

CENTRAL AMERICAN WOMEN MIGRANTS: A FEMINIST EXPLORATION OF
MIGRANT LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

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Central American women confront unique experiences in their countries that lead to their decisions to migrate to the United States. Their migration should be looked at through gendered perspectives due to the patriarchal structures that force them to migrate in search of better opportunity. Colonialism, postcolonialism and neocolonialism have continuously affected and stifled the role of women in Central America. The Northern Triangle of Central America, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, are plagued with poverty, violence, and corruption that hinder any progress for women. In order to gain liberties that they are not allowed to have in their home countries, women must break many chains that have suppressed their ability to think and act. Through migration, women connect with their spirituality, demand autonomy over their own bodies, and overcome familial trauma.

In migrant literature, the Central American woman's narrative is often placed in a supporting role. This negatively portrays the experience of women as secondary to men in importance. In the texts, *We Are Not From Here*, *The Far Away Brothers*, and *Enrique's Journey*, this is perceived through the supporting female characters. Through a gendered perspective, using feminist and postcolonial theory, I analyze the narratives of women migrants in order to understand the obstacles they face in Central America, the process of migration, and life as a new migrant in the United States.

In the first chapter of this study, I address the background and history of the Northern Triangle in order to gain an understanding of its implications on women. In the

second chapter, I address the topic of spirituality in relation to Central American women's migration in *We Are Not From Here*. In the third chapter, I focus on the portrayal of migrant women's commodification in *The Far Away Brothers*. In the fourth chapter, I concentrate on family disintegration and the trauma that ensues from it in Central American women and children in *Enrique's Journey*. At the end of the study, the gendered perspective to migration will provide clarity to the importance of women as primary characters in migrant literature and in the conversation of migration.

KEY WORDS: Central American women, Central American Migration, Colonialism, Commodification, Ecofeminism, Family disintegration, Feminism, Gendered perspectives, Neocolonialism, Northern Triangle, Patriarchy, Postcolonialism, Sonia Nazario, Lauren Markham, Jenny Torres Sanchez, *Enrique's Journey*, *The Far Away Brothers*, *We Are Not From Here*.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

“Maybe I died and went to hell. Maybe this is hell, that’s what I remember thinking. And then I panicked, that hell should be the barrio where I grew up, with my people on a white van to the market. I had to get out. I had to escape. I leaned out the door and let go. But now, on this train, packed with all these people, I hold on”.

-Jenny Torres Sanchez, *We Are Not From Here*

One of the most discussed groups of migrants in the United States presently are Central Americans. Their pursuit in going to the United States illegally and undocumented is of great focus on all mediums. The current focus on the conversation has been on children, unaccompanied minors, coming from the countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in Central America.¹ The surge of Central American unaccompanied child migrants was so massive that, by the summer of 2014, it “gained mainstream visibility, becoming sensationalized as a crisis by U.S. politicians and media” (Alvarado et. al). Of all the illegal migration captures in the United States and Mexico border in 2020, 83.7% were of unaccompanied Central American children (U.S. Customs and Border Protection). One of the causes of these growing numbers of unaccompanied children is their pursuit to reunite with their mothers who have illegally migrated before them (Patel et. al). Central American women are often portrayed as submissive victims of violence who have little to no autonomy over their lives (Pardilla). This stereotype of Central American women does not portray their resiliency and strength. It also leads to the overlooking of their undocumented migration in migrant literature, their narratives becoming minor components of a plot focused on the male immigrant experience.

¹ See Luiselli’s *Tell Me How It Ends* and Zamora’s *Unaccompanied*.

Although the odyssey of undocumented migration is extremely difficult regardless of migrants' age or gender, the female narrative must be examined in order to understand the depths of the migration journey in its entirety. The percentage of women that have migrated independently over the years, between 48.1% and 49.3% as recorded by the United Nations, has enhanced the visibility of women's migration and has led to the feminization of migration (Garcia Medina 12). Immigrant women from all over the world have become an integral component of the United States workforce and women from El Salvador have "higher rates of participation in the labor force than U.S.-born women" (American Immigration Council). Central American women are crossing Mexico's and United States' borders in high numbers and that is altering not just their futures, but the futures of their children and the cycle of life in the Northern Triangle and in the United States. There is a need to examine the narrative of Central American women's migration due to the significant losses and gains that they experience when they migrate. The combination of loss and gain that will be the focus of this study are spiritual, physical, and familial. The epigraph alludes to the difficult choice a migrant makes in deserting their homeland and their people. However, it is a necessary measure to take in order to gain the freedom that they cannot have in their country. That is what these narratives will detail.

The texts that will be the focus of my study about these women are Jenny Torres Sanchez's *We Are Not From Here*, Lauren Markham's *The Far Away Brothers*, and Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey*. These texts are significant to my study in that they bring to light independent women narratives in Central American literature that are currently overlooked in literary scholarship. In *We Are Not From Here*, Pulga and

Pequeña narrate their experiences in migrating North from Guatemala. In *The Far Away Brothers*, the Flores twins, Ernesto and Raul, migrate in order to flee violence in El Salvador. In *Enrique's Journey*, Enrique's experiences are detailed as he migrates from Honduras to the United States in search of his mother. In all these texts, written by all women authors, there is an overwhelming privilege given to the male experience. When women are put into focus, Pequeña for example, they are not given a narrative of their own. However, women are very important components of all the characters' journeys. Why are *their* voices not given an individual platform? The women characters' marginalization within each text shapes the structure of each by demonstrating a glimpse of the importance of women to the migrant process.

The History of Central American Migration

The history and impact of Central American women's migration is just as essential in literature as men's stories albeit Central American migration rose as men escaped military drafting during the civil wars (Ambrosius 1). The civil wars of the 80s in Central America uprooted 2 million people directly due to the conflicts (Pearce 591). This uproot is where the rise of Central American migration exists. There are many factors that lead to millions of people leaving behind everything they know out of the necessity to survive. These factors all go together and stem from corrupt governments on both ends of the line of migration. The instability that derived from the civil wars of the 80s, which the United States was involved in, was the deciding factor for migrants then and now because the economic instability that runs through the Northern Triangle remained even after the wars ended (Babich and Batalova). This economic instability alone would not have caused the rising amounts of migration were it not for the gang

culture that came after it. One of the biggest causes for migration amongst Central Americans today is gang violence and extortion caused by the deportation of migrant men in the United States back to their home countries.² In this study, I examine the literary impact of this history of instability in Central America.

Testimonio

Central American literature has a range of history from the time of colonization in the 1500s to present day.³ The literature covers topics from “anti-imperialist fiction” to “transnational autoethnographies of the Central American diaspora translocated across the United States and elsewhere” (Rodriguez 235). The Central American migration narratives I explore exist in between Central American literature and U.S. Ethnic literature and they examine a new genre of migration narratives that are a part of recent Central American migration. My narratives are inherently connected to the Central American literary tradition in that they also portray the implications of imperialism and diaspora.

The Central American civil wars of the 1970s-80s generated their own literary genre, testimonio, which presents testimonies of people labeled by society as “others” such as “peasants, indigenous peoples, women, children, homosexuals, the poor, political prisoners, guerrilla fighters” (Craft 4). The genre spotlights “several crises” including the corrupt politics of the 70s and 80s that affected the oppressed, the dependency of nation states, and Central America’s difficulty in adapting to the ever-growing capitalism (Craft

² Ambrosius discusses how the violence that developed in Central America is attributed to this migration history (2).

³ Rodriguez’s epigraphs by Howard and Carmack enhance the idea that Central America had a rich history before colonization (1).

188). This genre was pivotal in expressing the sentiments of people during and after the civil wars. People were left with ongoing trauma and fear, and it was their testimonies on their experiences that helped heal them and teach the public of the harsh realities of being the “other”. By breaking the silence, testimonio creates social conditions that “enable the truth” and “contribute to a kind of subjective justice” (Lira 396). There are scholars such as David Horowitz and Daphne Patai who see testimonio as a mythical genre and believe testimonio text is riddled with lies because it is a narration of life as seen through the eyes of the person, not a factual detail of the events that occurred (Beverley 4). However, the raw experiences that testimonio portrays are more impactful than any historical account because they focus on the real-life humans that are affected by politics and power.

Therefore, testimonio always implies the “possibility of fiction” and “can never be concrete ‘proof’; as soon as it becomes provable, it is no longer testimony” (Shemak 29). An example of a testimonial text is Rigoberta Menchu’s, *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* which “presents a detailed first-hand account of someone caught in the upheavals of her time” (Craft 2). The intentionality of the narrator is paramount to testimonio, and the “situation of narration” is what expresses the urgency of the matter that the author is attempting to convey (Beverley 32). Menchu makes the reader aware of that intentionality in her narration:

We had to make big sacrifices. And so, we peasants have learned to direct our struggle ourselves, and *that* we owe to our understanding of our situation. A leader must be someone who’s had practical experience. It’s not so much that the hungrier you’ve been, the purer your ideas must be, but you can only have a real consciousness if you’ve really lived this life. (262)

Testimonio details the experiences of the oppressed establishing themselves in Central American nations. It reflects a genre of the collective experience and not solely that of an individual. My thesis charts a new genre in that it will discuss the truth-value of people's contemporary migratory experiences and the emphasis on the perceived veracity of the individual narratives of undocumented Central Americans. This genre, which could be called contemporary migrant testimonio, represents the modern truth that exceeds the truth of traditional testimonio due to the continuous expansion of neo-colonialism in Central America which provokes a different range of narratives. It also details the marginalization of that experience based on gender. In order to chart this new genre, I will evaluate how the texts that I analyze in my study blur the boundaries between fiction, non-fiction, journalism, memoir, autobiography and young adult literature. In the two journalistic texts in my study, *The Far Away Brothers* and *Enrique's Journey*, the authors serve as mediators in that we hear the stories of the subjects as the author has written them. Through all the texts, refugee narratives are represented in that they "stretch and bend our notions of U.S. ethnic and postcolonial literatures and their various subcategories as they reflect the experiences of people in between national spaces who have no legitimate political membership" (Shemak 39). The gravity of these narratives breaks down borders and humanizes the image of people who have been badly portrayed for too long.

Contemporary Central American Migration

Today, most of this migration comes from the countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras whose people currently make up the 3.3 million Central American immigrants living in the United States (Babich and Batalova). Males used to

make up most migrants during the civil war era, but now half of people who migrate are women who account for the 49.3% of Central American migrants in 2020 (International Migrant Stock). For Central Americans to cross into the United States without legal papers permitting them to enter the country, they must cross through the entire length of Mexico. If migrants do not pay for a coyote, they must cross on their own by hopping on the notorious trains that run through the country.⁴

The factors that continue to propel migration are the same ones of poverty and violence that have plagued the Northern Triangle for decades. The civil wars did nothing to make the economies in Central America better and people suffer from extreme levels of poverty. With the growing GDP of the United States and the ever-lowering GDP of the countries in the Northern Triangle, it makes the most sense for people to search for a faster way to make a living. The GDP in the United States as of 2020 was at \$20,936.60B, compared to a total of \$126.07B for the countries of the Northern Triangle, a 166% discrepancy (Macrotrends). Furthermore, the gang violence in the Northern Triangle affects the economy and personal security significantly (Ambrosius 1). The gang violence that rose in the 1980s in Central America has only grown bigger and stronger throughout the years, causing the continuous migration of people to the United States. Regarding El Salvador, *The New York Times* reports:

With an estimated 60,000 members in a country of 6.5 million people, the gangs hold power disproportionate to their numbers. They maintain a menacing presence in 247 of 262 municipalities. They extort about 70 percent of businesses.

⁴ A coyote will charge a high price to smuggle a migrant through Mexico and over the border into the United States. If a migrant cannot pay, they are subjected to ride the dangerous Bestia (Nazario).

They dislodge entire communities from their homes, and help propel thousands of Salvadorans to undertake dangerous journeys to the United States. Their violence costs El Salvador \$4 billion a year... (Martinez et al.)

This violence affects public and private life in astounding ways that make it impossible to live in a stable environment no matter where one turns. Gang violence can both indirectly affect women through family members' involvement and directly impact their mental, physical, and economic conditions.

The Feminization of Migration

In the narratives that I examine, I shed light on the factors that push a woman to migrate from her home country and how they all lead to the feminization of migration. For example, the structures of gender relations that hinder women from advancement force them to shift their outcomes through the form of migration (Descoteaux 21). These structures stem from patriarchal ideologies that have embedded themselves so deeply as to cause a submissive nature in some women of certain cultures (Ray and Qayum 189-190 and Sev'er 283). The patriarchal superiority that permeates the culture in Central America contributes significantly to the dependence of women on their male counterparts inside their public and private lives (Padilla 62 and Noyori-Corbett 894-895). In the public sphere, there are few women in politics who can argue for women's rights and equality. In 2020 in the Northern Triangle, the average number of women in parliament was 32% and 35% in ministerial positions (World Economic Forum). An example of this inequality can be found in El Salvador where women have a right to own property, but banks are unwilling to let them take out a mortgage (USAID). In the private lives of Central American women, this dependence on males for everything expands machismo

and domestic violence.⁵ This strong, essentially forced, dependency on men brings about high dropout and pregnancy rates amongst women in countries like El Salvador in the Northern Triangle (Noyori-Corbett and Moxley 895).

