# Young Central American Migrants in Film: Exploring the Perception of the American Dream in Post-Conflict Guatemala

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# Abstract

The central research problem revolves around understanding the representation of young Central American migrants in films. Connected to this central inquiry is the exploration of the intersection between dramatic affluence of migrants and the socio-political landscape of post-conflict Guatemala. For this investigation, I will employ film analysis as the primary approach, focusing on two seminal works: "La Jaula de Oro" (2013) by Diego Quemada-Diez and "La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas" (2012) by Luis Mandoki. Through a close examination of these films, it is my aim to unravel the complexities of the migration experience, shedding light on the discrepancies between the idealized vision of the American Dream and the realities faced by those who embark on the journey northward. The major findings highlight the gap between the promise of the American Dream and the experiences of migrants. The American Dream, symbolizing hope and social mobility in a context of insecurity and poverty, fosters a belief I term “Pensamiento migrante” or “migrant thinking.” The films depict the perilous and disillusioning path to social mobility, but despite these portrayals, the Central American diaspora has achieved long-term income stability, job security, and generational wealth gain.

# Dedications

To my parents, thank you for investing in my education. I am aware it is a privilege and will not take for granted all that you have sacrificed for it. Los amo.

To my sister and best friend, for being there for me whenever I had a mental breakdown.

And to my late pet, who passed away in my last semester of uni. She was my favorite classmate during zoom classes, and I really wanted her to see me graduate. Suki, I will love you forever.

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# Introduction

*"De donde son?" "Somos de sueños de oro"*
*(""Where are you from?" "We are from dreams of gold.")1*
*Quemada-Diaz, "La Jaula de Oro "(2013)*

In cinema, the portrayal of migrants has emerged as a lens through which to examine the enduring struggles of marginalized communities (Rapoport et al. 2020). This research delves into the representation of Central American migrants in film, mainly focusing on the depiction of impoverished youth harboring dreams of a better life amidst the harsh realities of post-conflict Guatemala. Even after the formal end of the Armed Conflict in 1996, the legacy of displacement persists (Green 2009; Chamarbagwala and Morán 2010). The post-conflict period, formally starting in the early 2000s until now (Ardón 1999), will be the focus of this research. Many individuals and communities struggled to return to their original homes or faced difficulties in rebuilding their lives. This led to displacement and mass migration: internally, from rural villages to urban cities; and externally, towards safer countries, like the United States or Mexico (Meyer 2023; Green 2009). The immigrant diaspora formed in these countries has been a social phenomenon that has impacted Guatemala's culture and art since then[2].

The central research problem revolves around understanding how these individuals are portrayed. In other words, what is the representation of young Central American migrants in films? The answer lies in the portrayal of poor kids with a dream – a dream often embodied by the illusion of the American Dream met with impossible challenges. Connected to this central inquiry is the exploration of the intersection

[1] All Spanish-English translations in this text are my own, using the translation system Deepl (Webpage: https://www.deepl.com/en/translator)
[2] For further reading on the impact of migration on culture, please refer to Rapoport et al. (2020).

between cinematic representations of migrants and the socio-political landscape of post-conflict Guatemala. The time after the end of the Armed Conflict is highlighted by a surge in gang violence, social insecurity, poverty, intellectual brain drains, general distrust for the government and its military, among many others (Meyer 2023; Ardón 1999). What is the dramatic power of representing these migration stories during this period?

The major findings of this theoretical analysis reveal a stark dissonance between the promise of the American Dream and the experiences of these characters. In these depictions, the American Dream symbolizes hope, promising social mobility and a dignified existence in a country plagued by insecurity, discrimination, and entrenched poverty. The ideology that the American Dream is something that must be fought for is a belief that permeates fiction and non-fiction migrants alike, this I call "pensamiento migrante" or "migrant thinking." The pathway to social mobility for the lower class is depicted with peril and disillusionment in the narratives of these films, but it is relevant to remark that the Central American diaspora has enjoyed long-term income stability, job security, and generational wealth gain (Hernández 2024). Economically and emotionally, "el pueblo que camina" ("the walking people") has found cultural community and social assimilation in foreign land.

This research is significant for several reasons. The debate of the depiction of cultural phenomenon in art is relatively fresh and still disputed in the Guatemalan academia. The representation of migration in Guatemalan films has not changed because of the armed conflict, but migration and films themselves changed following the war. The film industry in Guatemala is still a young entrepreneurial project (Fojas 2024; Durón 2014), but it has caught the attention of A-lister international festivals,

such as Cannes, Berlinale, and Sundance, (Cabezas Vargas and González de Canales Carcereny 2018). Directors like Jairo Bustamante (*Ixcanul,* 2015) and Cesar Diaz (*Nuestras Madres,* 2019) who have made films depicting post-conflict issues, have had their renaissance boom recently (Cortés 2018).

