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## Central American Enunciations from US Zones of Indifference, or the Sentences of Coloniality

### Abstract

This essay explores Central American diasporic experiences in the US as sites for the continued exertion and reproduction of coloniality. A longstanding matrix of power transgressing all forms of borders and permeating all aspects of life—an irreversible and transgressive disease—coloniality operates so forcefully that it upholds its own survival. In the process, we live its plural incongruity and even extend its most contemptuous signs. Surveying a series of narrative texts produced from within the Central American diaspora in cities like Los Angeles and New York—Roberto Quesada’s *Big Banana*, Oscar René Benitez’s *Inmortales*, Hector Tobar’s *Tattooed Soldier*, and Mario Bencastro’s *Odyssey to the North*—this article examines the diverse ways through which the diasporic subject experiences coloniality, and how this subject unquestioningly contributes to its endurance.

### Keywords

diaspora, Central America, Central American, colonialism, coloniality, US

## Central American Enunciations from US Zones of Indifference, or the Sentences of Coloniality

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*Cut off from his origins and cut off from his ends, he is a thing tossed into the great sound and fury, bowed beneath the law of inertia.*  
Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*

Instead of elaborating historical descriptions of the events that took place in Nazi concentration camps—a place where according to Giorgio Agamben the incursion of power in human life reaches maximum expression—in *Homo Sacer* (1995), *State of Exception* (2003) and *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1998), the Italian philosopher exercises a type of inverse interpretative operation. In these texts, Agamben explores the political and legal structures allowing the occurrence of such events to happen in the first place. This method of interpretation must consider “the concentration camp not as a simple historical fact and an anomaly that—admittedly still with us—belongs nonetheless to the past, but rather in some sense, as the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we still live” (Agamben, *Means Without End* 37). Operating from a positioning that should have been overcome, the Modern State retains the power to deprive some human beings of their rights and freedoms. This practice, Agamben insists, is achieved by the normalization of a state of exception—or what we here will call a zone of indifference. In this zone, the moment of suspension of the law becomes as it has in the present, the paradigmatic form of Government.

*Homo sacer* is the metaphor Agamben articulates to understand subjects confined to that zone of indifference. A dark figure of Roman law, *homo sacer* ‘sacred man’ was an individual who could

be eliminated by anyone in the city, but one who at the same time could not be sacrificed in any religious ritual (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 82). Contrary to today's conception of "sacred," *sacer* was an individual who was excluded from society for having committed a sacrilegious act. In this exclusion, anyone could kill this individual while retaining impunity. In an ironic sense, anyone could kill him (or her) under full protection of the law.

The Central American civil wars made permissible the complete suppression of individual freedoms, resulting in the deaths of more than 400,000 people, the disappearance of thousands, and generating an exodus of over one million people during the 1980s alone, mostly to the United States. This article explores novels that arise out of this Central American diasporic experience: *Odyssey to the North* (1998) by Mario Bencastro, *Big Banana* (1998) by Roberto Quesada, *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998) by Héctor Tobar, and *Inmortales* (1983) by Oscar René Benítez. Particularly focusing on diverse representations of subjective erasures, death, and invisibilities, this study examines how the normalization of the state of exception during the Central American wars transgressed its historical moment, pervading the present moment of diaspora and exile. Both Agamben's framework of Modernity as well as what Peruvian thinker Aníbal Quijano has named the "coloniality of power" are useful theoretical tools for thinking and discussing these Central American novels of diaspora and consequently, the Central American diasporic experience.

### *Odyssey to the North*

Mario Bencastro's literary work in the US highlights the initial plight of Central Americans in the north, the emotional and social consequences of war, and the difficulties of the immigrant experience in US urban spaces. In his third novel, *Odyssey to the North*, Bencastro traces the experience of many Latin American immigrants, mainly Salvadorans, from the moment these characters leave their countries of origin to when they go about their daily lives in Washington DC. The novel represents the states of violence experienced by the population of El Salvador during its civil war in the 1980s, the submission of this migrant population to human traffickers in Mexico, human rights violations in immigrant detention centers in both Mexico and the US, and the reality of

survival on the streets of Washington DC for the undocumented subject. Subject to detention and deportation by US immigration agents, the characters live under constant fear of harassment, forced to lead semi-clandestine ways of life.