Even when women want to better themselves, the lack of work opportunities for women have been a big reason for migration to the United States. Globalization brought a massive change in the opportunities that uneducated women have for work because of the expansion of technology and information that has exposed women to different options for their lives that include being a part of the labor force (Beneria et. al. 3). An example of taking part of that labor force is seen in the high number of women immigrants who are house cleaners and nannies. Globalization has created a need for these types of employment due to the high number of women with education and families that are part of the workforce and who need home and childcare (Beneria 8-9). As outstanding as these rising levels of working immigrant women are, there are still too many discrepancies in that these women do not have complete stability in these jobs and are on the “lower echelon of labor markets” (Beneria et. al. 6). This occurs in *Enrique’s Journey* through Lourdes who migrates to the United States with the goal to make enough money to send back to her kids, Enrique and Belky, and eventually go back to Honduras. However, making enough money to provide for her kids back home becomes a struggle because she does not make enough to pay her bills in the United States and send back to Honduras. Nazario writes, “She can’t buy milk or diapers or take her daughter to the doctor when she gets sick. Sometimes they live on emergency welfare. Unemployed,

⁵ Walters and Valenzuela define machismo as the characteristic of many Latino men who are perceived to “embody hypermasculine” traits and are “positioned as rightfully masculine and potentiate legendary status among both peers and family”. Rigoberta Menchu also discusses the conflict of machismo in pages 261-262 of her testimony.

unable to send money to her children in Honduras, Lourdes takes the one job available...” (14-15). These are the constant struggles that migrant women undergo because they oftentimes have the sole responsibility to provide for their children. The remittances that are sent back to the home countries are many people’s only source of income and for women whose children’s dads have left the picture, they have no other choice but to stay separated from their children (Nuñez).

It is important to look at feminist studies in order to focus on the engendered aspects of migration. A critical feminist perspective is needed when studying the social constructs of power that hinder women and their ability to migrate (Angulo-Pasel 900). Using critical feminism takes “gender as a focus of analysis and reconstructs social structure which has devalued and marginalized women” (Misra 72). In order to relate the nation-state to men and women’s sexualized division of roles within the family, such as women overseeing all domestic responsibilities, the separation between nation and family needs to be challenged (Burman and Yuval-Davis). The separation between the political sphere and the individual household dynamics must be studied together in order to close the gaps between gender roles. These studies on gender and migration and their global effect show perspectives from host countries such as England, Italy, Greece, Canada, and the United States and migrants’ home countries all over Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Descoteaux, Glick, and Burman). Looking at the global consequences of women’s migration develops a wider understanding of the causes and effects of Central American women’s migration as well.

The commonality between the global perspectives on migration are colonialism and imperialism that incited the lack of political and economic stability that forces people

to migrate. David McNally states, “The criminalization of global migrants is among the most obscene features of the world in which we live” (141). Globalization, capitalism, and neocolonialism can all be attributed to this rise of migrants who “cross borders with only a bag in hand” in order to simply live (McNally 140). Scholarship on the effect of colonialism on migration discusses women’s bodies and “rewrites history to include the experiences of women, suggesting that women have always been implicated in the process of colonization and that colonialism itself is a gendered process” (Holmes 71-72). Holmes’ idea stems from Chicana artist, Alma Lopez, who expresses the connections between colonialism and capitalist neocolonialism through her art:

She shows women's labor and their bodies are exploited in the same way natural resources are exploited in this and other ages. Women are dehumanized and their labor is naturalized by drawing a host of dichotomies into action (mind/body, intellectual labor/physical labor, men's work/women's work, whiteness/racialized other, human/animal). (Holmes 64)

Scholarship focuses on Chicana, Mexican American, women who cross borders, but Central American women also enter this conversation because they also inherit a legacy of colonial invasions on indigenous land. These past and current invasions on the land, from Spanish conquests to the current green wars, have greatly affected women’s livelihood.⁶ The Spanish conquests of the 1500s and beyond in Guatemala not only killed off 90% of the indigenous people, but it also tried to “whiten” the indigenous race and exploited them for the cultivation of tobacco and sugar cane (Ybarra 33 and Figueroa

⁶ Ybarra argues that conservation practices authorize violence in protected areas that affect the indigenous people living in those areas and calls it “green wars” (33).

985). This robbed the indigenous community of their culture and their freedom. For example, indigenous women's tradition in hand-weaving garments was used against them under Spanish rule and now their original designs are used and sold for tourism and in United States culture without any recognition (Figueroa 987). In the early 2000s, the exploitation of land for resources like gold and petroleum in Guatemala has led to the threat of cyanide in the water of Mayan communities (Way 8). Currently, the drug production and trafficking industry affects the livelihood of people and the environment where the "dynamic frontiers of northern Guatemala and eastern Honduras provide the remoteness, maritime and border access, and weak governance systems that drug traffickers prize" (Tellman et al. 133). This constant upheaval of the land and displacement of people is a product of many centuries. In the wide scope of history, the need to migrate would never have existed because lands would not have been forced into wars for power and greed that devastated the earth and its inhabitants (Nhanenge 313).

The narratives I analyze reveal how the journey of undocumented migration alters migrant women's relationship to their spirituality, their bodies, and their family structures. The feminine spiritual connection to the land begins to break as women make the journey out of their homeland and across unknown and dangerous land.⁷ Women's bodies are commodified, sometimes by choice, many times not. Some women are trafficked by force, but other women voluntarily take on prostitution in order to provide for their families and pay for the migrant journey (Schmidt and Buechler 151). The disintegration of their families often causes irreparable damage in the lives of their children. All this loss in the life of immigrant women does not just affect their personal

⁷ Holmes discusses "women's efforts to create spiritual connections to the land" (26).

self, it also contributes to the social structures set forth by patriarchal ideologies and affects the environment, economy, politics, and public discourse (Viola).

The commodification of women's bodies, their sexualization as a profit, is an important factor in the feminization of migration (Vogt, Nhaneng, and Cockcroft). Women along the migrant trail are subjected to the dangers of kidnapping and sex trafficking, a big business in Mexico (Vogt 87). There is a tremendous sexual objectification of Central American women along the migrant trail and economists believe that profits in the sexual trafficking industry are bigger than those of the drug industry since bodies can be "sold more than once" (Vogt and Cockcroft). Nhaneng argues the patriarchal structures that demonstrate this commodification known as human trafficking before and during the migrant journey:

Patriarchal ideology is the foundation of human trafficking. This form of abuse is consequently based on domination, exploitation, and undermining of the human dignity of women and girls. The underlying causes for human trafficking relate to feminization of poverty and unequal gender relations. However, also female ignorance, male greed, political instability, and conflicts in the home country are causing the phenomenon. (61)

During the process of migration women are the most vulnerable to this and it is estimated that 6 in 10 women are raped and subjected to trafficking along their journey through Mexico (Amnesty International). Unfortunately, there seems to be no place where women can be safe from this commodification. They are unsafe in their home countries where women are sexually persecuted and there are times where they are flung into the same conflict in their new country because of their susceptibility (Markham 156 and Price 50).

Many times, women must make the decision to become a part of the sex trade in order to be able to make enough money to cross into the United States and/or to provide for their children back home (Schmidt 151). The form of commodification that I explore most greatly is motherhood and the monetary value that is placed on children and housewives that continue to hold up patriarchal constructs. In *The Far Away Brothers*, this commodification of motherhood is analyzed through Maricela whose life decisions revolve around her role as a mother.

I explore family disintegration in order to understand what transpires when a woman leaves her family behind in order to go to the United States to provide economic stability. Family disintegration is one of the losses that women experience, testify to, and that defines the migrant narrative. By looking at this through trauma studies which “explores the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance” (Mambrol), I can bring to light the cultural trauma that haunts many Central American women and children. Cultural trauma can haunt the human experience throughout generations (Caruth and Hirsch). Due to the trauma caused by wars and family separation both “embodied communicative memory and institutionalized cultural memory would be severely impaired by traumatic experience (Hirsch 33). After the civil wars and migratory experiences of Central Americans, there is undoubtedly a wide scope of trauma that can be deciphered through the gaps and silences of Central American women narratives. Trauma occurs in the text, *Enrique’s Journey*, through Lourdes who has to leave Enrique and his sister at a young age in order to

provide for them from the United States.⁸ The lasting trauma Lourdes' migration causes, such as the remorse she accumulates by leaving her kids in El Salvador and having a child in the United States and the tumultuous relationship she and Enrique share once they are reunited, is common amongst Central American families and affects the moral structures that hold families and cultures together. Critics of the text, *Enrique's Journey*, also interpret the theme of familial ties in the text and how they both motivate and deter migration, affecting the course of the family no matter what decision is taken (Vasseur). The themes of family disintegration revolve around the text and illustrate the trauma vividly and candidly.

To understand migration in a feminized perspective, women's experiences need to be documented. Interviews done on Central American women using feminist research methodologies bring awareness to the reasons why women have no choice but to migrate (Schmidt and Buechler). Interviews with women show the plethora of their struggle to make it in their home countries and the dire circumstances that lead them to their journey (Mayers and Freedman). Women are interviewed on the migrant trail and in migrant shelters where they can get meals and a few days of rest. This methodology in interviewing women has a connection to the genre, testimonio, because these are personal narratives on what the women have lived through that have nothing to do with their view or knowledge on historical facts, but that are impregnated with their struggles due to the history of their homelands.

⁸ Trauma studies show the effect of family separation on the mental health of all involved, especially mothers and children (Gindling and Poggio).

Feminist activism in Central America is not heard about often, but there are women's movements that rose after the civil wars. In Guatemala and Nicaragua, women activist groups, such as the Association of Women Confronting the National Crisis, focus a great deal on women's rights in the public realm (Destrooper). However, it often occurs that women's personal stories are disregarded, and organizations seldom connect the public domain to women's realities (Destrooper 148). This emphasizes the need for studying migration through an engendered lens. It is necessary to focus on the personal experiences of women migrants that marginalize them to a larger extent than they were before they migrated. Chicana feminist activists like Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga have recognized the importance in standing in solidarity with Central America and learning about Latin American struggles also caused by United States interventionism (Rodriguez 152).

Ecofeminism and Migration

Women give up a plethora of things when they migrate, one of those being their physical and spiritual ties to the land they are leaving. By examining ecofeminism and migration, I will tie the effects that patriarchal structures have on nature, women, and all societal structures. Ecofeminism exists at the intersection of feminism and social and environmental movements that link oppressed others based on "gender, ecology, race, species, and nation" (Gaard 28). It emerged in the eighties in the United States around the same time that countries in Central America were experiencing civil war (Gaard). In chapter 2, I will provide necessary scholarship on that connection, building on scholarship such as ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism is tied to migration due to “resource alienation and destruction of livelihoods” caused by colonialism that leads to growth of migrants in host countries (Vandana and Mies 284). The green wars that are occurring in Guatemala due to the fight between narcos and military over land, directly impacts women who work and live off the contested land. Women must leave it because they are not safe from exploitation, massacre, and deforestation. This destruction of land relates to ecofeminism because it perpetuates the “male-dominant social order”, which controls the institutions like culture that persecute women, and leads to the subjugation of women and the environment (Gaard 28). Due to “capitalist patriarchy”, women are excluded from economic growth and are therefore displaced from their livelihoods and alienated from the “natural resources on which their livelihoods depend- their land, their water, their forests, their seeds and biodiversity” (Vandana and Mies xv). This long history of exploiting and eroticizing women’s relation to the land goes back to European colonialism. Vandana and Mies argue, “The goal of these processes of subordinating nature, women and the colonies and treating them as spiritless and passive matter to be dissected and recombined as the male engineer wishes, was and is the optimization of human labour for the production of material wealth” (177-178). In modern day Central America, this conquest for land is not only pushing women away, but it also affects all migrants who cross between Guatemala and Mexico who get stuck in the middle of “narco-narratives” (Ybarra 140). Patriarchal ideologies of power over indigenous lands directly affects the people in the rural areas of Central America, but they also trickle down to the poor, urban areas.

In *We Are Not From Here*, ecofeminism can be studied through one of the main characters, Pequeña, who must leave the physical and spiritual connection she has to her land and form a connection to an unknown and dangerous land. Pequeña's narrative is closely tied to the ecofeminist studies of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga who make ecological connections that "underscore the link between women and nature because indigenous spirituality offers women a position of authority through association with nature goddesses and the land" (Holmes 58-59). This position of authority is thoroughly compromised when women must leave their land and it should be a larger topic of study within women's migration. The strategic essentialism that Anzaldúa and Moraga use, like emphasizing their radicalness as women of color, consolidate their power and resist oppression, even if it is going against their white feminist counterparts (Anzaldúa and Moraga xlv). Women lose their sense of ownership to their mind and bodies when they must leave the source of that connection: their homeland. Anzaldúa writes, "As a refugee, she leaves the familiar and safe homeground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain. This is her home/ this thin edge of barbwire" (35).

Spiritual Connections in *We Are Not From Here*

In chapter 2, I analyze the reconnection to spirituality that women experience through migration in the young adult novel, *We Are Not From Here*. Drawing on the ecofeminist perspectives of Anzaldúa and Moraga, I examine the novel's portrayal of civil and gang warfare's destruction of the land as one of the factors for women's disconnection to their spirituality. Pequeña endures sexual abuse in her home country of Guatemala which leads to an unwanted pregnancy. Her attacker, a prominent gang leader in the town, holds her mind and body hostage, to the point that, in order to escape him,

she is forced to make the journey to the United States. In her journey through Mexico, she constantly doubts her ability to succeed in crossing, but she overcomes that by healing through her feminine strength. Throughout the novel, Pequeña goes through constant periods of dreaming of her spirit guide, a witch. This witch represents the feminine spirit that exists beyond the patriarchy that “constructed ‘the witch’ in an early modern phase to identify its enemy and burned her as scapegoat” (Salomonsen). As she traverses through Mexico, she feels the witch's presence and wonders if she will also follow her to the new land she is venturing into. I will analyze how these strong ties of womanhood, land, and the spiritual realm in this realistic fiction story tie into the discussion of the effects of colonialism on women.

The Commodification of Bodies in *The Far Away Brothers*

In chapter 3, I examine the commodification of women's bodies through the portrayal of the female minor characters in Lauren Markham's *The Far Away Brothers*, a journalistic text written about two brothers who are forced to migrate to the United States from El Salvador. The female characters that will be examined do not take part in the actual migration and their stories portray the difficulty of staying in El Salvador despite the violence that threatens them and their bodies. The focus on the female experience will be on Maricela, the brothers' older sister, and the commodification that she experiences through motherhood. The limited attention given to the topic in literary text, compared to the huge effect that commodification of bodies has on the economies of all countries involved, will be an important part of my research for this chapter.