The academic Latinx diaspora in the United States has responded by analyzing the significance of migration in Mexican/Central American films and inquired on the intention of providing a spotlight to migrant stories and characters (Durón 2014; Shaw 2021; Ibarraran-Bigalondo 2021; Moralde 2014; Galeote 2023; Cabezas Vargas and González de Canales Carcereny 2018). Therefore, this research offers critical insights into the dynamics of power and influence between the United States and Central America, illuminating how pursuing the American Dream intersects with broader geopolitical realities. Additionally, by dissecting the allegory of the migrant as a character and narrative device, this study provides a nuanced understanding of migration within Guatemalan society, shedding light on the complexities of identity, belonging, and aspiration. Lastly, if the connection of migration and film is seen through the context of the post-conflict period, it would give further recognition and cultural context to international audiences and critics during this cinematic boom (Cabezas Vargas and González de Canales Carcereny 2018). Therefore, this research could expand the academic discourse on diasporic transnational cultural influences.

The formation of immigrant diaspora communities in destination countries heralded a new chapter in the region's cultural narrative. Far from their homeland yet bound by shared experiences of trauma and resilience, these diaspora communities became crucibles of creativity and cultural expression (Rapoport, Sardoschau, and Silve 2020). Through art, music, literature, and cuisine, they forged vibrant tapestries

of identity, blending elements of their Guatemalan heritage with the diverse influences of their adopted homelands (Canclini 2013). The impact of the immigrant diaspora on Guatemala's cultural landscape has been profound, catalyzing a renaissance of artistic expression that transcends geographic boundaries (Hernández 2024). From the vivid hues of Mayan indigenous textiles to the haunting melodies of marimba music, the cultural heritage of Guatemala continues to thrive and evolve, enriched by the contributions of its diaspora communities scattered across the globe. In this sentiment of resilience and renewal, the past's echoes mingle with present rhythms, weaving a narrative of hope and healing for future generations to embrace[3].

# Historical Background

## The Guatemalan Armed Conflict

The Guatemalan Armed Conflict, spanning several decades from the early 1960s to the mid-1990s, was not merely a clash of arms but a multifaceted struggle deeply intertwined with the country's history, politics, and societal fabric (Chamarbagwala and Morán 2010). At its core were intricate layers of social, economic, and political grievances that simmered for generations, erupting into a violent conflagration that scarred the nation profoundly(Ardón 1999). Land reform, or the lack thereof, stood as a focal point of contention, symbolizing the entrenched disparities in land ownership that fueled resentment among the marginalized Mayan indigenous population (Granovsky-Larsen 2017). This, coupled with pervasive social inequality and ethnic tensions, created a combustible environment ripe for conflict.

The ramifications of the conflict extended far beyond the battlefield,

[3] A great essay that explores this idea further is Canclini (2013), originally in Spanish with English translation.

permeating every facet of Guatemalan society (Chamarbagwala and Morán 2010). The civilian population bore the brunt of the violence, enduring widespread displacement, human rights abuses, and unimaginable suffering. The term "genocide" has been invoked by scholars and activists to describe the systematic targeting of Mayan indigenous communities (namely, the Ixil people), highlighting the deliberate campaign of violence aimed at eradicating cultural identities deemed threatening to the prevailing military power structure (Scott 2009). Efforts to reckon with the past and address the legacies of injustice have been fraught with challenges, as the pursuit of justice and reparations remains elusive for many victims and their families (Open Society Foundations 2013). Nonetheless, civil society organizations, alongside international partners, have tirelessly campaigned for accountability and reconciliation, striving to ensure that the atrocities of the past are never forgotten and that the pursuit of peace and justice remains a guiding principle for Guatemala's future (Kruijt 2003; Ardón 1999).

## The Post-Conflict Period in the Northern Triangle

The post-conflict period is the era following the end of the internal conflicts that plagued the country during the late 20th century (Granovsky-Larsen 2017; Chamarbagwala and Morán 2010). The civil war in Guatemala was not exceptional for the region. El Salvador experienced a brutal civil war from 1980 to 1992, and Honduras, faced significant political turmoil and military rule during the same period (Farah 2013). The Northern Triangle of Central America precisely refers these three countries: Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, whose issues are deeply interconnected, as this area is characterized by similarities in social, economic, and political challenges, including pervasive violence, corruption, poverty, and lack of economic opportunities following their respective internal conflicts (Ardón 1999;

Farah 2013).

The Northern Triangle has some of the highest homicide rates in the world (UNODC Homicide Statistics 2011), partly due to the presence of powerful gangs and drug trafficking organizations, with “La Mara Salvatrucha” as the biggest crime gang in control (Meyer 2023). This gang originated in Los Angeles and spread southwards with deported gang members scouting young kids on the meager urban areas of their hometowns (Kinosian 2017). La Mara’s spread was exacerbated by political instability, weak governance, social inequality, educational neglect, and systematic economic marginalization (Chamarbagwala and Morán 2010; Meyer 2023). 55% of the Guatemalan population lives below the poverty line, and 41% of all students in Guatemala do not finish high school (Chamarbagwala and Morán 2010; Meyer 2023).