The life of one of the characters, Teresa de Jesús Delgado, exemplifies the scope of the Agamben-like state of exception. Originally from El Salvador, Teresa enters the US in the mid-eighties escaping death threats her husband had received from both the government and guerrilla forces of her country. A member of the Salvadoran army during wartime, her husband Secenio is threatened with death by the guerrillas to discontinue his military obligations. Secenio leaves the Salvadoran military, but in doing so automatically becomes a fugitive of the law and both his life and his family's are soon at risk. The couple joins the tide of over one million people migrating illegally to the United States, where after three months of searching for work in Washington DC, Teresa is detained by Immigration. Illiterate and without the ability to speak English, twenty-year-old Teresa is suddenly seeking political asylum. She must prove to a judge, who is entirely unaware of the political situation of war in El Salvador, that there is sufficient cause to believe that if deported, she would be killed.

Given the impossibility of providing evidence considered concrete, the judge denies her asylum request. As he dictates his verdict, the legal language employed soon overpowers Teresa's own voice within the text, displacing her discursivity and taking center stage within the narrative. If in previous chapters Teresa's voice had been heard, in this one, it goes silent. As the legally accused subject, she must now only listen to the dictates of the judge and agree to obey his ruling. The language itself is emblematic of the exclusion experienced by Teresa within the mandates of US law:

The Ninth Circuit has concluded that the well-founded fear standard and the clear probability standard are meaningfully different and that the former is more generous than the latter. *Cardoza-Fonseca v. INS*. In describing the amount and type of proof required to establish that a fear of persecution is well-founded, the Ninth Circuit held: Applicants must point to specific objective facts that support an inference of past persecution or

risk of future persecution [...]. (Bencastro 175)

The passage's seventeen paragraphs of legal language explain why the judge has denied Teresa's asylum and "ORDERED" her deportation. Teresa's life has become subject to the political and legal order of the country's judicial system, which exercises the right to define her status and even the right to invalidate her fear. In this framework, Teresa's individual experience ceases to have any societal value. The established order has literally placed her outside society and outside legality, making her a modern day *homo sacer*.

Later in the novel Bencastro revisits the story of Teresa by inserting a brief article from *La Tribuna*, a newspaper from San Salvador. The entire article (and chapter) consists of only four sentences, covering a very small fraction of a page: a clear contrast to the chapter focused on the order of her deportation. The note reads:

**BODY OF WOMAN FOUND.** The remains of a woman have been found near Cantón El Jocote, San Miguel. Local authorities identified her as twenty-one year-old Teresa de Jesús Delgado. According to information gathered from neighbors, the deceased had recently been deported from the United States for having entered that country without legal documents. It is believed that her death was due to political retaliation. (Bencastro 191)

Her subjectivity deemed insignificant, her death cannot occupy more space in the text than these brief lines. Paradoxically, Teresa is able to enter the textuality of what Angel Rama once called the "lettered city" of El Salvador (the official newspapers) only by way of her exclusion and consequent death. In this regard the Modern State, represented here by both the US and El Salvador, has included her by literally discarding her.

Subjective discardability legalized by the State is represented in the social fabric portrayed by *Odyssey to the North*. Both the brevity of the newspaper article announcing the character's death and the omission of her name in its title are suggestive of the peripheral position given to Teresa in all the social spaces she inhabits. By portraying Teresa's death as an event without transcendence, the mass media confirms the Modern State's understanding of Teresa's subjectivity as trivial, if not non-existent. She joins the State's

dictum of normalizing the state of exception within the experience of marginalized subjects like her.

### On the Illegality of Being and a *Big Banana* in New York

The Modern State's practice of inclusion by exclusion operates in a manner that is even more hidden once the workplaces occupied by diasporic characters are examined. While on the one hand these diasporic Central American undocumented subjects are rejected by a US judicial order (illegalizing them and therefore making them deportable), on the other, these same subjects are forever prey to the vicissitudes of the US economy, which permanently and advantageously exercises power and manipulation over them. Since entry into the US, the bodies of these individuals become subject to this country's market economy, where due to their illegality they inevitably become viable targets of exploitation. The paradox lies in how the reality of migrant subjects operates as a visibly invisible element within US society.