Family Disintegration in *Enrique's Journey*

In chapter 4, I examine family disintegration as one of the greatest effects of women's migration through the story of Lourdes in *Enrique's Journey*, a creative non-fiction text. Family disintegration is common amongst migrants because they must leave many family members behind including their children, which causes "negative psychological consequences for both children and parents" (Gindling and Poggio 1160). I will focus on the actions of Lourdes, a single mother who must leave her home in Honduras in order to economically provide for her children, and how those actions derail the life of her son, Enrique and fracture the family relationship. I examine how the trauma of his mother's absence leads Enrique to develop drug and alcohol substance abuse. Through this analysis, I will place an emphasis on the inevitableness of psychological trauma when it comes to family ties being severed due to migration. This will also lead me to the current conversation surrounding unaccompanied minors coming to the United States and the political and public discourse that has developed out of it.

The Cost of Migration for Women

In Chapter 5, my conclusion, I affirm that Central American women lose a lot to seek the "American Dream", but they also gain a great deal. I hope to clarify this topic by connecting literature about Central American women migrants to research on the subjects that change the course of migrant women's lives. There is a lack of literary narratives that detail women's deciding factors towards migration and the obstacles that come from it. My thesis attempts to offer an analysis of this underdeveloped topic. The fact that I must look at minor characters indicates a literary gap that must be addressed. However, that

just makes the premise of this study even more relevant. Women pay a big price in their migration, and that includes the silencing of their narratives.

CHAPTER II

Spirituality and Homeland

In *We Are Not From Here*, published in 2020, author Jenny Torres Sanchez tells the fictional narratives of two Guatemalan teenagers, Pulga and Pequeña.⁹ In the novel, Pulga and Pequeña are cousins who, alongside Pulga's best friend, Chico, are forced to migrate to the United States because they are all in danger of gang retaliation. The gang leader in their barrio, Rey, is coercing Pulga and Chico to be a part of his gang because they witnessed Rey murdering someone. Pulga and Chico's only options are to become a part of the gang life, refuse and be killed by Rey, or leave the only home they know and escape to the United States. All the circumstances that the characters in the novel endure are reflective of issues that encompass youth in Central America and obligate them to migrate. Gang violence is one of the greatest factors of migration because it is impossible to escape its grasp once it has attached itself to a community (Fogelbach 429).

Pequeña, the feminine element of the novel and the focus of this chapter, also must endure terrorism by Rey. Pequeña is the feminine element because of the portrayal of her body as strength and her spirituality as a guide that heals her and others. Pequeña's femininity has less to do with her gender than it does with the patriarchal ideologies of strength and religion that she breaks throughout her development as a character in the novel. Those patriarchal ideologies being that only men can be strong, and that spirituality is an evil practice. Through Pequeña's portrayal and through the perspectives of indigenous women and Chicana feminism, this chapter provides the context around

⁹ Torres Sanchez is a daughter of immigrants from Guatemala and El Salvador. She describes herself as having lived "on the border of two worlds" growing up in America with traditional parents who did not understand the culture (Poray Goddu).

women migrant's journey to break the patriarchal forces that hold their spirituality and their homeland hostage. In this chapter, I analyze how Rey represents an oppressive figure for Pequeña and how that all relates to the history of colonial oppression. He relies upon patriarchal power to bolster his control over her. Rey rapes Pequeña and she has his baby. Rey sees Pequeña as his conquest and possession. In order to escape his menacing grasp, she leaves her newborn son with her mother and leaves for the journey to the United States. Pequeña's perspective throughout the novel paints the painful reality and hopeful illusion of crossing North and embeds the image of the Bruja as a Central American female migrant figure in women migrants' narratives.¹⁰

In this chapter, I will delineate Central American women migrants' loss of spirituality caused by their forced disconnection from their land. I analyze the effect of colonialism and neocolonialism on the land, from the early colonization of the Spanish to the current use of land for drug production. I also place an emphasis on the spiritual image of La Bruja in *We Are Not From Here*, which is reflective of Central American and Latin society, in order to demonstrate the patriarchal ideologies that control the narrative of women. In the novel, the female migrant, Pequeña, becomes a Bruja migrant, as she is a parallel to her Bruja spirit guide, by breaking down all the ideologies that are set out for women that hold them back from their divine femininity. I will focus primarily on the Central American country of Guatemala which is the setting of the novel, and the

¹⁰ "Bruja" is the Spanish word for witch that will be defined and used throughout the chapter.

connections that can be made between land, spirituality, and the indigenous cultures of the country.

I begin by examining the history of indigenous women in Guatemala in the beginning of the chapter because of the great scholarship on the history of indigenous cultures in the country. This history of indigenous women and their silencing is important to my thesis because it provides an understanding on the centuries of struggle for women due to colonialism and it is also the foreground for feminist movements. I build on Chicana feminist and ecofeminist perspectives to analyze the patriarchal destruction of women's spirituality. Women become disconnected to their land whether it is through the forced uprooting of their home due to land disputes or from the migration from their country due to poverty, violence, etc. The high number of women that migrate to the United States from Central America is brought about by many factors that are out of their control in their home country. One of those factors is their lack of freedom, spiritually and physically, caused by patriarchal colonialism in their home country.

By spiritual freedom I mean women's ability to connect with their inner selves, their consciousness and awareness of their personal wants and needs, and project that spirituality into the world. This disconnection that women have little control over goes hand in hand with the link to their spirituality. *We Are Not From Here* portrays how a woman's spiritual awareness can be destroyed by patriarchal power. The bruja is a female spiritual figure that patriarchies have used to portray women as outcasts, but some Central American women have reclaimed the bruja figure as representative of female power. For example, Las Brujas Migrantes, a group of feminist social activists, explain this wisdom which gains strength through circumstance:

My witch wisdom is not only mine. It is the sum of a disbanded diaspora of thoughts and practices. The black, the racialized, the white, the indigenous, the peasant, the community, the forgotten, the ignored, the persecuted, the exiled, the impoverished, the rich, we are survivors of the same macho, capitalist and patriarchal system. (Bruja Mensajera)

This group of women bring together the idea of “bruja” with migration and help to understand Pequeña’s journey of becoming a Bruja migrant. All these topics lead to the same conclusion that women have been subjugated to such a small role in the scope of colonial projects and it is up to them to strengthen their positions in life through migration.

Chicana Feminism

Chicana feminism will be a part of my study due to the connective themes and purposes it has to Central American migration. Chicana feminism is different than what would be considered mainstream feminism because it focuses on women of Mexican descent. However, it has also embraced women of other Latin American descent and women of color because many feminists of color saw themselves as marginalized tokens in the “white” feminist community (Anzaldua and Moraga xlv). Chicana feminists like Moraga and Anzaldua saw the necessity to include a more global perspective in their feminist studies due to the deep-rooted implications of colonialism on all women of color, not just on Chicanas.

The long history between Mexico and the United States and the “realities of continuous movement within and across social locations mean that Chicanas increasingly deploy a transnational perspective that enables us to confront the clash and confluence of

cultural, political, and economic disparities" (Zavella 4). Children of Central American immigrants experience the transnational perspectives that Zavella discusses just as much as Chicanas and Chicanos. Children of immigrants that are between two worlds, like Torres Sanchez describes, will understand the circumstances that lead to migration, take on that weight and awareness of circumstance, and develop a united consciousness of the migrant struggle in order to fight against it. Cherrie Moraga states:

The painful irony is that the United States' gradual consumption of Latin America is bringing the Americas together. The United States is changing face... Most of us are immigrants, economic refugees coming to the United States in search of work. Some of us are political refugees, fleeing death squads and imprisonment, others fleeing revolution and the loss of their wealth. Finally, some have simply come here very tired of war. (156)

Moraga, a Chicana born in Los Angeles, classifies herself as one with the migrants from all over Latin America. This is representative of the large impact of the movement, not just on the Mexican American women who encounter injustice every day, but on all people who are at the mercy of another country for security. It is important to use Chicana feminism in my study on Central American women because of the lack of scholarship on Central American women's feminism. The global perspectives of Chicana feminism shed light on a history of colonialism and its effect on the indigenous women that cannot be marginalized and forgotten.

The Effects of Colonialism on Guatemala

Colonialism in Guatemala directly led to the destruction of the indigenous cultures and their lands. Since the arrival of Spanish conquistadors on Guatemalan soil five hundred years ago, the ethnic “persecution and violence” have not ceased, and the indigenous people of Guatemala have had to endure disease, dispossession of land, and cultural exploitation (Figueroa 985). After resisting colonialism and gaining independence, the indigenous still had to answer to Ladinos and their encroachment over indigenous land for crop plantations for products like coffee.¹¹ This led to the exposure of indigenous groups like the Maya community to multiple threats that “targeted labour as well as land to be desirable economic assets” (Lovell 245). Centuries later, some of the indirect effects of neocolonialism in Guatemala are continuous land destruction for capital gain and gang violence which affect both rural and urban areas (Martinez Salazar). For example, an effect in rural areas can be seen in the rise of sweatshops that are a “contemporary form of forced labour that exploited a mostly female working force with multiple violations of civil rights, violence and repression” (Castillo Cabrera 383). Urbanization, a direct cause of indigenous land dispossession and international organizations in the neoliberal age only led to stronger forms of capitalism and neocolonialism that hinder the progress of the many and propel the success of the few.

The violent and repressive nature of modern criminal organizations is an important component to this study because they prevent women from having spiritual and physical freedom. Rey, the prominent gang leader in *We Are Not From Here*, is of great

¹¹ A Ladino is a westernized Central American person of predominantly mixed Spanish and indigenous descent (Britannica).

symbolic importance because he represents the role of patriarchal gang violence in destroying Central American women's connection to the land. Rey embodies this through his dominion over Pequeña. Rey is part of the cycle of violence that permeates the Northern Triangle, and his actions propel Pulga, Pequeña, and Chico to migrate. The criminal organizations that formed during the civil war in Guatemala produced a security crisis "worse than at any time during the civil war" (Insight Crime). The criminal gang activity that occurs in *We Are Not From Here* is a direct representation of what is happening present day in the Northern Triangle. The added number of deportations that bring gang members back to their home country adds to the pressures of gang activity as seen in Rey. In Guatemala, there were reportedly 14,714 cases of gang-related extortion in 2019, most of them being in homes and businesses (Overseas Security Advisory Council). In the novel, Torres Sanchez portrays the easiness with which violence can affect a community and change fates when Pulga and Chico witness the murder of a store owner in their neighborhood. In order to not get caught up in what they know must be a gang-related crime, Pulga and Chico must leave the body of the store owner and run:

All I know is we have to run-hard and fast and without looking back. Away as quickly as possible. Away so you're not a witness. So you're not a part of any of it. So no one can ask you questions. So no one knows you were there. We run. It's the way you learn to live around here. (33)

Like Pulga and Chico, the fear that people live in robs them of the simple human acts of helping to defend and mourn the innocent. Human rights activist, Elizabeth Lira, notes that these common crimes in Guatemala are not easy to live through and people carry a strong sense of trauma from all the criminal occurrences in their country: "Yet in

Guatemala I was impressed by people's sense that these crimes had been committed with impunity, that the threat is ever-present. Fear is palpable, despondency as well as hope, and the impact of the violence is deeply personal” (396). Violence has plagued Guatemala for decades and has left the people traumatized and wary of the gangs in their neighborhoods and the corrupt government that enables them and other criminal organizations.

The Indigenous, the Rural, and the Urban

For as much coverage as gang violence gets, it is the higher national power that formed before them that continues to perpetuate the cycle of violence and criminal activity in Guatemala and the rest of the Northern Triangle. After the war, the Guatemalan military formed civilian militias to “extend its power and influence over the hobbled, corrupt and incompetent state” by targeting rural lands and affecting thousands of indigenous people (Insight Crime). In Rigoberta Menchu’s testimonio, she reflects on the violence that overcame her Quiche community:

The government says the land belongs to the nation. It owns the land and gives it to us to cultivate. But when we’ve cleared and cultivated the land, that’s when the landowners appear. However, the landowners don’t just appear on their own - they have connections with the different authorities that allow them to manoeuvre like that. Because of this, we faced the Martinez family, the Garcias, and then the Brols arrived. This meant we could either stay and work as *peones* or leave our land. There was no other solution. So my father travelled all over the place seeking advice. We didn’t realize then that going to the government authorities was the same as going to the landowners. (125)

This corrupt system run by the government and the wealthy still affects the rural lands of the indigenous through drug trafficking. Reports state, “Taking advantage of a hungry and divided population and a weak and corrupt state, the major criminal groups operating in Guatemala are involved in myriad illicit activities. The most disruptive is drug trafficking” (Insight Crime). The drug trafficking industry is closely connected to the destruction of land and directly affects the people of those lands. Meghan Ybarra writes, “While narco-narratives do not seem related to conservation at first blush, narco-planes land on narco-plantations in protected areas, supposedly the cause of narco-deforestation. The narco associations of social ills, violence, and death map onto those living in trafficking regions” (136). The consequences of all criminal organizations directly and indirectly affect the people in Guatemala.¹²

These disputes for land, either from war or drug trafficking, focus tremendously on power and status, but they focus too little on the effects that they have on women. The land has been used for capitalist accumulation and women have been largely excluded from these endeavors. Much of the scholarship that I looked at for this study, based on land accumulation for things like drug production, cattle ranching, and ecotourism, fails to even mention women in their research (Ballve, Devine, and Finley-Brook). This research demonstrates what is portrayed in the novel with Rey, who is symbolic to the power men hold that they taunt and silence women with. The struggle for women and children is rarely represented because “only male figures are represented as having the agency to kill (for land and power). This renders the deaths of women and children

¹² Non-criminal organizations that also bring harmful effects are enterprises like cattle ranching and ecotourism (Devine).