These harsh conditions have led to large-scale migration, with many individuals and families fleeing to the United States and other countries in search of safety and better living conditions (Mejia-Mantillas and González Rubio 2024; Meyer 2023; Farah 2013; Green 2009). New arrivals to the U.S. join the approximately 3.8 million Central American immigrants already resident (Batalova 2024), who accounted for 8% of all 45.3 million immigrants (CBP 2024). The Central American-born population in the United States has grown more than tenfold since 1980 (around the end of armed conflicts) and by 25 percent since 2010 (during the post-conflict period) (Ward and Batalova 2023). Thus, the Guatemalan migrant journey is conjoined with other post-conflict reflections in neighboring countries of the region, and films depicting Central Americans migrating share similar themes and archetypes.



## Methodology

## Film Analysis

For this investigation, I will employ film analysis as the primary approach, focusing on two seminal works: "La Jaula de Oro"[4] (2013) by Diego Quemada-Diez and "La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas"[5] (2012) by Luis Mandoki. "La Jaula de Oro" is a Mexican-Guatemalan film who premiered at the Cannes Film Festival and has since then gathered a devoted following of film critics and fans alike; in fact, it is still occasionally exhibited at the Mexican Cineteca[6] (Delgado 2014). The plot, much like the 1983 corrido-folk song by the same title[7], concerns Latin-American migration to the US, focusing on three teenagers in their journey from Guatemala City to what they refer as “The North.” The second film, “La Vida Precoz y Breve de Sabina Rivas” is a Mexican ‘Televisa’ production which follows the life of young Sabina, a 16-year-old Honduran child prostitute working in the outskirts of the Guatemalan border to Mexico, with the hopes of receiving a benefaction to become a legal immigrant in the United States.

There are two reasons for the choice of film in my analysis. First, both films delve into my topic of research on dream and hope, include narrative tropes reflecting post-conflict phenomena, and common characters in migrant stories (like “La Bestia” train, La Mara, the Mexican Border Patrol, etc.). Secondly, the migrant experience is represented by kids going through two life transits: the journey to the United States, representing the American Dream narrative; and becoming of age, representing their loss of youth and identity. As 60% of all migrants in the Mexico-US border are single



[4] English title: The Golden Cage
[5] English title: The Brief and Precocious Life of Sabina Rivas
[6] Recent to the submission of this research, on May 18, 2024, the film premiered a behind-the-scenes documentary in Canal Catorce alongside the Mexican Cineteca (Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5guKzu0Cfs).
[7] Original song by Los Tigres del Norte (Listen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84SSCUhpa7U)

young adults (CBP 2024), I see an intrinsic connection between coming of age story arcs and journey migration films. I believe these films are ideal for highlighting the Central American migrant as a character, as a narrative allegory to encourage the pursuit of hope at all cost.

# Theoretical Framework

I found two relevant theorists from which I would like to base this research's film analysis and my own argument on "The Migrant Thinking". The main author being Yosefa Loshitzky complemented by the work of Mieke Bal. Even if Loshitzky and Bal were basing their theories on the European continent, I see clear similarities between the migrants depicted in their research and Central American migrants. The "human waste" problem, an effort to "get rid" or discard migrant, especially refugee, communities from Europe (Loshitzky 2010) is universally applicable to all migrants across the world, including the social and political reactions to Central American migration (Galeote 2023).

### The Journeys of Hope Genre by Yosefa Loshitzky

I will begin with the works of Yosefa Loshitzky, namely "Screening Strangers: migration and diaspora in contemporary European cinema" (2010). She argues there are three genres of migration and diasporic films; these genres are used as methodologies to humanize migrant populations in Europe, which has become unhospitable for these "strangers", aka the migrant (Loshitzky 2010).

I found the first genre most applicable for my film analysis: the Journeys of Hope genre, illustrates the challenges and resilience found in journey stories to the host country. "Films of this genre portray the hardships experienced and endured by refugees and migrants on their way to the Promised Land (their host country in

Europe)" (Loshitzky 2010). The Journey of Hope also involves discarding the old life; that is, the identity once had must be abandoned, while at the same time the integration of a new identity is dubious (Loshitzky 2010). Suitcases, old friends, family, and other lively possessions should be abandoned by the migrant character at some point in these films, and so the loss of identity is intrinsic to migratory narratives (Loshitzky 2010).

## The Illusion of Migratory Aesthetics by Mieke Bal

The effort to make migrants more human through cinema is also echoed in Mieke Bal's theory in "Close Encounters: Producing Mutual 'Integration' (2019), in which she argues on the nature of films as an untruthful medium. According to Bal (2019), films, even films pretending to be genuine and truthful, are lies. "Their ethical integrity does not consist in the production of narratives, and they are not transparent. The very familiarity of narrative renders events familiar, thus lessening their affective impact, and promoting the lie that we can find out, then know, what other people go through. In other words, it is the form that lies" (Bal 2019). She continues by explaining that migration in films is the experience of others, and therefore an unfamiliar event turned immersive by the screen (2019). This transforms migration into a performative tool, in which migrants are no longer othered by its audience, but have become disingenuous (Bal 2019). The allegory of the migrant as a fictional character in migration films effectively makes that character empathetic towards the audience. Furthermore, whether this representation is foreign to real-life migrant experience, is irrelevant for the cinematic aesthetics of migratory stories (Bal 2019).