Eduardo Lin, the main character in *Big Banana*, is an undocumented immigrant and a dreamer. In New York he continually fantasizes about the future to free himself "de estar donde estaba" 'of being where he was,' and "destruir su presente sin esperanzas, deprimente y de caos económico" (Quesada 161) 'destroy his hopeless, depressing, and economically chaotic present.'<sup>1</sup> A novel with a happy ending, *Big Banana* is a parody of the immigrant experience. After Eduardo's brief stay in New York working in construction, he returns to his native Honduras not as a result of being deported, as one might imagine, but by personal choice. He returns, moreover, having realized his American dream: "hacerla" 'making it' on Broadway. Without an acting resume worth mentioning or legal documentation to work in the US, in New York Eduardo successfully manages to obtain an audition with director Steven Spielberg. Impressed with his acting talent, Spielberg offers him a starring role in one of his latest Hollywood projects. To Spielberg's surprise, however, Eduardo rejects the offer, saying that all he wanted was to "llegar" 'to make it,' "y ya lo logré" (Quesada 295) 'and I've made it.' The director tells him to call if he ever changes his mind. Then Eduardo happily decides to return to Tegucigalpa to his girlfriend Mirian, a journalist of "gran capacidad" 'great capacity'

who wants only to write novels. The novel ends in an ironic tone when Eduardo warns Mirian that if she ever decides to write novels, to be sure not to include a happy ending because “a muchos críticos les disgustan los finales felices [...] [y] no [l]e perdonarían ni siquiera un capítulo con un final feliz” (Quesada 315) ‘many critics dislike happy endings, and they would not let her publish even one chapter with a happy ending.’

Using humor as a tool of criticism, in *Big Banana* Quesada accomplishes a parody of the immigrant experience without discounting the severity of their situation in New York. It is through humor that Quesada reveals the American dream in the modality of a myth, depicting it as a mere product of the author’s imagination. The fact that the novel’s main character—an undocumented immigrant who speaks little or no English, is a product of Honduras’ substandard acting industry, and has no way of reaching Broadway other than through trying to find work as a busboy in one of the nearby restaurants—obtains an audition with Spielberg, gets selected by him, and then willingly decides to decline his dream and return to Honduras, seems more like a presumptuous product of the author’s imagination, than actual reality. Eduardo’s unusual success story is incongruous with the precarious conditions experienced by characters in the novel.

Mired in situations of constant insolvency, the characters in *Big Banana* remain confined to the dictates of their workplace, handicapped by the institutional racism that permeates the social fabric of NY. As *homo sacer*, these characters have been removed from the protection of the State, relegated to what Agamben would call “opaque zones of indistinction” (*Means Without End* 139). In these opaque spaces the market economy enslaves these subjects, relegating them to zones where silence and social immobility are the norm. This silence is further fueled by the indifference of others, as the following passage exemplifies:

[Eduardo] regresó con cierta emoción al lugar de su trabajo. Pensó que alguna de las personas que pasara lo vería y quizás la intuición le diría que ése no era un obrero más sino un hombre con talento [...] Mujeres y hombres bien vestidos caminaban cerca de él. Él levantaba la vista para toparse con los ojos de alguno [...] Fue inútil. Absolutamente nadie se dignó en lanzarle, aunque fuese



de soslayo, una mirada [...] Quizás por ahí habría otro hombre invisible, pero The Big Banana tampoco lo detectaría. (Quesada 56-57)

Eduardo went back to his job feeling somewhat happy. He thought that maybe one of the people passing by him would see him, and that maybe their intuition would tell them that the person working there was not just another worker, but a man with talent [...] Well-dressed women and men walked by him. He looked up to try and make eye contact with someone [...] It was useless. Absolutely no one even turned to look at him [...] Maybe there was even another invisible man like him around, but The Big Banana would not be able to spot him.

Paradoxically “invisible and excessively visible,” as Nelson Maldonado-Torres would describe Frantz Fanon’s *damné* (257), Eduardo disappears from society’s view not because he is literally invisible, but because he has been made invisible by society’s gaze. Others like Eduardo—or “The Big Banana” as his friends call him—also remain invisible within the realm of the immigrant world because the marginal and invisible positions that these subjects occupy within New York society impede communication with, and recognition of, one another. An alienating space is thus created between the *damnés*, contributing to the rupture of links that would otherwise enable communal solidarity. This forced alienation further engenders the conditions of exploitation, as Eduardo’s recurrent job loss exemplifies. Taking advantage of Eduardo’s forced silence, his boss treats him as a disposable entity, giving and taking away his job as is convenient and profitable to him.