unspoken and unseen” (Ybarra 175). The omission of the impact on women speaks volumes to the underlying problem of male dominance over the female body and spirit. There is a history of patriarchal domination over the land that can be traced back to colonialism (Jaimes Guerrero 61). This comes into relation with the dominance of women because, in the male’s domineering and egoistic perspective, if they can come and take land as their own, why can’t they also take women as their own? In Menchu’s testimonio, she emphasizes how important women were to the community she grew up in as opposed to the colonist negation of a woman as mentally valuable (Fiske 524). Women were part of it all: the spiritual ceremonies, the cultivation of the land, etc. Menchu depicts the dominance of men through the physical aspect of men’s power over women when she explains how the army came to indigenous lands and raped many of the girls that she knew: “There were four of them. Two of them were pregnant by soldiers and the other two not. But they were ill too because they’d been raped by five soldiers who’d come to their house” (168). In an interview with Noemi Tun, an indigenous Guatemalan whose village and family was directly impacted by Mexican drug gangs cultivating poppies for the United States in the early 2000s, Noemi relates the following event that leads to her parents migrating to the United States:

One night, strangers from the other village came to our village, beat my father badly, and threatened to kill him. They cut him on the legs with knives. There were a lot of men attacking him. He couldn’t defend himself. I didn’t see this happen, but I saw him right after when he was all bloody... My mom was physically attacked when she tried to defend him. They punched her and

threatened her. The attackers were Ladinos who spoke Spanish well. (Mayers and Freedman 99)

She remembers how the “narcos” set the neighboring villages against each other in their fight over land and water for profit and how her house was eventually burned down. All of this led to her and her sister’s migration to the United States with coyotes. Noemi recalls the dangers of the journey and how they would go days without eating. They were ultimately captured by immigration agents, reunited with their parents, and given asylum in the United States. Noemi’s account gives an overall understanding of this epidemic of kids migrating alone, or with other kids, to join their parents who migrated to the States before and shows the deep effects of neocolonialism. At the end of the interview Noemi says, “My hope is that in my native country there is no more war, no more problems, that they stop fighting over water and land, and that this whole thing ends so that I can be in my beautiful country someday” (Mayers and Freedman 107). The loss that Noemi experiences in leaving Guatemala remains with her after years of being in the United States successfully and even after all the pain she experienced in her home country. Menchu’s and Tun’s accounts occur decades apart, yet they both signal the depths of trauma that women undergo in Guatemala and the rest of the Northern Triangle. The examples represent just a few of the reasons why women must migrate North that are caused by colonial invasions on indigenous, rural land. Although their stories are different from Pequeña’s in *We Are Not From Here*, they provide a timeline of the different factors that have led to women’s migration. What started off as violence in rural areas then transferred into the same kind of violence in urban areas like in the setting of the novel.

This direct impact on rural areas indirectly impacts the urban settings in the Northern Triangle as is portrayed in *We Are Not From Here* through gang violence. After Pulga has had a conflict with Rey's brother, he realizes the danger he has put himself in with Rey: "Rey, who had done a few years in a United States prison for robbery. Rey, who, upon his release, was deported back to Guatemala, where he stayed true to his new gang family and ran with them in Guatemala City" (24). The origin of gangs in the Northern Triangle stem from the civil wars when many Central Americans migrated to Los Angeles in the 1980s and were exposed to gang life (Fogelbach 420). When these migrants were sent back to their home countries in the Northern Triangle, they took with them the gang culture and established the new social orders. Fogelbach states, "These deportees transplanted the MS-13 and MS-18 gangs to Central America. Eventually, the gangs established 112 cells in Honduras, 434 in Guatemala, and 307 in El Salvador" (421). The drastic effects of these cycles of migration and deportation are depicted in *We Are Not From Here* through every single experience that Pequeña faces.

Pequeña is a direct target of gang violence through Rey, who becomes obsessed with claiming her as his possession. Pequeña is robbed of her innocence and forced to mature because of Rey's dominance over her, something too common amongst young women in the Northern Triangle. Torres Sanchez writes:

I was his. That's what he said. And one night, while Mami slept on the living room couch the way she did sometimes when she came home exhausted from work, he made sure I understood what that meant... He told me not to make a sound, not to dare make a sound, or he'd kill me, and as soon as Mami made it into my room, he'd kill her, too. And just in case I doubted him, he showed me

the gun he carried in his waistband. Rey whispered in my ear, but I shut my eyes tight, silently screaming for help as he pressed himself against me, as his hands slid up my legs, under my nightgown. (115)

Rey's abuse of Pequeña leads to her pregnancy and the birth of her son who Rey wants to take, along with Pequeña, to live with him. If Pequeña would have chosen this route, she would have been able to raise her baby, but she would have been vulnerable to the cycle of domestic abuse that exists in Guatemala. Despite the advances that have been made in the Guatemalan government to combat femicide and violence against women, it is still widespread throughout the country (U.S Department of State). In 2020, Guatemala's Public Ministry reported that "3,684 women were victims of rape from January to August, compared with 6,231 women in the previous year" (U.S Department of State). Is it that the numbers are decreasing or are the cases being reported decreasing?¹³ In order to avoid unplanned motherhood, Pequeña takes a drastic measure and jumps off a moving bus in order to kill her baby. Pequeña reflects, "When I threw myself from the bus, hoping it would take a life, not caring if it was mine or that baby's" (186). Regardless of what decision Pequeña made, she would have lost something in the process. If she stayed with Rey and the baby, she would have been able to stay in Guatemala where her mom, tia, and cousins were. However, she would have been Rey's property and would have never had the freedom to be her own person. In the process of migrating to the United States, she had to leave her child, family, and everything that she knew in order to begin a new life where she was not trapped and abused. There is loss in all these instances, as

¹³ Regarding the pregnancy that results from Pequeña's rape, she had to have it because abortion is illegal in Guatemala unless the mother's life is in danger and an abortion, or even a miscarriage, can put a woman in prison up to 10 years (Human Rights Watch).

well as the spiritual and physical disconnection that Pequeña must experience in leaving Guatemala, crossing through all Mexico, and arriving in the United States.

Spirituality and La Bruja

Pequeña is a very spiritual person throughout *We Are Not From Here* and her spirituality follows her throughout her migration to the United States. Torres Sanchez portrays this spirituality through magic realism by embedding Pequeña's experiences of harsh reality with mythical dreams that sometimes warn her of the future and that sometimes show her spirit guide, a witch.¹⁴ As Pequeña is traversing through Mexico on La Bestia, she reflects:

For a moment, I wonder if La Bruja is here, watching over me. I stare, trying to conjure her up, trying to make her fly out of one of those windows. She'd swoop down toward me and take me away, let me hold on to her hair as she flies me through the sky and takes me somewhere safe. Somewhere I won't be afraid to dream. (168)

Pequeña dreams of la Bruja when she is encountering her hardest moments at home in Guatemala, and she wonders if she will follow her into her hard moments on the journey North. The ideology of the witch as a negative, non-Christian figure was brought to the Americas by the Europeans along with colonization (Lara 14). Chicana feminist, Irene Lara states, "As an empowered female cultural figure, la Bruja symbolizes power outside of patriarchy's control that potentially challenges a sexist status quo" (122). This is

¹⁴ Magic realism is a "chiefly Latin-American narrative strategy that is characterized by the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction" (Britannica).

precisely what Pequeña represents as she is the female character who challenges the patriarchy by letting her spirituality, not her Christianity, lead her out of the grasps of bondage. Gloria Anzaldua writes about “spiritual activism” which heals the demonization of the witch figure (Lara 13). It is notable that Torres Sanchez chooses Pequeña to have the spiritual narrative, but she does not have the other narrator in the novel, Pulga, have it as well. With this move, Torres Sanchez uses Pequeña as a healer that changes the perception of la Bruja from something bad into something good.

The reason why Pequeña, Pulga, and Chico migrate at the moment that they do is because Pequeña has a dream where she is warned that staying in Guatemala is going to bring danger into the three of their lives. In her dream, the store owner who Rey killed, Don Felicio, manifests himself. Torres Sanchez writes, “And finally-his eyes desperate and wild-one word escapes his lips. *Corre. Run*” (60). Pequeña implores Pulga and Chico to leave with her. This parallels the dream that Doña Agustina, Don Felicio’s wife, has which serves as another warning for the three kids. Torres Sanchez writes, “‘He came to me last night,’ she whispers. ‘It was... horrible.’ She takes another deep breath. ‘He could hardly talk, but he managed to say, ‘Que corran.’ *Run*, Pulga. He wants you and Chico to *run*. Pequeña, too’” (52). Doña Agustina is considered a bruja in the town because of these dreams and visions she has. All these details portray the spirituality of women that is tied to the land, to their physical location. Pequeña’s and Doña Agustina’s dream is about the people in their lives, about their pain and their warnings. Their spiritual connection and knowledge are therefore linked to their country, their people, and they forge the connection between the spiritual and the physical through their dreams. Anzaldua writes about this spiritual activist knowledge and the responsibility of the

women to protect everything, an ecofeminist thought. Anzaldua writes, “You share a category of identity wider than any social position or racial label. This conocimiento motivates you to work actively to see that no harm comes to people, animals, ocean—to take up spiritual activism and the work of healing” (Anzaldua 558). If she would not have been in tune with her dreams, Pequeña and her family would have faced danger at the hands of Rey. Through her intuitive dreams and her Bruja, she can come into herself and lead. La Bruja’s role as a spiritual guide manifest leads to an ecofeminist aesthetic that leads Pequeña in her migration. The image of nature and imagination forming into reality in order to defeat the structures that hold women and nature back comes to fruition with Torres Sanchez’s portrayal of Pequeña’s migration with her Bruja. Pequeña and the figure of la Bruja defy patriarchal divisions of feminine selfhood that Gloria Anzaldúa critiques in *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

The male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female self and the female deities. They divided her who had been complete, who possessed upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects. (49)

Due to patriarchal ideologies, La Bruja is seen as something separate from the female self and women should always strive to only possess “light” and not the “dark” that male-dominated cultures condemn. This is connected to *We Are Not From Here* because Pequeña needs to overcome those divisions in order to let her Bruja guide her, in order to become her. Ecofeminist scholar, Susan Griffin, states this notion of light and dark in her writing as well:

And that thought it is written that there is no wickedness to compare to the wickedness of a woman, it also written that good women have brought ‘beatitude to men, saved nations, lands and cities’, and that ‘blessed is the man who has a virtuous wife, for the number of his days shall be doubled’. (29)

The belief that only “good” women can serve men and the planet is built on the patriarchal values that men have structured to ensure the submission of women by masking their spirituality with virtuousness.

The idea of women being wicked is a patriarchal construct that forces women to disconnect with their spirituality. By making Pequeña so in tune with the supernatural, Torres Sanchez heals those divisions caused by patriarchal structures such as religion. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldua also writes about divisions and how they are created through fear:

Humans fear the supernatural, both the undivine (the animal impulses such a sexuality, the unconscious, the unknown, the alien) and the divine (the superhuman, the god in us) ... Because, according to Christianity and most other major religions, woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself. (39)

Anzaldua makes such an important realization on how the patriarchy sees the image of women as too fragile to have any independence because, like a toddler or an animal with not enough brain capacity to understand, there is no knowing what kind of trouble they will get into. In order to maintain that fear in women, they are constantly threatened by society’s set patriarchal ideologies and told that they cannot be superhuman and that they

need to just take a seat inside the house while men handle the outside happenings of the world that they single-handedly built.

In *We Are Not From Here*, Rey, and even Pequeña's mother and aunt, represent those patriarchal ideologies that hinder women from being their complete self. Rey sees Pequeña as something to have and not as a full-fledged woman with a mind and the capacity to be something in the world. Torres Sanchez writes, "'Stop worrying so much about your mami. You don't belong to her anymore, don't you know that?'" (93). He enforces his power by threatening her all the time and reiterating the plans that he has for their future with no regard for her opinions. Pequeña's mom and aunt, Pulga's mom, perpetuate their internalized misogyny by forcing Pequeña to have her baby and accept full responsibility for it, never asking for her opinion or even who the baby's dad is. Even when Pequeña is refusing to nurse her child when he is born, her mother adds pressure to the situation. Torres Sanchez writes, "'Pequeña! Mami's voice is sharp and harsh. 'I've tried to give you time to adjust to this. But we can't afford to buy formula each week. And if you don't start feeding him, your milk will dry up. You *have* to do this mija'" (61). Pain, from physical and mental abuse to forced motherhood, is a cycle inflicted on women. This cycle does nothing to make them stay and fight for the physical and spiritual liberty that they know is not accepted in their society. Pequeña choosing to leave that cycle breaks the structures created through patriarchal colonialism that rob women of fulfilling their potential on Earth.

The last leg of Pequeña's migration through Mexico reveals a lot about her spirituality and what it represents for migrant women. Throughout the journey North, Pequeña can maintain a connection to her homeland through her spirituality and her

Bruja. When Chico dies by falling off La Bestia, Pequeña searches for her only source of comfort, her Bruja: “*Through darkness, through imaginary worlds with water and spiders and stars-where witches who are also angels watch over you. Her dazzling eyes and long silver hair come into my mind’s eye. Come and tell me this is all a nightmare, I tell her. Come, wake me. Please*” (232). In this moment of awful pain and loss, Pequeña could have easily given up on her mission to migrate like Pulga did, but instead she puts all her faith into the Bruja as her female migrant spiritual guide. The Bruja does not come to save her and Pequeña must face the pain and reality of death using her own strength; the strength that has been inside of her throughout her entire spiritual journey. This moment of strength, along with the strength that she gains from the experience of sexual abuse and birthing of a child, allows Pequeña to “be her own mother” as Norma Alarcon puts it when writing about poet, Alma Villanueva:

The sexual abuse experienced leaves the daughter no choice but to be her own mother, to provide her own supportive, nurturing base for the physical and psychic survival. To escape the cycle of loathing and self-loathing. Villanueva’s woman has no alternative, even though she would have wanted more options, but to first love the self and then proceed to regenerate and nurture it by becoming her own mother. (183)

Pequeña depicts this in all women, young or old, who migrate to the United States escaping something, but heal by learning their strengths along the way. In her own journey, Pequeña develops awareness of that strength that has always been a part of her:

My head feels like it might burst from the sound of my own scream-that noise, thunder, roar, wail-that escapes me. It is so long, so all consuming, I can’t believe

I could carry it. It fills the sky and as it does, I know it has been building inside me since the day of my birth (328).