## Migrant Thinking: Identity, Belonging, Aspiration

Migrant Thinking is the ideology of the Central American migrant. It supposes that the migrant must somehow suffer on their journey and presumes the destination is reserved to only a few. It is prevalent in both fiction and non-fiction, and I believe it

stems from three socio-cultural pillars: Christian faith and Hope, Post-conflict-induced forced migration, and the Illusion of the American Dream. Hope, connected to Christian faith, reflects the resilience and unbreakable spirit of the migrant. Forced migration reflects the desperation of the migrant, having no place to go and no place to return. This connects with Loshitzky's (2010) Journeys of Hope genre, and the elemental loss of identity as part of the journey. Finally, the Illusion of the American Dream is Bal's (2019) theory of Migratory Aesthetics applied to Central American migration.

The migrant genre attempts to portray migrants as human, contrary to popular public media discourses attempting to shadow migrants as the enemy (Loshitzky 2010). The migrant character, previously othered by non-migrants, is presented from the point of view and the gaze of the other himself (Loshitzky 2010). I argue these concepts; namely the Illusion of Migratory Aesthetics, the Journey of Hope genre, and Migrant Thinking; can be observed in my chosen films.

# Film Analysis

## La Vida Precoz y Breve de Sabina Rivas

*La Vida Precoz y Breve de Sabina Rivas* follows three characters, each representing a migrant population. The first is the main character: Sabina, which I described in the introduction above. The second is Jiovanny, a Honduran "marero" member of MS13 (La Mara Salvatrucha) who shares an initially unknown connection to Sabina. The third and most ephemeral is Juan, a young Central American (exact nationality is left unsaid[8]) trying and failing to cross over to Mexico, ultimately being tied to the rails and crushed by "La Bestia", a train commonly used by Central

[8] I might be compelled to add that Tenoch Huerta, the Mexican actor who plays Juan, executed a diluted and frankly hilarious accent that I, as Guatemalan, cannot attribute to any Central American country.

Americans seeking to cross all of Mexico.

Sabina works in Tijuanita del Sur ("Little Tijuana of the South"), an obvious parallelism with the Mexican City of Tijuana in the State of Baja California, bordering USA. Tijuanita del Sur is located in Tecun Uman, a Guatemalan border city to Mexico. Compared to any Mexican city, even Tapachula, the next town over the border, Tecun Uman is merely a village: underdeveloped, cheap, and full of criminal activity. Sabina's pimp, an old lady called Doña Lita says "En Tecun Uman la vida no vale nada" ("In Tecun Uman life is not worth anything").

The city's name is also ironic since it is the name of one of the last rulers of the K'iche' Mayan Indigenous people (Aroche 2022). According to the Kaqchikel annals, he was slain by Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado while waging battle against the Spanish and their allies, the Mexica (Aztecs) of Central Mexico (Aroche 2022). He is one of the last war heroes left of the pre-colonial Guatemalan memory (Aroche 2022).

## The Language of Migrant Thinking in La Vida Precoz de Sabina

The language used in the film's dialogue evokes the themes of chance, and wording of "fate, chance, destiny...", present throughout the film. Doña Lita says about Sabina:

*"Esa niña tiene futuro, pero tiene transgiversada la constelación" (Mandoki 2012).*
*("That girl has a future, but she keeps misinterpreting the stars [constellation].")*

These characters speak about Sabina's "chances" to cross the US border, hinting that it is not in her cards. However, the systematic poverty, violence, and trafficking that affects Sabina's character is, precisely, *systematic*. She is, at one point in the movie, literally handcuffed, with no way of escaping her life, imprisoned by her situation. Sabina's character arc ends when she finds herself free from her oppressors, free to

look for her own life path; the film ends in an aerial shot of the Mexican-Guatemalan border, separated by the river. I believe this language exemplifies the fundamental of Migrant thinking that migration has something to do with luck rather than privilege and education.

It can be said that Sabina is a child who just wants to play, as displayed in the scene where she dances around in an arcade, who is instead forced to exploit that very desire by singing and dancing topless. Sabina's dream is nothing specific, and it is implied that she simply wishes to leave her past trauma behind. She says she "has to continue," northwards, to the US, to her future. Sabina's loss of innocence happens before she is framed by the camera, and her loss of identity is revealed later.

Jiovanny is exposed as her brother, who incidentally killed their parents and burned down their home after getting into an argument. Family abuse, poverty, and trauma are all exemplified in her background, an attempt at showing the systematic effects of the Armed Conflict. In one second, Sabina's youth and identity is stripped away, while she attempts to leave her past behind. After she leaves the brothel and finds refuge in a temporary migrant shelter, the cycle continues: another girl replaces Sabina, singing the same song she performed.



## The System of Migration: Antagonists of Sabina

In this section I will describe a character study of the oppressive forces which doctrine Sabina's story and its respective connections to post-conflict issues. The Guatemalan armed conflict makes its presence in the form of the Sabina's shelter raid: officially executed by the Guatemalan Army, but sneakily intervened by La Mara Salvatrucha. During the morning raid, the National Army marches through the shelter, wearing red bonnets and golden patches. In response, the migrants gather around their

makeshift parish, singing prayers, and the imagery evokes memories of families praying for the missing during the war. Later at night, as the Mara ambushes and begins a mindless killing spree, it hints at the present systemic violence forced upon the Guatemalan population, who are now killed by La Mara *because the Army can no longer do it themselves*. This is the quintessential example of the post-conflict period in context.