“Happy Land” and that Ordinary Death of *les Damnés*

On March 25, 1990, eighty-seven individuals, mostly Garinagu immigrants from Honduras, were suffocated and burned to death in “Happy Land,” a nightclub in the Bronx that had operated illegally since 1988. The accident was caused by a Cuban immigrant who, angry at being spurned by one of the waitresses working in the club that night, decided to set it on fire. Since all the emergency exits were blocked, only four people made it out alive, among them, the

waitress in question. The repatriation of these bodies to their home country caused great distress among the Honduran population, particularly among coastal communities.

Incorporated within *Big Banana's* plot, the narrative voice describes the event as follows: "En Honduras el luto se generalizó. Los cadáveres fueron trasladados en varios aviones. Al llegar se les cubría con la bandera de Honduras. Era como una condecoración a los Héroes de la Pobreza, los Mártires del Hambre" (Quesada 216) 'In Honduras everyone mourned. The cadavers were transported in various planes. When they arrived they were covered with the Honduran flag. It was like watching the Heroes of Poverty, the Martyrs of Hunger, be praised.' Highlighting the marginal, subalternized position of these bodies within North American society, this representation inscribes within the text the failure of these subjects to be recognized as such within hegemonic nations. In New York, the news was received with certain indifference:

El homenaje a los caídos en el Happy Land se realizó al aire libre en el Van Cortlandt Park. [...] La asistencia fue escasa, pese a que se anunció por los medios indicados [...] Los familiares de los más de ciento cincuenta mil hondureños que viven en Nueva York se entristecían, pues si bien muchos de ellos no tenían familiares entre los fallecidos, podía ser que en el futuro fueran ellos los que recibieran el féretro con su familiar adentro. (Quesada 216)

The tribute to the fallen in Happy Land was held out in the open-air at Van Cortlandt Park. [...] Attendance was low, despite the announcement made in the appropriate media [...] The families of the over one hundred and fifty thousand Hondurans living in New York were sad. Although many of them did not have any relatives among the dead, it could be that in the future it would be them receiving a coffin with a family member inside.

Despite having been, as described by an article in the *New York Times*, "the worst fire in New York since 1911" (McKinley), the event did not cause much consternation among the city's larger population. These deaths did, however, impact the New York Honduran community who read these events symbolically, seeing a representation of their own future in the image of those charred bodies.

Historically denied within the Honduran *mestizo* State, the Garifuna have been immigrating to New York City since at least 1930 (Borowik 50). It was not until the occurrence of these deaths in 1990, however, that the group officially became recognized as one of several migrant communities making up the cultural and racial conglomerate of the city. In an ironic sense, the deaths of these individuals gained the Garinagu in New York visibility. The Honduran government also, by way of the symbolic gesture of covering their bodies with the national flag—in marked difference to its historical attitude toward the Garifuna population—incorporated them, albeit momentarily, within the public spheres of the nation. In both the US and Honduras, death became the only vehicle by which the Garinagu could gain visibility within the official discourse of the State. Ironically, this inclusion by exclusion—or the incident of their death—was also the only manner through which the Garinagu entered Quesada's text.

### *The Tattooed Soldier*

In *The Tattooed Soldier*, the post-national experiences of diasporic subjects are also accursed by the omnipresence of death and violence. While its characters have migrated to Los Angeles escaping the terror and violence of Guatemala's civil war (1960-96), in the new city they encounter only the continuity of abject experiences.

Antonio Bernal, one of the two main characters in the novel, is a former college student who despite having stayed out of the guerrilla movement in Guatemala, is suddenly forced to leave the country the day he arrives home to find both his wife and newborn murdered. Antonio leaves for Los Angeles where memories of his past become entwined with the reality of his present. He is unemployed, undocumented, and homeless, all the while dealing with the trauma of having lost his loved ones. One afternoon Antonio sees Sergeant Guillermo Longoria, the soldier with a tattooed jaguar in his arm who killed his family, living among the thousands of Central Americans in the Pico Union area of the city. Taking advantage of the climate of violence unleashed by the 1992 LA Riots<sup>2</sup>—an event representing the unraveling of the intricate social and racial conflicts permeating the city—Antonio is able to avenge the death

of his family without suffering any legal repercussion. A sense of justice permeates the end of the novel when Antonio can finally walk the streets of LA assured that Longoria is gone: “We are free,” he says, partially referring to the triumphs of the riots, and partially to the success of his revenge.