Her roar, representative of the strength of a woman, shows the power that she finds within that nurtures and loves her, mothering her in her greatest time of need.

In *We Are Not From Here*, Jenny Torres Sanchez portrays the spirituality that women carry. Some women, like Pequeña, tap into that power to help them overcome difficulties and give them hope. Other women lose that sense because they are so weighed down by the patriarchal dominance that does not let them be whole. An important theme in the novel is to not lose that spirit and the connection to the land where that spirit is born out of. Anzaldua expresses that idea in her writing:

It is the responsibility of some of us who tap the vast source of spiritual/political energies to help heal others, to put down a drawbridge; at the same time we must depend more and more on our own sources for survival. Ayudar a las mujeres que todavia viven en la jaula dar nuevos pasos y a romper barreras antiguas. (To help women who still live in cages to take new steps, and to break old barriers).

(xxviii)

Pequeña breaks physical and spiritual barriers in her journey to the United States that demonstrate the strength and spirituality exuding out of her divine femininity. At the peak of her journey through the desert when it seems that all hope is lost and she will die out there, she taps into that source of spirituality that helps her survive and that heals the spirits of all the women who were not able to:

I feel the coolness of La Bruja, that cold that ripples off her like a breeze. I don't know who she is, except...I do. And then I become her. And I am all the women

who are leading me through the land of the dead. I feel all of their spirits inside me. I hear their voices, from inside my head. I see their faces flickering in my mind, all their faces. I feel their spirits entering my body. Filling me with some kind of strength, with some kind of will. (327)

As Pequeña becomes the Bruja, she completes the spiritual awakening that her migrant journey has led her through. The spiritual activism that Anzaldúa discussed is portrayed here through the healing of all women migrants who have crossed through the same desert and have left their spirits there. Pequeña calls on the spirits of the women who lose themselves and their spirituality on the journey to a new life and to the women who never make it out of the land that they love, but that is too damaged to love them back. Pequeña signifies the light and dark, the divine and the undivine, that women are robbed of.

At the end of the novel, her journey has rebirthed her into a stronger person and she becomes a sort of superhero, a representative for all migrant women who are in search of the elements within them that make them whole. Her rebirth represents her old, abused self mothering herself, as Villanueva discussed, and healing herself into a position of power and strength because the only other alternative is to die both physically and spiritually. Pequeña becomes like the Bruja, she reclaims the Bruja figure so that it is no longer defined through the patriarchal idea of a bad woman. The migrant journey fills women with the hope of an ideal world where they demand the physical and spiritual freedom that they cannot demand in their home country. However, as Norma Alarcon writes:

The lure of an ideal humanism is seductive, especially for spiritual women such as we have often been brought up to be; but without female consciousness and

envisioning how as women we would like to exist in the material world, to leap into humanism without repossessing ourselves may be exchanging one male ideology for another. (188).

We Are Not From Here portrays how some women are able to complete the physical journey of migration, but do not complete the spiritual journey that is also necessary to succeed as a woman liberated from the structures and perceptions that men have made for her. Pequeña ends the journey North alone. Chico has died and Pulga has been taken by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, so Pequeña must complete the odyssey on her own. She is found and saved by two women: “They begin walking toward me as I feel my knees give way. I am a flower sprouting from ashes. I am *life* in the desert, and they pluck me and carry me to their car” (328). Once again, Torres Sanchez portrays Pequeña’s rebirth through the metaphor of a dead desert blooming with life. Whereas Pequeña was dead inside before, she has been born again into a symbol of vitality. The end of the novel depicts the resilience of migrant women and Torres Sanchez’s metaphor of life in the desert enhances the connection that women inherently find with nature, no matter where they are planted.

In this chapter, I have made the connection between land and spirit and the loss of both things that cause women to migrate. The indigenous struggle to conserve their land in Guatemala due to colonialism and neocolonialism led to a cycle of violence and migration for women who were caught in the middle. The patriarchal dominance that ingrained itself in the Northern Triangle has damaged the perception of the Central American woman. War, drug trafficking, and gang violence have wreaked havoc on their bodies and minds. In the case of women like Pequeña, they must make the decision on

whether to stay and continue being possessed and robbed of their spiritual freedom or make the dangerous but liberating trek into enlightenment and independence.

CHAPTER III

Physical Chains

The Far Away Brothers by Lauren Markham is a work of journalism published in 2017. Lauren Markham is a program coordinator at Oakland International High School in Oakland, California where she met Ernesto and Raul Flores, twins from El Salvador in the process of their court appeal to stay in the United States after migrating illegally. *The Far Away Brothers* details the experiences they had growing up in El Salvador that led them to migrate and their assimilation to life in the United States. The use of this text for my study will not be to focus on the twins though. I will study the female narrative that is underlying in the text, but that carries much depth about the role of women in Central America. This chapter will focus on how Central American, particularly Salvadoran, women's bodies are commodified in their home country, on the journey to the United States, when or if they migrate, and in the United States once they have settled into a new life.

Women's bodies are exposed to commodification through forced and unforced sexual transactions in their home countries and outside of their home countries. Their bodies are seen as instruments to make money from, and they are oftentimes either taken advantage of and killed, sold into prostitution involuntarily, or have no other option but to willingly prostitute themselves to pay for their migrant passage or to support their children and family (Noyori-Corbett and Moxley 892 and Schmidt and Buechler 151). I also study women's bodies as a commodity in their home life through domestic violence and motherhood. Women who are dependent on their spouse are seen as an object by said spouse and are forced to pay up with their bodies and with the production of children.

Through an economic perspective, the housewife holds up patriarchal constructs by allowing men to continue making the money while the women raise the next generation of kids that will take over those structures and keep the system in place.

The Structures of Male Dominance

Women's bodies undergo immense vulnerability under the patriarchal constructs that our world has been built on. This vulnerability leads to domestic violence, rape, forced pregnancies, sexual trafficking, femicide, etc. (Izcara Palacios, Noyori-Corbett and Moxley, Pardilla, and Schmidt and Buechler) For Central American women, their vulnerability is heightened by the high dependence they have of their male counterparts and the lack of opportunity they have in gaining independence. In Salvadoran women, this vulnerability tends to result in "discrimination and oppression through the culture's socially constructed ideology called machismo" (Noyori-Corbett and Moxley 893). The construct of machismo, of male dominance over the female, brings about a set of standards for both the male and the female dynamics. Mo Hume states, "The policing of women's behavior is key to this dynamic, and it is popularly believed that men have the 'right' to punish women who deviate from the acceptable notions of femininity" (68). These gender inequalities influence immigration patterns as the idea of a better life in a new country often empowers women to escape the discrimination in their country through migration (Noyori-Corbett and Moxley 893). For decades, Central American women have been migrating to the United States in order to enhance their opportunity and realize their potential (Schmidt and Buechler 142). Often, forces like marriage and violence that keep them trapped in their home country follow them through the migrant journey and into their new destination. Undocumented, immigrant women in a new,

foreign country often experience isolation, economic dependence, and domestic violence that they cannot report for fear of the police asking over their immigration status (Price 47). Worse than that, many women are not able to escape the obstacles of their home country due to the violence that ends their lives too soon or to the responsibility that is forced on them and their bodies through their children.¹⁵

In *The Far Away Brothers*, this is portrayed through female characters who are not able to make the journey to the United States. The focus of *The Far Away Brothers* is, as the title states, on brothers; twin brothers from El Salvador who make the undocumented journey to the United States and build a life for themselves. This text will be of importance to this study, not for the brothers' narratives, but for the underrepresented narrative of the women in the text. This issue of underrepresentation is an issue I noticed while researching this study. There are not enough contemporary, literary texts that tell the narratives of Central American women migrants, especially from El Salvador. This chapter will shed the realities of women's journeys, both in their home country and in their journey to the United States. The focus of the chapter will be on the country of El Salvador and the women who are not spoken about enough by portraying their narratives through their struggles with gender roles that repress and commodify them. When one thinks about El Salvador, the first thing that comes to mind is gang violence. That violence affects women all over the country. In *The Far Away Brothers*, I will analyze the impact of violence on the character of Maricela and other women characters whose bodies are commodified in different forms.

¹⁵ Women in Central America are victims of some of the highest numbers of femicide, 97 reported in El Salvador in 2021 alone (U.S. News). Those are just the ones reported. Furthermore, as stated in the previous chapter, women are also forced into motherhood due to strict abortion laws in Central America.

Lack of Representation

The portrayal of Central American women migrants is often given a backseat in migrant literature. In *The Far Away Brothers*, the issue arises in more ways than one. First off, Lauren Markham could have chosen any students for her study on Salvadoran migration due to her constant interaction with immigrants at Oakland International High. Markham describes the school as extremely diverse: “We had been home to undocumented students since we opened—students from Mexico, Mongolia, El Salvador, China who lacked immigration papers, because they had either unlawfully crossed a border or overstayed a temporary visa” (108). However, she chose the narratives of two males. She states that the twins’ story was not the most “harrowing” she had ever heard, but it really painted a picture of Salvadoran migration (xviii). The idea that a male perspective paints an entire illustration of migration seems to be a little stuck in the idea that only the male perspective deserves to be told. It is the perspective of the “other”, in this case the marginalized woman, that would portray a more encompassing picture of the migrant experience and the experience of people in the Northern Triangle. Secondly, in the text, the twins’ eighteen-year-old big sister, Maricela, also undergoes obstacles in El Salvador, some of them in repercussion to the actions of her brothers, that she wishes she could escape by migrating to the United States. Apart from Markham’s writing on the twins, her inclusion of Maricela’s perspective portrays the desire and fear women have for migrating. Markham writes:

Going all the way by herself without a coyote would be too risky: many women, she knew, were raped, kidnapped, and even killed. She knew girls often took birth control before they left to make sure they didn’t get pregnant if-when, even-they

were raped. Plus, she doubted her ability to find her own way. She'd have to go with a coyote, which cost about \$8,000 these days. Could she take out another loan, this time in her own name? (219)

Maricela's worries about migration encapsulate the unique kind of fear that women must face if they want to go to the United States. Maricela, the eldest daughter in her family, is not able to migrate because her brothers have taken out two loans in order to migrate from the only loaner available in their town and he will no longer loan out to her family. Also, she has a child that the father does not support, a commonality in El Salvador and a prime example of a patriarchal culture. It would be so powerful to have contemporary Central American migrant literature that places a bigger emphasis on these topics instead of shy away from them. *The Far Away Brothers* is a journalistic text, so Maricela's narrative cannot be manipulated into something it is not. However, there are many migrant woman narratives that could be used for a text such as this if they were just interviewed by journalists for insight. Third, although the text is based on the two brothers, Markham throws in a single chapter on the violence against women in El Salvador into the middle of the text. Chapter 6 of the text discusses the high rates of femicide and women's few options being joining the gangs themselves or migrating.

Markham reports:

In 2012, El Salvador had the highest rate of femicide-the gender-motivated killing of women-in the world. High femicide rates persist and reports of rape and domestic violence are also on the rise... Is it so surprising that more and more girls are joining the gangs, wresting a tiny hunk of power from the male-dominated world-of gangs, of police, of the trials and tribulations of their own

families-around them?... Is it so surprising that more and more girls are going north, feeling the odds? (156-158)

Why tease the reader with three pages on a very important topic and not expand on it in the remainder of the text? There are many explicit ways that women seem to be portrayed in this text and in other migrant texts. Yajaira Padilla makes a reference to this when she discusses the difference in Salvadoran writers' portrayal of the female migrant: "In Bencastro's novel, men factor as the main protagonists of El Salvador's history of migration and immigrant life in the United States, whereas women remain secondary and obscured figures with little or no agency" (94). In the context of contemporary Salvadoran migrant literature, like *The Far Away Brothers*, there is no single literary work that portrays the role of the female migrant enough to provide a voice to her experience. An experience which is already riddled with voicelessness and suppression.

Women's Roles and Gang Violence After the Civil War

After the civil war in El Salvador ended in 1992, there was a lot of political and social reform in the country (Padilla 72). One thing that did not change was the role of women in the public and private spheres. Women still took part in the country's reform but there was not much change to their personal lives and still, "unlike their male counterparts, they are often depicted as passive victims of male violence and abuse. Furthermore, they continue to be cast in traditional gender roles such as mother, wife, or prostitute" (Padilla 72). Padilla depicts the extremities in which society perceives women. A woman is either a devoted wife and mother or her body is commodified, there is not an in between. Like the idea of La Bruja in the last chapter, there is not an in between on whether a woman is good or bad. La Bruja is seen as a symbol of radicality who

challenges and rebels against all the traditional structures that make up men and women's roles in society. Whereas the good, Christian wife and mother is the figure of obedience who will follow all the commandments of matrimony even if it means losing her identity. She is perceived to be either inherently good and selfless or radically selfish and evil. Maricela is constantly shamed for the two children she has out of wedlock by two different men. One of her brothers verbally attacks her out of anger that she has gotten pregnant for the second time: "He stormed into her room, screamed at her that she was a fucking idiot, a damned whore, and she better get the fuck out of the house" (173). Once she has had the baby, he physically attacks her: "A few weeks later Maricela woke up to a hard kick into her stomach. It nearly knocked the wind out of her. Ricardo" (252). Regardless of which "role" the Salvadoran woman falls under, her body is not hers. It belongs to the patriarchy: to her husband, the men that pay for her, or her family. Is this a generalization for all women? Of course. There are many women in El Salvador who fall into an in between; women who can overcome the extremities and who are working to change the norms for women. Women like Bruja Migrante, Alicia Pacas, for example. Alicia is a Salvadoran feminist activist living in Spain who is part of the Central American women migrant feminist collective which speaks out on women's consciousness, and which embraces the witch stereotype by dressing up as witches (Chavarria et al.). Social movements like Ni Una Menos spread awareness of the high rates of violence against Latin American women, including femicide (Graham-Bergmann 237).¹⁶

¹⁶ See Graham-Bergmann, especially 237-238, for more on Ni Una Menos.