Remarkably, the itself film tries to distinguish a ranking of the power structures of three main obstacles in Sabina's journey. The Mexican and American higher ups draw up the territorial borders of each power, calling it "a perfect system with no leaks"(Mandoki 2012): From Tapachula and Up, jurisdiction falls to the Americans ("gringos"). From Tapachula Downwards, that is responsibility of the Mexican border control. River Down (Guatemalan territory), to la Mara Salvatrucha. First, on top of everything and always overlooking, is the character of the *Gringo*, representing American control. Mexican Policeman to Sabina:

*"Resultó que eras la debilidad del gringo y eso es mi lotería" (Mandoki 2012).*
*("Turns out you were the gringo's weakness and that is my lottery.")*

The *Gringo* comes in the form of an American man posted in the Guatemala-Mexican border. He meets Sabina when her bus is being searched and convinces the Mexican officials to unjustly arrest her (even if she was under the protection of Doña Lita). His American peer frowns upon his intentions and prefers to leave his office, but does not intervene. The Mexican police are reluctantly complacent because they cannot go against the *Gringo's* wishes. Doña Lita cannot protect her from afar, she can only go as far as the Mexicans. Thus, Sabina is raped while everybody is aware of it. The man is so much taller than her, looming over her from behind, highlighting not only Sabina's early age, but also visually representing American power over the Central

American region. He further enhances this abuse of power by using brute force and leashing a belt over Sabina's neck, dehumanizing her further.

Second, the Mexican border patrol, represented by two corrupt police officers, one of which works as a secondary pimp to Sabina. These characters reference the American power control over the region, as they are always working as pawns for the higher ups. They are corrupt, complaint to criminal activities (even working together with gangs to terrorize migrants), and they show deep xenophobia/racism towards Central Americans. For instance, when they unjustly apprehend Sabina, they assume her Mexican passport is fake without checking. Then, they *sniff her* like dogs, and mutter she must be Honduran. The Mexican police officer confesses he despises having to run errands on Guatemalan territory, saying "[In Guatemala] AIDS is loose in the atmosphere and that is worse than bat rabies" (Mandoki 2012).

Third, the presence of la Mara Salvatrucha is not only embodied by Jiovanny, but gathered into one collective and undistinguishable "group," always together and recognizable by their shaved heads and scary tattoos. In the first moments of the film, Jiovanny is put through an initiation process known as "13 segundos de trancazos" ("13 seconds of punches") where newcomers get dogpiled by other members for 13 seconds (Kinosian 2017). This animalistic hunger for violence attempts to show them as the service dogs of the higher ups, used by Mexico and the US for any disposition outside legal limits. They terrorize migrants on "La Bestia," oversee drug traficking in the area, kill and murder anyone who is a threat to the social rank of the region. They embody the biggest threat to Sabina, a reminder she has nowhere to return but nowhere to run.

## Jaula de Oro

"La Jaula de Oro" follows the story of three mestizo teenagers from Guatemala City as they pass through Mexico: Samuel, who separates from the crew early on after their first failed attempt; Sara, who disguises herself as a boy named "Oswaldo;" and Juan, our main protagonist. The three come from the slums of "El basurero de Zona 3" ("The Zona 3 landfill"[9]), which illustrate the immediate aftermaths of the armed conflict: mass displacement, poverty, and unsafety. After crossing Mexican territory, they meet Chaok, a Mayan Tzotzil indigenous boy who does not speak Spanish.

After Samuel decides to go back to the capital city, the three remaining kids are motivated to continue into Mexican territory, with the hopes of reaching "the North" They board "La Bestia," a train that crosses most of Mexico and is used by thousands of Central American migrants every day. However, their dream is sold short and the path ahead is full of trails and turbulations. By the end of the movie, only Juan will be residing in "the Golden Cage;" la Mara would take Sara, her fate left to our imagination, and Chaok is shot dead by a non-descripted white sniper, only a few meters into American territory. Juan is the only one able to see the snow: a dream they all shared.

## The Loss of Youth/Identity in La Jaula de Oro

Juan attempts to cross Mexico three times, and each time is empathized by the loss of a friend. Especially, the loss of Sara and Chaok contribute to Juan's final character arc and represent both his loss of identity and youth.

There is a drastic tonal shift in the middle of the film after the taking of Sara. Whereas before the film had a melodic, hopeful, and adventurous ambience; the rest

[9] Guatemala City is separated by zones, similar to the numbered districts in Vienna or Paris, starting from Zona 1 until 21.

of the trip up North is quiet. The initially unexplained disguise used by Sara is completely justified when a group of "mareros" ("gang members") stop all migrants boarding "La Bestia," sort them in a line, and pick only the women to put into a truck. The reason is unknown to the viewer, with only the human trafficking of women on the border as contextual cues. Sara is found out, stripped from her shirt, and groped in public. After that, she is put into a black SUV, which drives away carrying her cries of help away from her male companions. It is a cruel scene; it serves the purpose of female violence used as a narrative tool to move a male protagonist's story forward. Sara is to Juan a happy future, a family, the promise of young love; that is taken away in an instant.