At a most basic level, *The Tattooed Soldier* criticizes impunity in postwar Central America, a reality that has forced both victims and perpetrators to coexist in the same social spaces without the intervention of functional legal entities. To this end, Tobar has transformed Los Angeles into a platform for the representation of the physical and subjective consequences of such impunity. In Antonio’s words, “No one will punish this man. In my country there is no one to punish the army for their *barbaridades*. No court will do it. This man can go free, he can do anything he wants. He can live here, he can live in Guatemala, and no one will bother him (Tobar 177). Through the act of killing Longoria, then, Antonio consciously usurps the judicial space that should in theory correspond to both the Guatemalan and US nation-states.

A critical reading of this text will further reveal infiltrations of intrinsic forms of violence embedded in both systems; it is a violence normalized and perpetuated by what Walter Mignolo and Maldonado-Torres have labeled the *coloniality of being*. An exploration of this embedded violence cannot be limited to a discussion about the state of the juridical systems of both Guatemala and the US. Its examination must instead focus on the coloniality that constitutes racialized subjects and configures them as *damnés*. This kind of violence labeled by the aforementioned theorists as “coloniality of being,” may be examined only through a reassessment of structures of power in a foucauldian fashion or, by means of Aníbal Quijano’s conceptualization of the coloniality of power.

The forms of power structuring violence, argued Foucault, are relational. For Foucault, power is not confined to the State; it is “not an institution, and not a structure, neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with, it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society” (93). In analogous fashion, coloniality takes the intricacies of racialization of entire peoples as a structuring axis of power-relations in society. With respect to violence, Quijano points to the way in which power

and violence are linked to the “constitutive ideologies” legitimized by the various interest groups structuring a given society. For the Peruvian sociologist,

La fuerza y la violencia son requisitos de toda dominación, pero en la sociedad moderna no son ejercidas de manera explícita y directa, por lo menos no de modo continuo, sino encubiertas por estructuras institucionalizadas de autoridad colectiva o pública y “legitimadas” por ideologías constitutivas de las relaciones intersubjetivas entre los varios sectores de interés y de identidad de la población. (Quijano 12)

Force and violence are requirements of all domination, but in modern society they are neither explicitly nor directly exercised, at least not continuously. They are concealed by institutionalized structures of collective or public authority and “made legitimate” by the constitutive ideologies guiding the inter-subjective relations among the various interest and identity sectors of the population.

In *The Tattooed Soldier*, even though Sergeant Longoria has retired from the Guatemalan military and is now part of the Central American diaspora, he still identifies with (and is identified by others as part of) the Guatemalan military institution. Of Maya origins and *campesino* extraction, like thousands of others in Guatemala, Longoria was forcedly recruited during the 1980s to fulfill the mandates of the State. During this period he was trained by Guatemala’s military apparatuses to carry out a genocidal war against people of his same social, economic, and ethnic background. It is due to this practice, akin to indoctrination, that Longoria comes to perceive himself as an integral part of the machinery of the State, even articulating his masculinity in function of it: “Guillermo was still a child when the army pulled him out of the Lux Theater. Slowly the army made him a man” (Tobar 60). In Foucault’s terms, the State successfully disciplined Longoria’s body through biopower.

In his conversion to man/subject/citizen, Longoria must abandon his Maya and rural identities and replace them with what Quijano would here call the “constitutive ideologies” of the Ladino State.<sup>3</sup> The Guatemalan Ladino State in turn instrumentalized him,

and hundreds of thousands of similar subjects, as a docile body instilling in him an Eurocentric, racist, classist, and heterosexualist ideology to be defended by those like him. The State achieved this through the spread and infusion of a misanthropic skepticism—a concept which will be further explored—premised here on the idea that the Maya were not humans but a “virus” to be eradicated. From the perspective of Longoria’s adopted military identity:

This thing they were fighting was a cancer, and sometimes the children were contaminated with it too [...] The parents passed the virus along to their children. It made you want to kill the parents again and again, even after they were dead, because if it wasn't for the fucking parents you wouldn't have to kill the children. (Tobar 63-64)

Just as the jaguar is permanently tattooed on Sergeant Longoria, as the titled of the novel suggests, this ideology also marks him as being an integral part of the diaspora.