However, it is important to study and comprehend the women who are so deeply suppressed and whose experiences are never given a voice because it is one of the ways to decolonize the mentality of a patriarchal society.

Women that are free from the patriarchal domination in the home, still encounter it in the public sphere in Central America. Due to the patriarchal structures that society has been built on, “the culturally entrenched views of women as sexual objects and of violence as sexually titillating, the economic location of women as underpaid workers, and the social reality of women’s reproductive and child-rearing roles permeate law and legal meaning just as they permeate everyday life” (Calavita 106). Women are objectified and commodified simply because of their gender and sexuality. That is all they are perceived as by the patriarchy and even when they can overcome those perceptions, it is still difficult for them to make a greater change to society. When it comes to women who do not have a higher education in El Salvador, a common status, it is difficult to make ends meet on their own, especially if they have children. Leisy Abrego makes this claim based on the personal account that she attained in an interview with a Salvadoran migrant in Los Angeles:

Set in a rigidly patriarchal context, jobs available to women in El Salvador with little formal schooling pay unlivable wages that make it impossible for a single mother to provide for her family. Even in the twenty-first century, when *maquiladoras* (factories) with poor working conditions are considered the best option for women with little formal schooling, the pay is set at a minimum wage—about \$200 per month. (62)

There has been progress made in women who are revolutionizing politics. During the Salvadoran civil war, women took part in revolutionary social movements for the “general liberation of the society”, but there was not much done for women’s rights (Noyori-Corbett and Moxley 893). Therefore, women still lack the proper representation they need to have authority over their lives. In El Salvador, for example, when it comes to motherhood, women have no choice on whether they want to be pregnant or not and are required to assume the responsibility of their child while men are given no such responsibility. Ideologically, women have been taught that their natural role in life is to be a mother and that has become a cultural expectation that falls on women in El Salvador (Carter et al.). Also, the country still holds on to that cultural ideology that “women are incapable of conducting economic and financial activities” (Noyori-Corbett and Moxley 894). This all makes for entirely difficult circumstances that leave women with very little alternatives. Markham reports:

The fact is that young women in El Salvador don’t have a lot of options. According to a study by the United Nations Population Fund, 25,132 of the 83,468 registered pregnancies in El Salvador, around a third of all pregnancies, were girls or young women between the ages of ten and nineteen. Twenty-five percent of girls are married before they are eighteen, and abortion is illegal; women in El Salvador have even been jailed for miscarriage... More than three hundred thousand youth in El Salvador are currently out of school and without a job”. (158)

These statistics portray the scant opportunities for women in the country and in other countries such as this in Central America. The violence that has been established by

gangs in every corner of the Northern Triangle exacerbates the matter.

Migration from El Salvador has become vital for survival due to the rise of gang violence that has plagued the country for decades. A 2016 *New York Times* article reports:

With an estimated 60,000 members in a country of 6.5 million people, the gangs hold power disproportionate to their numbers. They maintain a menacing presence in 247 of 262 municipalities. They extort about 70 percent of businesses. They dislodge entire communities from their homes, and help propel thousands of Salvadorans to undertake dangerous journeys to the United States. Their violence costs El Salvador \$4 billion a year, according to a study by the country's Central Reserve Bank. (Martinez et al.)

This complete control of Salvadoran life by an “army of flies”, as the *Times* article refers to them, is truly devastating and indicative of the effects the war and migration caused to the country. In a 2015 interview with Isabel Vasquez, a migrant from Santa Ana, El Salvador, she speaks about gangs:

We have a pestilence, like worms, flies, or leaf-cutter ants. I think there isn't any part of El Salvador where they don't appear. It's practically all contaminated with them. Before, a village like ours was so beautiful, and suddenly things were ruined”. (Mayers and Freedman 114)

The imagery that Isabel creates through her description of gangs is a true testament to the emotional affliction that gang culture in El Salvador causes. The metaphor of an army of flies is echoed in *The Far Away Brothers* with the heavy gang presence that invades El Salvador that the twins cannot escape no matter how much they want to. The

repercussions of gangs in El Salvador are precisely what makes the twins migrate in *The Far Away Brothers*. Markham writes:

They heard about it on the news first. Bodies found dumped in secret grave sites, police officers murdered, women raped and slaughtered and left in the streets.

Gang violence had spread throughout El Salvador like an invasive bloom... The twins heard of beheadings and shootings of murdered police. The whole world around them began to tremble. (18)

Once gang activity settles into La Colonia, the twins' town, they cannot escape the grasp that it takes. They end up in a conflict with their uncle involved with the MS-13, leading to both of their migrations in order to not be killed. La Colonia was a rural town, people lived off crop plantations, a living that was already becoming difficult. This difficulty in making a sustainable living off the land depicts the changes brought by colonialism and capitalism that destroyed people's livelihoods. Markham writes, "In the late spring of 2013, someone hacked down Uncle Agustin's tree... Agustin was furious. Its fall, he said, had taken out a large swath of his coffee plantation in the adjacent field, ruining a good part of the crop" (40-41). Uncle Agustin had always been at odds with Ernesto and Raul's family and looked down on them because they were poor. He had more land, therefore more money, and he had MS-13 members that worked for him to protect his smuggling business. This greed over land and money epitomizes the colonial ethos for conquest and capital. This competition over lands, like the competition and destruction of indigenous lands in the last chapter, are all the effects of colonialism. In *The Far Away Brothers*, this view of land as business mixed with gang culture adds to the factors of poverty and migration for the twins and their family. These factors implicitly affect

Maricela's spirit just as it did Pequeña's in *We Are Not From Here*. Maricela is affected by these conflicts going on in the neighborhood and between the families, but, being in a patriarchal society, the males are affected more directly and explicitly. Ernesto and Raul did not want to be a part of the gang culture, so this only added to Agustin's distrust and dislike toward them. Markham writes:

The twins soon heard about more stories heading Agustin's way, that Ernesto and Raul were gossiping about Agustin's livelihood and his gang connections and that they claimed to have seen stores of guns at his house. The twins had certainly heard dark things about Agustin; he was rumored to have had people killed who stole from his business. They didn't know if it was true, and they'd certainly never seen or gossiped about the guns, but the story added to Agustin's menace... This kind of bad-mouthing was treated as treason in the gang world. Agustin has always looked down on the twins' family, and now he had reasons- the tree, the twin's alleged shit talking-to seek revenge. (43)

This affects Maricela's plan of being able to migrate because there is no money to send her and simultaneously makes her life in El Salvador more dangerous because Agustin still holds rancor over the family. Before her brothers migrated, Maricela "also dreamed of going north, of making something unexpected of herself" (34). Throughout the text, it becomes more and more difficult for her to fulfill that because of the responsibility she has as a mother. It seems to be a cycle, women staying in El Salvador and getting pregnant at a young age, lessening their chances to make it out. Towards the end of the text, Markham writes:

If only they'd sent her to the North instead of, one after another, her brothers. For now, Maricela wasn't leaving, but she hadn't given up her burning-ember hope. If she didn't go she knew she'd spend her whole life wondering what might have been, or what could be (263).

Maricela represents all the women who hope to be more than they were born to be. Like Pequeña in Chapter 1, she refuses to settle for the role that has been expected of her as a woman. Even though she does not migrate, she still breaks the boundaries of the patriarchy just by continuing to dream.

Commodification

Women are commodified in their home lives through the structures of matrimony, motherhood, and every single other familial tie they are born into. Dana Harrington Conner explains the history of gender inequality that has existed within marriage:

According to Matthaei, in colonial America the vast majority of a married woman's production was for the household, while a man's production was for sale. The work of the man was to earn wealth for the family, while the work of the woman, within the home, was intended to save the family money; caring for the children, providing meals, cleaning, sewing, and accomplishing other tasks was a financial savings for the household. While the cost-saving measures were good for the family as a whole, the practice entrapped many women, chaining them to the home. (344-345)

While a man was the economic provider as part of the labor force, the woman was also an economic provider without any of the recognition; housewives don't get a 401K. This is still the dynamic of marriage in many countries such as El Salvador where the man is the

head of the household (Every Culture). However, as a long-term effect of the civil war and gangs, relationships have become more fleeting, and women are put in an even more devastating predicament when the partner that they have had children wants nothing to do in a union or in a role in their child's life (Every Culture).

This is depicted in *The Far Away Brothers* through Maricela. Before the twins migrate, Maricela gets pregnant with her first child by an unreliable partner. Markham writes, "By the time she found out she was pregnant, he'd lost interest not only in sleeping with her but even in talking to her" (38). Once Maricela has her baby girl, Sebastian is not a present father, a theme that I will focus more on in the next chapter of this study. Markham writes, "Not only did Sebastian not call her or see her or send money, he was courting several other girls-three of whom saw fit to inform Maricela that there was no way Sebastian would acknowledge this bastard baby as his own" (39). This is also the case for Daniela Silva, a Salvadoran migrant who was interviewed in a shelter during her transit to the United States. Daniela says, "I met a guy, a partner in 2009, when I was eighteen, and I had a daughter with him, Sara. He really wanted a son, so when he found out that our child was a daughter, he left me. I never heard anything from him after that" (Mayers and Freedman 131). This impulse to have multiple partners and/or to not take responsibility for any of the outcomes from these relationships is an example of the way that men see women and their bodies as commodities, as things to use, take advantage of, or produce a son from (Sharp 295). Maricela and the rest of the women are pitted against each other while the greater enemy scores the benefit. Children not only continue to expand the economy, but they also grow up learning the same ideologies of society, reinforcing the patriarchy for further generations. Equitable Growth

reports, “Investing in the nation’s children is one of the safest bets policymakers can make. Research on early care and education programs finds that \$1 in spending generates \$8.60 in economic activity” (Abbott). This also correlates with women migrants who make a great part of the babysitting and nannying business in the United States that was discussed in chapter 1. Another problem in this commodification inside of the home is domestic violence. Women who are dependent on a man and who, in the eyes of society, “have little power or importance in society, their lives are not valued, which manifests itself in femicides and incidents of domestic violence” (Pardilla 38). After Daniela, the interviewee, meets another man who she has more children with and who physically abuses her and threatens her life multiple times, she is forced to migrate to the United States in order to survive. This form of domestic violence includes physical, verbal, and sexual violence.

Violence against women’s bodies is a persistent factor in a woman’s home country and on their journey to the United States if they make the decision to migrate. Sexual abuse can be seen as commodification of women’s bodies in the way that a women’s body is used for the pleasure of the men and in the form of the indirect monetary compensation that it leads to. As of 2018, “The estimated lifetime economic burden of rape has been estimated at \$3.1 trillion, which included \$1.2 trillion in medical costs, \$1.6 trillion in lost work productivity, \$234 billion in criminal justice activities, and \$36 billion in other costs” (Yeh et al. 912). These extreme numbers emphasize the idea in this chapter that the violence of women is just as much an economical transaction as any other thing, and it can’t be stated enough that the transaction is gendered. The benefit is not for the women, clearly, and it (rape and abuse of all sorts) continues to

build on the patriarchal structures of male dominance and female submission. In *The Far Away Brothers*, the twins are led out of El Salvador, through Guatemala, and into Mexico by a female coyote named Sandra. The twins take separate journeys with Sandra; Ernesto arriving in Mexico first and Raul going second. On Raul's journey, they get stopped by a group of men who mercilessly steal their money and rape Sandra. Markham writes:

Two men took Sandra away into the darkness; Raul could hear her scream. Next to him, the driver was praying aloud to God as Sandra's screams crescendoed into the night, along with shouting and grunting, the driver's frenzied prayers, and the wicked pounding of Raul's heart against the ground. (63)

Sandra is still able to get Raul to Mexico and acts as if nothing has happened, possibly implying that this has happened to her before as a coyote. This is a typical circumstance of the journey to migration for women. For women migrants, this is also an involuntary transaction and form of commodification. "Get rape or be killed; if you let me rape you, I will compensate you with your life". It is as simple as that when you are the inferior gender in the eyes of men. On the journey to the United States, Central American women experience this all too regularly. It is estimated that 80 percent of women and girls migrating to the United States through Mexico are raped while in transit (Schmidt and Buechler 148). Of course, there is no way to have accurate statistics on this due to the immense number of cases that go unreported, but it is clear the occurrence of rapes throughout migration are pervasive.

Sex trafficking is an important component in women's migration narratives. Although there is no direct instance of sex trafficking in *The Far Away Brothers*, it is a form of commodification prevalent in Central American women migrants. One of

Maricela and her family's fear of her migrating to the United States is the possibility of her being raped, trafficked, or killed. Markham writes, "'Don't come,' Ernesto messaged her on Facebook. 'Seriously. Don't do it'" (219). Ernesto's warning to Maricela portrays the unspoken knowledge of the higher danger that there is for women than men along the migrant trail. Sex trafficking, or human trafficking in other terms is a form of commodification because it derives a profit that boosts multiple economies. Economists believe that profits in sex are "greater than those of narcotics because women, youth, and children, unlike a narcotic, can be sold more than once" (Cockcroft 79). The idea that women and children are profits for business expresses the little value that they are given in society. Oftentimes, women voluntarily join the prostitution business because it is the only way that they can cross to the United States and/or send money to their family back home. Scholar, Simón Pedro Izcara Palacios, reports:

we interviewed 22 Central American women who had been deported from the United States. They exercised prostitution temporarily in bars, brothels, and other Mexican adult entertainment establishments to save money with which they could continue their trip to the United States; 17 had extensive experience working in prostitution in the United States, though only 6 had started doing this kind of work in their countries of origin, and 5 had only a few months of experience because, when crossing into Mexico, they had failed to find work in any other activity. (33)

The failure to find any other work opportunity is a failure of the Central American, Mexican, and United States governments to create jobs for migrants that do not exploit

them. This exploitation and commodification on women, from reproduction to the sex trade, leads to many dangers for women migrants.