Chaok could debatably fit the "noble savage" trope. He is an indigenous boy who is mysterious/mystical (there is no subtitles when he speaks), more prepared than their mestizo counterpart in the wilderness, quiet (solemn and wise), and ritualistic. He is the only one capable of killing a hen and he does it without added cruelty, thanking the hen to let them eat it, even under the mocks of the others. Juan says:

> *"Indio cerote cree que lo va a matar hablandole" (Quemada-Diaz 2013).*
> *("Fucking indian thinks he is going to kill it [the hen] by talking to it.")*

His relationship with Juan is poor, to say the least. Juan calls him common Guatemalan racial slurs like "indio[10]" or "ishto[11]," insults him by calling him "cerote[12]." Juan is a racist mestizo who exemplifies the racial tensions of post-conflict Guatemala. These mestizo characters could be poor and underprivileged, but next to a Mayan indigenous person, they would rather be "gringos;"[13] as seen with Juan who

[10] "Indian"
[11] Derogatory towards dark-skinned children.
[12] "Piece of shit"
[13] Further reading: Martínez Peláez (2015)

poses as a cowboy for a picture, and even goes as far as stealing cowboy boots. Chaok is separated by the others even in frame, misunderstood by all, even Sara, who is compassionate and kind to him.

However, after Juan is severely wounded by the same Mara who take Sara, Chaok saves Juan's life. Chaok helps the mestizo, unconditionally, even after all the maltreatment against him. Juan is cured by herbal medicine (indigenous knowledge) on the ruins of a colonial "finca,"[14] and the reference to colonial power dynamics is not lost on anyone. Juan survives and they are later captured once again by mareros who only free Juan, but he chooses to go back and save Chaok, even at the risk of his own life. They find an emotional connection to each other, in the form of snow and the memory of Sara. The sudden death of Chaok as they cross the border reminds Juan of his loss of privilege, no longer a mestizo with power, now just any other 'beaner[15].' His position within Guatemalan society is taken away from him. Chaok is killed in a golden wheat field, from far away, by an unknown American soldier: literally killed by America.

Once across the border, having lost both youth (Sara) and identity (Chaok), Juan is sent to work in a meat processing factory. In clothes too big for his young body, dressed in all white but drenched in animal blood, he is seen picking up the bits and pieces dropped on the ground. There is a social commentary here: migrants get leftovers on the ground. Not a short scene, the audience is forced to watch roughly 10 minutes of sweeping meat. Juan is forced to grow up, only his innocence connecting him to his home country.

[14] Finca is a Spanish term for estate, usually adjacent to a plantation.
[15] Racist slur towards Latin-Americans in the U.S., especially Mexicans

## Migratory Aesthetics in La Jaula de Oro

In this section I will attempt to interpret the cinema's language in relation to the allegory of the migrant, trying to find imageries and symbols which attempt at empathy for the migrant. Firstly, the "Golden Cage" is a popular culture metaphor of immigrating to the US as a Latin American citizen. It alludes to the feeling of helplessness of the migrant who struggles to assimilate emotionally, who cannot choose to go home, but who nevertheless enjoys the economic benefits of the host country—feeling imprisoned in a cage, albeit made of gold. I find explaining the title much more relevant for understanding the film's message: at the end of the day, this movie could be the story of anyone on that train to the North.

Music in "La Jaula de Oro" is limited, even dialogue is scarcely distributed. The first 15 minutes of the film are entirely without both. Most of the film is diegetic sound, meaning sounds that solely exist within the story's world-building, but there are some remarkable exceptions. On the second attempt to cross Mexico, as Juan and Chaok are riding La Bestia for the last few miles, "La Caña" by Son del Centro plays in the background. The lyrics say:

*"Hermano si te haz perdido cruzando la frontera, siembra el valor con tus pasos pa' cruzar cuando yo quiera."*
*"Yo moriré en tierra extraña, esta tierra ahora es de todos, con los muchos que han caído cruzando por la montaña."*
*("Brother, if you have lost your way crossing the border, sow courage with your steps to cross when I want you to."*
*"I will die in foreign land, this land now belongs to all, because of the many who have fallen crossing the mountain")*

The film is set to a 2.39:1 aspect ratio, often referred to as "CinemaScope" or "anamorphic widescreen format"(Delgado 2014). Because of the width of the frame size, this aspect ratio is ideal for those wide cinematic shots of landscapes in films. It

is open, extended, like a horizon. It hints at a dream-like, hopeful view of the characters. This aspect is often accompanied by similarly themed imagery throughout the film.

For instance, after the two remaining characters pass through a tunnel, the once wide landscape of the Mexican desert goes farther and farther away from the camera. I found this to elude the character's home leaving behind, forgetting their past, with no turning back. Another view is the peephole POV frame used when Juan and Chaok are "peeping" a look across into US territory, looking through the holes on the border wall. It perfectly encapsulates the character's feeling, that the American Dream represents their ideal future, reserved to the few who cross.

