo disrupts the impression of nation-states as neatly compartmentalized zones. As detective Chacón pursues crimes with the help of the homeless Rafael Murrillo they move freely among the U.S., Mexico and Guatemala, highlighting these nations interconnectivity rather than an alleged separation. These subjects' incessant crossings suggest a reconsideration of a national "home" as not limited to one area, but that stretches beyond one unchanging location and presents an inseparability that official accounts downplay. This unconventional perception of nation-states as relational reframes and creates another meaning of home for U.S.-Central Americans as they circulate among them without being bound or attached specifically to one, undermining the stability and intelligibility of nationality as an essentialist and defining characteristic. The strategy of shapeshifting underscores a collapse of national distinctions as these categories become more and more unusable.

As Central American subjects find themselves advancing a transnational position, they correspondingly undergo changes as well, making subjectivities that are in flux the second recurrent theme of this study. In *The Tattooed Soldier* and *The Ordinary Seaman* the position of homelessness overlaps with a masculinist subjectivity characterized as destructive and inoperative in a transnational framework. After their engagement with civil war, ex-soldiers and ex-revolutionaries find themselves homeless and without a sense of community in the U.S., provoking them to reassess their habits and frames of mind. All the male subjects in these novels share the fundamental characteristic of engaging in troublesome practices associated with a hyper masculinity that overlaps with their homelessness. A need to stand out among other men as former combatants, a drive to dominate, humiliate and kill women and the defenseless guides these subjects as they struggle in creating a new sense of place and community. However, both novels compliment and counterpoint each other. As they are both connected by a masculinist subjectivity, *The Tattooed Soldier* showcases a masculine drive that leads to a perpetual enactment of war within Los Angeles, sustaining a position of homelessness. In contrast, *The Ordinary Seaman* underscores a reflexivity provoked in a transnational context that provokes a need to establish a new subjectivity, one that moves away from aggression to sociability and cooperation, bringing us to *Frontera Street*.

While a politics of physicality and violence, characterizes male, heterosexual homelessness, Barrientos' narrative veers away from this template. She puts homelessness in relation to ethnicity and family, highlighting a reconfiguration of U.S. national identity that finds itself disoriented by Brown populations. Barrientos frames this conflict within the site the family as two women from starkly different backgrounds come

together to raise a teenager whose subjectivity is in flux and finds itself longing for the presence of an absent father-figure. As migration is an enterprise undertaken considerably by women, the novel suggests that a patriarch or masculine presence, who provoked subjects' homelessness, is not necessary for the creation and survival of a new family that displaced women can construct on their own. *Frontera Street* also digresses from the previous novels penned by men, as it foregrounds the construction of interethnic relationships between Anglos and Chicana women, but in doing deviates from the criticisms of Third World Feminism, remaining uncritical of ethnic binaries. Nevertheless, the work challenges female subjects' homelessness by fomenting a politics of solidarity and collaboration, engaging with Pratt's concept of the "feminitopia". As Barrientos structures her novel around the interaction between a dominant, White subject and the cultural Other, this interaction brings us back the complicated relationship between the insider and the outsider articulated in this dissertation as the housed and the homeless.

Written almost twenty years ago, the novels I study are timely as this tense interaction only becomes more pronounced. These novels are inseparable from the daily articles in the news, or stories on social media that spotlight the plight of Central Americans that struggle to make their way into, or simply remain, in the U.S. Migrant caravans, mass deportations, detention centers unfit for living conditions, family separations, and the invalidation of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) are all symptoms of a national anxiety that Central Americans, along with other Mesoamerican immigrants, will constitute a substantial percentage of the nation, eroding the U.S.'s Anglicized roots and identity. As such, the trope of homelessness highlights a

latent national fear that established U.S. citizens also perceive their own cultural homelessness and dislocation, provoking a desperate and misguided politics of intolerance. Consequently, the state responds with hard-lined measures to purge itself of Brown immigrants. Despite exclusionary immigration policies, these narratives underscore that the trope of homelessness offers emancipatory possibilities and renegotiations, creating a place and home for Central Americans that puts an end to their long plight of transience.

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