Not able to see Longoria’s instrumentalization by the Guatemalan State, Antonio can only see Longoria as a nemesis, an antagonist to be eliminated. In the ex-sergeant, the civilian sector of the Guatemalan diaspora sees only the figure of a murderer: “¡Matón! Murderer! ¡Matón!” someone in the street yells out to him (Tobar 160). The interests for which Longoria committed countless acts of genocide during the war, however—even though neither Antonio nor the ex-soldier realize it—are not his own, but those of the State.

Such instrumentalization becomes even more evident in the diaspora, where both civilians and Longoria end up discarded by the Guatemalan and US governments. Although Longoria cannot face it, he has been left unprotected by the military institution he was, and still is, willing to die for. When he arrives in Los Angeles, like any other undocumented immigrant, he becomes just another subject of exploitation:

Longoria had worked in a series of factories, including eight months in a sweatshop on Washington Boulevard where his job was to tend to large vats of acid that turned regular blue jeans into “stone-washed” jeans [...] He wanted a job where he could stay clean and not worry about chemicals eating into his skin.

(Tobar 26)

Within the context of the state of exception in which these characters permanently live, the murder of Longoria at the hands of Antonio cannot but represent a violence perpetuated and normalized by the coloniality of being. Immersed in a perpetual war environment, the characters in Tobar's novel forge social relationships based on their conditioning to violence and death without questioning the articulation of power that programs them. The Los Angeles riots concealing Longoria's assassination are emblematic of such conditioning, one literally representing violence as an intrinsic part of the social fabric these characters must endure.

On the Sale, Disappearance, and Death of the *Immortal* Female Body in Los Angeles

*Inmortales* takes place in Los Angeles, the setting of all of Oscar René Benítez's novels, where the lives of many characters are intertwined through an intricate plot woven together by way of an incestuous relationship between a father and his daughter. Benítez's diverse stories create a broad canvass of the massive wave of Central American migration to Los Angeles in the early 1980s, the decade marking the beginning of the region's massive diaspora. As the title suggests, *Inmortales* presents a disenchanting vision of the Central American exodus. All of its characters—alcoholics, drug-traffickers, prostitutes, homeless people, *ficheras*,<sup>4</sup> undocumented migrants, and the perpetually unemployed—unsuccessfully look for ways to survive the arbitrariness of the city, cope with their undocumented status, and deal with the loneliness experienced while having left their families behind. Like *Big Banana*, many of the characters in *Inmortales* endure precarious economic situations and are exploited in their workplace. Due to their illegality they are forced to work in the informal sectors of the city's economy. These sectors are located outside of official controls of any kind, leading immigrants to work in the shadows and within the realm of illegality. Breaching the law, and visually hidden from society, these occult illegal places become zones where any form of abuse is (also) possible, as Foucault and Agamben point out.

In these marginal areas of the economy the undocumented

Central American woman's body becomes an object of transaction; a commodity. With no other way out of their abject living conditions, most female characters in *Inmortales* resign themselves to selling their bodies, working as prostitutes or at the bar El León, an illegal *fichera* bar located in the heart of Los Angeles. In a month's work there, letting their male customers touch them or even having sexual intercourse with them, the female characters in *Inmortales* make as much money as they would have earned in a year of cleaning mansions in Beverly Hills and Malibu, where as house maids their salaries would be below the city's established minimum wage.

Jacinta, one of the many characters, leaves El Salvador for the United States as a young adolescent. Her main reason for leaving is not the war itself, but the sexual abuse she endures under the consent of her mother. Condemned to remain as a sexual object, on her way to the US she also becomes the target of a *coyote* who, upon meeting her, begins sexually abusing her in exchange for alleged protection. Instead of realizing he is manipulating her, Jacinta blindly falls for this relationship. In what becomes the never-ending story of her life, in Los Angeles she becomes a *fichera*, and in exchange for an apartment to live in, she later grants full access to her body to a Mexican drug dealer before committing suicide.