The armed conflict's presence is made known throughout this journey too. In Guatemala City, the missing posters of people still missing from the war litter the streets of downtown, an authentic image documented by the fim. After "la Bestia" is stopped by the Mexican border patrol and migrants are forced to flee, our three characters are compelled to work on a burning corn field after being saved by its farmers. The image of burning corn fields hints to the Guatemala army's strategy to set them on fire during the war, capturing or killing the people hiding in the field.

However, I think the biggest re-occurring imagery is the vision of the snow. It is first introduced to us as our characters first sleep on top "la Bestia." They dream of a black sky, snow falling towards the camera. Close to the US border, Juan and Chaok watch a miniature toy train ("la Bestia") riding on the snow. Chaok shares the name of snow with Juan in Tzotzil, and Juan tells him the Spanish. This vision of the snow is repeated multiple times, every time the characters sleep. I believe this vision of snow symbolizes hope, a representation of the American Dream. At the journey's end, when

Juan leaves his work, with a lonely lamp post to guide him, only he gets to see the snow falling. This snow now has a different meaning: all the lives lost in the journey to America.

## Major Findings

In this section, I plan to answer my initial research question: the representation of young Central American migrants in films. In "La Jaula de Oro" the migrant character can be attributed to *anyone*, meaning that the film enraptures the allegory of the migrant in various faces, not limited to the main cast; Albeit this character is most often depicted as poor, darker-skinned, desperate/helpless. The image of "La Bestia" as a secondary character, is a carrier and a symbol of the migrant. The film crew spent three weeks hoping on and off the train, recording real people on top (Delgado 2014). This effort redirects the audience's attention to other stories, other experiences on the train. La Bestia becomes one more companion of the migrant, a helper, a supporter. It travels slowly to facilitate hopping in, it takes the fastest and safest path across Mexico, it looks after them as they sleep, and it warns them of any danger lurking ahead. It is the past, the present, the future, and the journey. As a visual marker of Central American migration (IOM, 2024), it portrays the migrant character in its essence.

Per contra, the migrant depicted in "La Vida de Sabina Rivas" is comparatively more dangerous, desperate. Juan[16] might be the most cliched depiction of the migrant character, and La Bestia is anything but one more obstacle in his path. He fails to get on it in his first character introduction and ultimately it is that train which runs over his body tied to the tracks by la Mara, killing him instantly. If the sudden death of Chaok is blamed on the conceptualization of America, Juan's murder falls on the hands of the

[16] The character in Sabina Rivas, not to be confused with his namesake in La Jaula de Oro.

symbol for future. The migrant character depicted in this film is not on that train, but rather split between Sabina, Jiovanny, and Juan, all of which will share a hopeless ending. Oppositely, the migrant character in this film is not *anyone,* because barely a few are allowed to continue their journey.

In the following subsections, I relate the three concepts from the theoretical framework; namely, my own theory of the "Migrant Thinking", Loshitzky's Loss of Identity in Journeys of Hope, and Bal's Illusion of Migratory Aesthetics; reflecting each theory to the cultural context of the films.

## Migrant Thinking in Central American Films

I believe the American Dream as an illusion of hope is prevalent in fiction and reality. Migrant thinking underlines three ideas: hope/faith (which is connected to Christian religious belief), helplessness of the present (provoked by systematic inequality), and determination (to make it across). The American Dream comes in seemingly simple wishes: to provide for the family, to own a house/territory at old age, tandget a higher education (Villalobos Vindas 2017). In short, these dreams are not far-fetched and impossible, but reflect the feeling of "poder tener un pedazo de vida" ("to be able to have a piece of life") (Villalobos Vindas 2017). In the human rights documentary, "Casa en Tierra Ajena (Home in Foreign Land)," a migrant is asked the most dangerous part of the journey. His response:

*"Soñar el sueño americano es fácil. Lo difícil es cruzar por México"*
*(Villalobos Vindas 2017).*
*("Dreaming the American dream is easy. The hard part is crossing through Mexico.")*

## Journey of Hope: Loss of Youth

I would argue further that the loss of youth seen in these coming-of-age films also parallel the loss of identity of the migrant. In the same way that Sabina carried

nothing but candy and makeup on her purse moments before she is raped, or in the way that Juan tries to impress Sara with his dance moves the night before she is taken, these characters lose their sense of youth the longer along in their journey. Juan and Sabina are both teenagers who dream unattainable dreams, who go into both mental and physical paths on which they realize they must abandon their identity (their country, their family, their friends, their memory of the past). Loshitzky's (2010) suitcase analogy could be compared to Juan losing his boots to the Mexican migration police and to Sabina when she is finally on Mexican territory but realizes, "I have nowhere to go." Turning back is not an option for either of these characters because they have abandoned their identity, and continuing forward is hard because they have lost their youth.

*Naive* is a word that best describes both main characters of each film. The innocence of youth and its consequent loss is a narrative metaphor for both growing up and moving away, it is the basic loss of identity that represents both becoming of age and immigrating. No research prior to the trip implies last option, that there is no other choice for these teenagers. Migratory paths across borders are often built by communities. In other words, entire villages migrate to the United States and have generational knowledge on the routes and challenges to avoid, and who have even built businesses to make others cross easier (Mejia-Mantillas and González Rubio 2024). Both depictions in these films seem to be of kids who have had their whole lives pre-meditating this crusade but are constantly fooled into taking the road less traveled due to ignorance.