This chapter has shown that Central American women face danger and hopelessness whether they migrate or not. Women in their home countries of the Northern Triangle seem to be constantly looking for a way out, such as Maricela. Some are able to make it out and some are not. Even when women can migrate, they face obstacles in the United States that are more out of their control than in their home countries because they are undocumented and illegal. For Latina immigrants in the United States, “interpersonal violence and structural forms of violence, including the law, are sometimes mutually reinforcing. The legal and social structures make them vulnerable to economic exploitation, mistreatment, and sexual abuse” (Price 47). The decision that a Central American woman makes to migrate will set forth a string of events. Their narratives, which are unique to the ones of men, should be used to produce literature that will represent them and not diminish their needs. By the end of the novel, Maricela does not end up migrating, but she does not lose hope that she will one day go on the harrowing journey because she knows it is the only way to break the generational curse of poverty, violence, and submission. Markham writes:

But she knew that she also had to find value for herself-especially in this world where women were still, so often, second class, and in this country where life was cheap. She was determined to forge a life that was distinct from the one she had inherited from convention and from her parent’s circumstances (God bless them). What good, clean-hand choices were there for girls like her? They could go to the convent, they could go to the North, they could hunker down in their lives and

live as quietly as possible, as if underground. She wanted Lupita and Leiny to find more than she had to give them, and to do that, she'd have to start them off better than where she'd begun. Here or there she would manage to better the hand she'd been dealt with; she and her girls in her wake would- quietly, maybe, but unflinchingly-carry on. What other choice was there? (264)

The awareness that Maricela shows in her thoughts about her country and her circumstances are where she gathers the strength to break mental and physical patriarchal crutches. It would be very interesting to see Markham publish a piece on Maricela alone to continue her narrative which provided a necessary gendered view of migration. For the meantime, focusing on secondary characters in migrant text presents an opening for the expansion of women migrant narratives while the primary characters help us to understand the power structures in which Central American women are ensnared.

CHAPTER IV

Mental Warfare

“The boy does not understand. His mother is not talking to him. She will not even look at him. Enrique has no hint of what she is going to do. Lourdes knows, she understands, as only a mother can, the terror she is about to inflict, the ache Enrique will feel, and finally the emptiness”.

-Sonia Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*

The detention of minor migrants from Central America to the United States has gained worldwide attention in the past couple of decades. The U.S Border Patrol reports that of the 73, 235 unaccompanied minors apprehended at the US-Mexico border in 2019, 85.7% were from the Northern Triangle (Patel et al. 228). This is the broader context in which I analyze family disintegration in *Enrique's Journey*, a journalist text by Sonia Nazario.¹⁷

The non-fiction genre of this text is significant for the portrayal of undocumented migration because it presents a modern testimony to the migrant experience and depicts the impact of women's migration. So far in this study, I have discussed women's spirituality and commodification in order to analyze women's narratives in Central American literature. Another important theme in this exploration of literature is family disintegration.

For women to be able to gain spiritual and physical freedom, they often must sacrifice leaving their families. Central American mothers are migrating to the United States without their children at growing rates. Sonia Nazario writes, “The single Latin American mothers begin migrating in large numbers, leaving their children with

¹⁷ Sonia Nazario was a projects reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* and her newspaper series on Enrique's story gained national recognition, including a Pulitzer Prize, and led her to write *Enrique's Journey*. She is now an Op-Ed contributor for *The New York Times* (LinkedIn).

grandparents, other relatives, or neighbors” (xiii). This form of family disintegration has been a main factor in the arrival of thousands of unaccompanied children at the Mexican American border (Patel et al. 228). Many children are in search of the mothers that left them back in Central America while they searched for a better outcome for themselves and their children. The text follows the experiences of a mother and son, Lourdes and Enrique. Lourdes, a single mother from Honduras, migrates to the United States in order to financially provide for her children, Enrique and Belky. This sets off a slew of events for the three of them, especially Enrique who cannot overcome the loss of his mother and decides to migrate to the United States to find her after many years of hardship. The epigraph portrays the confusion and pain that children and parents experience. Parents, like Lourdes, are aware that leaving their children will cause damage, but they have no choice but to leave. Children, like Enrique, do not understand why their parents must leave and are often not told goodbye by their parents in order to not add salt to the wound.

The factors that I have discussed in the previous chapters, mainly lack of opportunity in the home country due to very tight patriarchal structures, leads women to leave their children behind in search of independence and opportunity. However, this causes a lot of psychological traumas to the family structures in Central America that affect everyone involved tremendously. Immigrant parents who have left children behind agree that ‘separation from their children had negative psychological consequences for both children and parents. They agreed that children are more affected by separation from their mothers (compared to fathers)’ (Gindling and Poggio 1160). This chapter will focus on the family disintegration and trauma that exists through migrations, particularly

through Central American women's migration, and how they are portrayed in *Enrique's Journey*.

Honduras

This chapter will have a primary focus on family disintegration in Honduras because it is the country that *Enrique's Journey* is set in. Unlike the other countries of the Northern Triangle, Honduras did not undergo civil war. However, it is not remiss of all the consequences of war and neocolonialism. Aviva Chomsky states, "Honduras escaped the all-out war that ravaged its neighbors in the 1970s and 80s, but it became a staging ground for US involvement in those wars, and for US-sponsored experiments in structural adjustment and neoliberal economics" (146). Once the peace treaties brought an end to the wars, Honduras "lost its value to the United States" (Chomsky 155). The effects of this can be seen through the poverty, corruption, violence, export agriculture, and drug wars that have existed in Honduras for the past few decades and that make it a part of the dreaded Northern Triangle (Chomsky and Haskin). These effects fall in line with the drug wars of Guatemala and the greed over land in El Salvador that are explored in the previous chapters. In Honduras, these factors of neocolonialism that exist between land and drug disputes affect the inhabitants of the rural and urban regions in the country.

An article on narcotrafficking and drug control in Honduras and Guatemala states:

Land control change is important to understand because it can lead to a larger array of socio-environmental degradation beyond land use change, including illegal logging, wildlife trafficking, declining conservation governance, economic inequality, and violence. (Tellman et al. 133)

The main factor that affects Enrique and his family in *Enrique's Journey* is that of economic inequality. Enrique and his family live in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. Their lives exemplify the struggle to survive for people in Honduras. Lourdes is a single mother with two children and little stability. Nazario writes, "She can barely afford food for him and his sister, Belky, who is seven. Lourdes, twenty-four, scrubs other people's laundry in a muddy river. She goes door to door, selling tortillas, used clothes, and plantains... they have a bleak future (4). The poverty rate in Honduras in 2019 was at 49% with people living off less than \$5.50 a day (Macrotrends). These circumstances cause Lourdes to migrate to the United States to find a job that will give her children a better life in Honduras:

Lourdes has decided: She will leave. She will go to the United States and make money and send it home. She will be gone for one year-less, with luck-or she will bring her children to be with her. It is for them she is leaving, she tells herself, but still she feels guilty. (4)

The decision to leave children behind must be one of the most difficult ones that a mother must make and indicates the true poverty of life in Honduras and the rest of the Northern Triangle.

Single Mothers

Family disintegration can be studied through a gendered lens due to the number of single mothers that have to migrate because of absentee fathers in the Northern Triangle. As stated in the last chapter, family structures in the Northern Triangle can be complicated even before migration. One of those common structures is single motherhood. The number of single mothers in Central America causes the need for

women to be the sole provider for their children in an economy that is not built for women. Nazario states, “In recent decades, the increase in divorce and family disintegration in Latin America has left many single mothers without the means to feed and raise children (xiii). The family dynamic changes even more once it comes to migration. Michelle Moran-Taylor describes different reasons for and consequences of migration for men and women:

Migrants include women escaping violent marriages or marginalization in their communities and men and women fleeing the law. When males migrate to the United States and then form another family abroad, abandoned spouses left with the sole responsibility for the children may consider migration an option.

Although during the initial years it was primarily males who headed north, now equal numbers of men and women leave the Oriente for the United States. (81)

In a general sense, it seems that women only migrate if they are in dire circumstances to do so because of male actions. Women with children who stay behind in the home country probably have no intention of ever leaving their children. However, they have no other option when their spouse no longer provides for them, and they must rearrange the roles that society has gotten them used to. In *Enrique's Journey*, Enrique and Belky's father, separated from Lourdes and financially absent, lives in Honduras and Enrique stays with him when Lourdes migrates. It is interesting to note that, although separated, it is Lourdes who makes the sacrifice of migration for her children instead of their dad. This portrays the role of the mother in Central American society as being of higher importance than the role of the father, instead of it being equal. Nazario writes, “He [Enrique] and Belky are not likely to finish grade school. Lourdes cannot afford uniforms or pencils.

Her husband is gone. A good job is out of the question. Lourdes knows there is only one place that offers hope” (4). It is through the absentee father, then, that many women “began to negotiate and redraw the contours of motherhood to include international migration as an acceptable path to provide for their families’ pressing needs” (Abrego 33). Is this worth it, however? For Enrique and for the thousands of children that lose their mothers through migration, the damage of the loss can be extremely difficult to heal from.

Once in the United States, it is not easy for immigrant women to find a stable job that will provide for them in their new country and their children in the home country. Most migrant women must start off in low-wage, unstable jobs when they come to the United States. Lourdes Beneria refers to this circumstance in her studies on the feminization of migration:

Women migrants tend to be located in the lower echelons of labor markets. This is the case for manufacturing employment as well as for employment in the service and care sectors. Immigrant women’s employment opportunities tend to be in temporary and unstable jobs. Many governments, in both sending and receiving countries, are involved in some form of regulation of migrant labor, but this does not change the informal and mostly precarious character of women’s migration. (6)

Due to this reason, single mothers who have migrated to the United States end up staying way longer than they thought they would or take longer to send for their children to join them in the States. Another effect of this instability in a new place is something I mentioned in the last chapter; women sometimes continue the cycle of toxic and abusive

relationships in the United States because they form relationships and families with other migrant men (Price). This perpetuates the cycle of male dominance that women migrated to get out of and leads to more circumstance for the migrant woman and her children back home, especially when the woman has new children in the United States. Lourdes puts herself in this situation and she has a child while living in the United States:

Lourdes unintentionally gets pregnant. She struggles through the difficult pregnancy, working in a refrigerated fish factory, packing and weighing salmon and catfish all day. Her water breaks at five one summer morning. Lourdes's boyfriend, who likes to get drunk, goes to a bar to celebrate. (Nazario 13)

This repetition of the single mother trope escalates the conflict and further prevents Lourdes from reuniting with her children in Honduras.

The difficult experiences that women migrants encounter in their new country is not discussed enough in literature. There is plenty of literature about the journey to the States and about immigrant children, but the narrative of the struggling woman is given a side role. This study attempts to frame the women's narrative as a new type of testimony that gives voice to the silence surrounding Central American migrant women and, through Lourdes' narrative, there is a glimpse of women's voices that help to depict the gendered migrant experience in literature. Not only is Lourdes pregnant from what seems to be an unreliable partner, she has no one to fall back on other than herself. All the obstacles that Lourdes faces not only causes distress for her, but it also leads to the continuous feeling of abandonment that Enrique has which affects him tremendously. Nazario writes, "For Enrique, each telephone call grows more strained. Because he lives across town, he is not often lucky enough to be at Maria Edelmira's house when his

mother phones. When he is, their talk is clipped and anxious” (16). The distance Enrique has from his mother and the mental trauma that it causes him is a true testimony to the value of a mother and the desperation of family disintegration for the migrant woman and those impacted by her.

Trauma

Trauma theory regarding the Northern Triangle is commonly studied through violence, especially through violence against women before, during, and after migration (Fortuna et al. and Vila and Pomeroy). The history of trauma studies clarifies many of the reasons why migrants carry so much trauma. Cathy Caruth, trauma theory scholar, states, “What causes trauma, then, is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (62). This break in the mind, which is a consequence to a quick and unwarranted stimulus of the brain, can certainly explain the traumatic events of migration. The act of migration comes with many unknowns and a migrant is unprepared for every single experience throughout the journey, leading to multiple breaks in the mind. Freudian theories of trauma explain the compulsory repetition of traumatic experiences (Mambrol). Those theories can be applied to migrant women of the Northern Triangle and the violence that follows them throughout their lives, especially in the repetition of violent partners in their new country. For women who have endured violence in the home country and/or in route to the United States, the psychological distress of those factors alone is unimaginable, so any additional stressors will only lead to more trauma (Vila and Pomeroy 231).

Trauma through colonialism can be related to early trauma theory on the Holocaust due to the intended elimination of culture. Trauma scholar, Marianne Hirsh, explains the literature and art that conveys the trauma that followed the Jewish genocide:

It is a measure of the massive effort in which, as a culture, we have been engaged during the last 70 years- to attempt, however unsuccessfully, to rebuild a world so massively destroyed without, however, denying the destruction or healing its wounds or using it as an alibi for further violence. (174)

Hirsh conveys the generational attempt to heal from a past of violence on people and culture. Without the knowledge and understanding of the traumatic impact that colonialism had on the generations of people in the Northern Triangle, it is impossible to fully understand the trauma that migration causes for the current and future generations of the Northern Triangle. Migration is an extension of colonialism and therefore repeats the patterns of trauma.

Migration is a traumatic experience for the person doing the act of migrating as well as for the family members that they leave behind, especially their children. In her feminist thoughts on trauma, Marianne Hirsh makes a very resonating statement about trauma and gender:

In traumatic histories, gender can be invisible or hypervisible; it can make trauma unbearable or it can serve as a fetish that helps to shield us from its effects. It can offer a position through which memory can be transmitted within the family and beyond it, distinguishing mother-daughter transmission from that of fathers and daughters or fathers and sons, for example. (18)

For a parent, the trauma of migration along with the trauma of leaving a child behind must be one of the hardest things they ever go through (Abrego and Moran-Taylor). Separation from their children adds another level of trauma that is hard to heal from. Through a gendered perspective, the bond that a mother has with her child will change the level of trauma that is transmitted. In relation to the Oedipus complex, the close bond between a mother and her son will cause even more of a transmission of pain and trauma, hence the painful separation between Enrique and Lourdes.