The body is the only possible means of both enunciation and economic survival for female characters in this text. This essay argues that the symbolic order of *Inmortales* is organized by what Maldonado-Torres calls the "misanthropic skepticism" of Modernity/Coloniality. Being the means by which the "certainty" of the *ego conquiro* or "imperial man" is maintained, this misanthropic skepticism provides, in our case, the basis for the masculinist gaze of this diasporic textuality's narrative voice (Maldonado-Torres 245).

Founded on the permanent suspicion of those transformed into sub-others, misanthropic skepticism is "a form of questioning the very humanity of colonized peoples" (Maldonado-Torres 245). Originating in the colonial debate on whether colonized beings had a soul or not, misanthropic skepticism defines its targets as "racialized and sexualized subjects" (247). The subject/object of misanthropic skepticism is seen as a perpetual servant, his or her body coming to "form part of an economy of sexual abuse, exploitation, and control" (248). In *Inmortales* this figure has found an expression in the female



subject condemned to being part of an economy of sexual abuse. Through her representation as a perpetual sexual servant the *ego conquirero* operates as the norm in this diasporic text.

Jacinta's suicide towards the end of the novel further reaffirms the denial of her agency within the text. Like Teresa in Bencastro's novel, or the Garinagu in *Big Banana*, Jacinta has earned this textual representation by way of her physical and symbolic erasure. Even while exposing the injustices that the Central American *homo sacer* confronts on a daily basis—without doubt, one of Benitez's main objectives in *Inmortales*—the text's narrative voice has represented and limited Central American women to that of a racialized commodity, deploying them through a masculinist and misanthropic gaze keeping them firmly within the confines of coloniality. Undoubtedly, this further complicates their diasporic experience.

## Conclusion

This analysis shows how Central American diasporic subjectivities are forced to subsist within the United States' social fabric as invisibilized, and disposable beings. The Modern State places racialized subjects deemed illegal in an abject space, one to be understood, to paraphrase Mignolo, as the dark side of globalized coloniality.

Much like the *homo sacer* of Roman law, Central American subjects are removable and exploitable without their absence having political consequences for the overall functioning of the *polis*. Lacking the protection of the State, individual subjects and groups are both displaced to the fringes of society; in the process, they are transformed into outcasts. Those abject limits located at the liminality of life and death make up a tolerated contact zone where fully enfranchised citizens of the contemporary globalized world represent the weak limits separating humans from subhumans, the lawful from the unlawful. Here, in a state of suspension, those whom Frantz Fanon once labeled the *damnés* live in such a state of suspension.

In short, the coloniality of being corrodes the ways in which the Central American diasporic subject acts and thinks. Those representations in question make evident how coloniality has

permeated post-national endeavors, partially manifesting itself through complicated signs of erasures. Whether in the form of self-destruction as in *Inmortales*, or in that same text's masculinist gaze depriving female characters of any agency; whether in the act of including racialized subjects only in death, as happens to the Garinagu in *Big Banana*, or in the form of a vengeful death articulated in *The Tattooed Soldier*, the omnipresent menace of death is a dominant sign of Central American diasporic enunciations.

However, the very act of writing—that is, the existence of these diasporic texts in the US—could be seen as efforts to write back to the status quo; a conscious will to construct signs that mark Central American invisibilized beings as real subjects despite their abject marginalization. These vital textual signs marking diasporic subjects as *presentes* 'present' are a counterbalance to the hegemonic silence historically concealing the Central American state of exception.

#### Notes

1 All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2 The 1992 Los Angeles Riots began on April 29, 1992, after a jury acquitted three white and one Hispanic Los Angeles Police Department officers who had been caught on tape beating black motorist Rodney King, thousands of people rioted over the next six days.

3 In Guatemala, the term *ladino* commonly refers to non-indigenous Guatemalans and westernized mestizos. It also refers to westernized indigenous Guatemalans who have attained some level of upward social mobility. Implied in this definition is the adoption of racist views and practices towards the indigenous Guatemalan.

4 Women who work in *fichera* or *ficha* bars. These are bars where men pay for female escorts to accompany them for as many drinks as they buy. *Ficheras* usually work under severe forms of sexual and/or economic abuse.

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