In *Enrique's Journey*, Lourdes struggles with the memory of leaving her children and not being able to bring them with her because she cannot make enough money to have a sustainable life. This causes her to have nightmares and hallucinations about Honduras and her children: "Lourdes has nightmares about going back, even to visit, without residency documents. In the dream, she hugs her children, then realizes she must return to the United States so they can eat well and study (Nazario 20). This trauma through separation is a constant feeling of fear and guilt that parents feel when they are in the United States illegally without their children (Abrego 69). Their legal status in the United States affects their financial opportunities, which determines the emotional experience of separation for the children. In her studies on the sacrifice of transnational families, Leisy Abrego states:

In the context of multiyear separations, children left behind try to make sense of the situation and look for cues from parents about what they hope is a continued commitment to them. Children who are faring well financially can justify their family separation by pointing to concrete gains, while children who are faring poorly have no way to justify the family separation. As a result, children of

undocumented parents experience compounded suffering; besides the pain of their parents' absence, they are also likely to endure dire poverty. (98-99)

In the case of undocumented, migrant women, whom I have already discussed have less opportunities to make big money in the United States, the trauma caused for both mother and child hits an extreme due to the pressure that the mother has financially.

The financial burden that exists as an effect to migration is one that causes conflict within family disintegration. When someone migrates to the United States, they migrate with the intention of sending remittances to their families back home.¹⁸ In the Northern Triangle, remittances are an important source for the economy with the remittances for Honduras amounting for up to 20% of the country's GDP (Nuñez and Osorio-Caballero). It is a lot of pressure for a single mother in the United States to not only provide stability for herself, but to also send money back home to their children and their caretakers. The cycle of remittances creates conflict between the person in the United States sending the money and the person receiving it because they depend on it. The reason why most single mothers must migrate in the first place is because their children's fathers who migrated before them stop sending remittances after they form a new family in the United States. Leisy Abrego and Ralph LaRossa state this in their study on remittances in El Salvador:

When parents began new relationships abroad or in El Salvador, father-away families tended to suffer whereas mother-away families benefited economically. Immigrant mothers were consistent remitters, regardless of their own or their ex

¹⁸ Remittances are the part of migrants' earnings that they send home to help support their families in the form of cash or goods (Ratha).

partners' relationship status. Immigrant men, however, tended to decrease or discontinue remittances because of their own or their ex partners' new relationships. (1080)

This exemplifies the ideology that motherhood needs to be more of a sacrifice than fatherhood. While the migrant mother must sacrifice herself working in jobs that already pay her less than the migrant father's job, she also must be consistent with her remittances so that her family back home can have food on the table. Furthermore, the idea of ever going back to the home country to reunite with their family becomes impossible. If the only source of income can no longer send remittances, then what was the purpose of migrating in the first place? Lourdes dreams of going back home to Honduras one day and building a beautiful house where she can enjoy her life and her family. However, that possibility seem far-fetched as she surveys her circumstance: "How can she justify leaving her children if she returns empty-handed?" (Nazario 17). This strain on one person to provide for the people back home only adds to the level of trauma that a woman must live with and continues the family separation that effectively harms the children involved.

Separation between children and parents threatens the development of children (Patel and Suarez Orozco). Studies on the effects of children left behind in the home country and children that have migrated to reunite with parents has only begun to exist in recent decades and *Enrique's Journey* is a great contribution to the conversation. The portrayal of the psychological implications that Enrique experiences after his mom leaves and after they are reunited is extremely poignant and indicative of the migrant

experience. When Lourdes leaves, Enrique is utterly confused, heartbroken and left with only memories. Nazario writes:

Many, including Enrique, begin to idealize their mothers. They remember how their mothers fed and bathed them, how they walked them to kindergarten. In their absence, these mothers become larger than life. Although in the United States the women struggle to pay rent and eat, in the imaginations of their children back home they become deliverance itself, the answer to every problem. (7)

This idealization of mothers makes it difficult for children to ever feel comfort or safety with any caregiver they have. The physical and emotional detachment they are forced to experience leads to all kinds of mental instabilities like anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Musolf, Patel, and Suarez-Orozco). Gil Musolf describes the toll that disintegration due to migration causes on the mental health of kids:

From a mental health perspective, the emotional toll on immigrant children, and more so to children who didn't immigrate with their parents, is enormous and sometimes discounted. Their anxiety and depressed feelings are triggered when they are left behind, usually by well-intentioned parents. Their ambivalent feelings often become complicated and bewildering to themselves if and when they are able to join their parents. (223)

For Central American children who already grow up in a world pressured with poverty and internal and external violence, the loss of a parent, especially a mother, must be the tipping point for their mental health. Unlike the current awareness in the United States on mental health issues, kids in Central America with mental health issues are not

categorized as such, do not get the help that they need to overcome their trauma, and find an outlet in drugs, alcohol, abusive relationships, and gangs (Musolf 223-224).

Enrique depicts the worst extreme of family disintegration for children. In the absence of his mother, he turns to drugs for solace. Nazario writes:

Hidden beside a wall scrawled with graffiti, they inhale glue late into the night...

Enrique tries to hide his habit. He dabs a bit of glue into a plastic bag and stuffs it into a pocket. Alone, he opens the end over his mouth and inhales, pressing the bottom of the bag towards his face, pushing the fumes into his lungs... Enrique sinks deeper into drugs... By mid-December, he owes his marijuana supplier 6,000 lempiras, about \$400. (35-36, 38)

His drug addiction damages his relationships with the family he has in Honduras. The aunt that he is with, and one of the last family members that Enrique has not severed a relationship with, confronts him about his addiction and, in a drug-induced rage, he kicks her. For Enrique, there is no other choice than to go find his mom and make the journey to the United States. After many attempts at crossing the border, he makes it to the United States and finds his mother. The reunification, as is the norm after family disintegration, only opens deeper wounds and trauma for mother and son.

Once mother and child reunite, in the home country or in the new country, all the idealizations and the dreams of a happily ever after come crashing down quickly. Reunification brings with it many feelings of resentment and anger. Nazario writes, "Children like Enrique dream of finding their mothers and living happily ever after. The children show resentment because they were left behind. They remember broken promises to return and accuse their mothers of lying" (191). Reunification seems to either

be able to heal the pain of separation or make it worse. Parents and youth both described “acute discomfort” in the months and years after reunification, but most achieved “remarkable strength, determination, resourcefulness, and resilience in dealing with the imposed challenges” (Suarez-Orozco 249). The break cannot be made whole even after mother and child are unified on the other side of the border as they must heal from the trauma that their separation has caused. In the case of Lourdes and Enrique, it gets a lot worse before it gets better. Lourdes and Enrique live together in North Carolina with Lourdes’s boyfriend, daughter, and six other people. The anger that Enrique feels about his mother’s new family and the resentment he can’t get over leads him to retaliate with a return to substance use and verbal aggression (201). He is eventually able to get past the resentment and redevelop the bond he had with her as a child. The end of the text is filled with hope for Enrique and Lourdes’ relationship and their lives in the United States.

Nazario writes:

Lourdes is sure that God is answering one of her prayers: that Enrique straighten up, stop drinking, and no longer feel so bitter towards her. ‘It’s like a miracle,’ she says. It is as if all the hurt he felt inside had to come out and now he is ready to move on. She feels the same warmth and love from Enrique as when he first arrived on her doorstep in North Carolina. ‘He always wanted to be with me,’ she says. (235)

Lourdes is Enrique’s sole reason for migrating to the United States at the time that he does. This truly depicts the value of the migrant woman, not just as a statistic, but as a mother and as someone who has a major influence on those around her.

Nazario's portrayal of Lourdes's narrative demonstrates the sacrifice of the migrant woman. Even if Lourdes was not a mom, Nazario's description of Lourdes's obstacles as a migrant woman in the United States are important to understand the inequalities that exist for women when it comes to careers and livable wage. The sacrifices that Lourdes makes as a mother solidify the inequalities between men and women in the eyes of a patriarchal society that expects everything out of the mother and very little out of the father. At the end of the text, Enrique convinces his girlfriend to leave their 3-year-old daughter behind in Honduras so that she can come to the United States. This is a perpetual cycle of leaving children behind. Enrique, whose entire narrative portrays the pain of children left behind by their moms, decides to do the same exact thing for his daughter. He plays a role in the patriarchal standard of controlling the situation and affecting another mother and her child. Nazario writes, "You must make a decision, Enrique says. Now. If not, he vows, he will remake his life, find someone else" (237). If his girlfriend does not go to the United States with him, she will end up as the single mother trope who is forced to migrate to provide for her child. In the end, the migrant mother loses regardless of what she chooses. It is a devastating reality, but it is a necessary reality to be aware of so that the cycle can be broken. Once that cycle is broken, the migrant woman can be free to exist as her own independent and spiritually free self.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

In the previous chapters, I have discussed women's spirituality, commodification, and family disintegration. In all these chapters, women's narratives have been the focus regarding their migration from Central America to the United States. This study portrayed the obstacles that women must overcome in order to be independent both mentally and physically. All three chapters focused on a specific factor that causes women's migration. In the second chapter, I discussed the suppression of women's spirituality. In the third chapter, I explained the varieties of forms that women's bodies are used as instruments for commodification. In the third chapter, I depicted the pain and confusion that comes with family disintegration and how it exemplifies the sacrifice of migration. All these topics seem to be distant from each other when looked at first glance. However, when looked at within the context of women's marginalization, they are all rooted through oppression. Women have been oppressed of their spiritual, physical, and mental liberties that affect them in every step of their lives, from youth to motherhood. In this study, each chapter is about linked oppressions; we can't understand family disintegration without first understanding how women's bodies are commodified and how their spiritual journeys shape them. Women perceive migration as an outlet for that oppression and leaving the source of their oppression gives women the push to free themselves of the societal pressures that hold them hostage, however difficult the transition may be in their host country.

Patriarchal Constructs

I have discussed the patriarchal structures that oppress women extensively in this study. I described patriarchal structures as being rooted in colonialism. The idea of colonialism stems from a male need to conquer and control. This includes the conquest and control of women. In chapter 1, I analyzed them through the ideologies that frequently define women's lives. Through religion, women are expected to exemplify a certain persona of submission and passivity. Through spiritual awakening, women can break patriarchal structures and become their own entity. In chapter 2, my discussion of *We Are Not From Here* discussed the patriarchy through Pequeña's spiritual awakening before and during her journey as a migrant. She can break patriarchal structures by escaping forced motherhood and the threat of a man who holds her submissive. In the third chapter, I represent patriarchal constructs through women's bodies as a source of money. Women are expected to be mothers and to take care of their children while men get free childcare as they go out and provide for the household and take part in the economy. The migration route is more dangerous for women than it is for men. Women are more subjected to sexual assault and trafficking and, once they are in the United States, they are more exposed to violence. In *The Far Away Brothers*, Maricela is expected to take care of her children and cannot migrate to the United States because her male siblings have gone before her and used up any opportunity of her being able to go. All these instances make chapter 3 very important to the representation of patriarchal constructs. I expanded the conversation of motherhood in chapter 4 to complete the theme of patriarchal constructs and their oppression on women. Family disintegration affects women and children the most because of the bond that women have with their

children after being their primary caretakers due to societal expectations. Once a child's father leaves, either through divorce, abandonment, or migration, it perpetuates the expectation that women are more responsible for their offspring than men are. When women must leave to provide for her children, it ironically breaks the patriarchal structure of men being the providers. In *Enrique's Journey*, Lourdes has no option but to break the structure when she must migrate to the United States as the sole provider for her children. The commonality in these forms of patriarchal oppression in the literature that I have chosen to study is that in order to escape the grip of the patriarchy, women must first go through a lot of pain and encounter much danger and solitude in migration.

Feminism and Postcolonialism

I used feminist and postcolonial research in most of this study because they work conjointly to shed light on the marginalization of women. Both feminist and post-colonial discourses “seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant, and sought to invert the structures of domination, substituting, for instance, a female tradition or traditions in lace of a male-dominated canon” (Ashcroft et al 173). I focused on ecofeminist theory in the second chapter because I wanted to tie the destruction of the land with the destruction of the women's spirit. The feminist theory, from Susan Griffin to Gloria Anzaldua, depicted the connection of nature to spirit and women's place in that discourse. The destruction of land in Central America is the effect of colonialism and the greed that encompasses post and neocolonialism. I attributed Pequeña's distress in *We Are Not From Here* to the destruction of land and spirit because the forces that hold her back are all a consequence of colonialism and the destruction of nature that occurs through capitalism and globalism. In the third chapter, I discussed the role of women and

the activism that fights for women to exist outside of the household and be seen as more than just sexualized objects and mothers. Colonialism affects this feminist view of woman because it makes them seem like an unimportant factor for the expansion of globalism and are therefore easily replaceable and unworthy of a solid place in society. Maricela in *The Far Away Brothers* begins to understand this by the end of the text, and she is set on breaking the physical chains that keep her tied to her role as a woman and mother. In the fourth chapter, I connected the ideas of spiritual, physical, and mental freedoms that exist through the effects of colonialism and the patriarchal constructs that lead to a feminist mindset. Lourdes in *Enrique's Journey* breaks many barriers for women because she fearlessly challenges the idea of a submissive mother and heals from the trauma that migration causes her.

The Future for Women Migrants

I have hope that women migrants will continue to break chains that they, and the generations before them, have been oppressed with and that they will translate their freedom into literature. There needs to be more literature by women about the women's perspective. The number of migrants who will have a greater understanding and knowledge about migration, detention facilities, and the laws that alienate them and label them as threats grows every day. However, the advantage that they have in being in the United States provides them opportunities and freedoms to argue for human rights and for the rights of the people that migrate after them. The primary texts that I chose for this study depict the secondary value that literature has placed on women of Central America. I did not choose the texts as my primary research because I wanted to look at secondary characters in Central American migrant text. I did it because I had to; I had no other

option because there are no contemporary migrant texts from El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras where the protagonist is a female in her home country who must make the decision to migrate. I hope that this study shows the importance of looking at migration with a gendered lens because it is the only way that a woman's perspective can be fully understood. Migrant women are fierce, fighting feminists and their narratives are vital to the history of migration.

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