## The Illusion of Migratory Aesthetics: The American Dream

The allegory of the migrant is present in the main characters of each film because both initially evoke the empathy by their innocent hope. But whether these

characters hold their initial belief of the American Dream is debatable by the end of their arc. Sabina, because she still has not reached it, and Juan, precisely because he already has. They both grow to realize that "the other side" is not all sunshine and roses, and that their struggle may have been for nothing. The underlying message of these films is that migrating takes excruciating effort and deathly risk.

*"De ahi [Estados Unidos] no se llega de salto ni por milagro" (Mandoki 2012).*
*("To there [the United States] you cannot even get by a miracle.")*

According to these narratives, crossing Mexico comes with the following risks: falling victim of sex trafficking and pimping, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and extortion, kidnapping for ramson, or forced labor. Furthermore, migrants risk severe injury, accidental death, rape/sexual abuse, and even violent death or murder. Indeed, geo-political negotiations between Mexico and the USA have made it so much harder for Central Americans to pass through Mexico and have statistically been more apprehended by the Mexican border control as time goes by (Ward and Batalova 2023).

La Mara Salvatrucha keeps a tight control over the Northern Triangle territory, but no record could suggest a remarkable effort to target the migrant population (Kinosian 2017). Drug-transshipment organizations, which are separate from the gangs, are responsible for moving cocaine up through Central America (Kinosian 2017). In Central America, the MS-13 is primarily involved in local extortion; drug sales are a much smaller part of the gang's activities and happen mostly at the local level in the neighborhoods they control (Kinosian 2017).

While it is true that deaths at the border are on a record high (Alvarez 2022), those account for less than 0.3% of all US-Mexico border encounters ("Southwest Land Border Encounters" 2024). A total of 2,552 human trafficking victims, 393 of which are specifically sex trafficked minors, accounts to 1.5% of all migrants who cross

Mexico (Batalova 2024, Polaris 2018). The risks in these films, depicted as inevitable fates of all migrants, are factually improbable[17][18]. The bottom line is that if crossing the border was *that* hard, no one would do it. However, migrant aesthetics go against a realistic approach to migration, as they favor the emotional performance of crossing. It is also a reality that if journey movies had no dramatic exaggeration, nobody would see them. There is another bottom line in this imaginary of the American Dream: most people reach it. The Central American diaspora in the US enjoys an average middle-class life (Hernández 2024). They have higher education, wealth accumulation, stable jobs, and better social mobility than their national counterparts in their home countries (Mejia-Mantillas and González Rubio 2024).

# Conclusion

## Migration Thinking as a Long-term Hope

Migration stories are the modern embodiment of hope for post-conflict Central America. The transformative cycle of migrant identity and diaspora evidence that migration "pays off, " assimilation is possible, and that generational stability is a reality. The illusion of migrant thinking does not erase the message of these films: they ask the audience to recognize migrants as humans through immersion and empathy, making non-migrants experience the worst-case scenario of a cross-border journey. These films are highly effective in doing so.

The dramatic power of the representation of the Central American migrant

[17] In research by Rogers et al. (2012) there is indeed a high frequency of sexual abuse at the US-Mexico border. However, it is also a known fact that Mexico and Central American women suffer some of the highest rates of sexual assault and gender-based violence in the world (Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, n.d.), so whether the cross-border factor impacts sexual assault frequency positively or negatively is dubious.

[18] For expansive statistics about immigration and migrant behaviors to/in the U.S., please refer to Batalova (2024).

underlines the importance of solidarity and empathic narratives. The Central American humanitarian crisis relies on the decision to leave, on the uncertainty of going, of seeking refuge elsewhere. Central American migration is empathized by UNHCR (2024) as not only a form of social mobility, but an absolute necessity after the war (Mejia-Mantillas and Gonzàlez Rubio 2024). The portrayal of these migrants in film is crucial in fostering audience empathy and understanding. By immersing viewers in the path migrants face, these films effectively humanize individuals often reduced to statistics or political talking points. While these stories may be exceptional, the risks they depict are real and ongoing.

This phenomenon does not seem to dwindle anytime soon[19]. The disparities in living conditions and economic opportunities between Central America and the United States underscore the likelihood of continued migration from Central America's northern regions (Mejia-Mantillas and González Rubio 2024). The stark contrasts in opportunities make migration an enduring reality for many seeking better futures (Mejia-Mantillas and González Rubio 2024). Stability and job security are far more attainable in the U.S., driving generations of Central Americans to embark on perilous journeys northward (Ward and Batalova 2023).

In conclusion, the cinematic depiction of migrants, while fictional, serves as a powerful tool for raising awareness and empathy. The enduring hope for a better life will continue to drive migration, necessitating comprehensive and compassionate approaches to support those on this journey. Recognizing and addressing the root causes of migration, alongside creating safe and legal migration avenues, are essential steps towards a more just and equitable global society.

[19] For information about immigrant and emigrant populations across the globe, please refer to tabulations by MPI (2020)

(Gibbons et al. 2011; Pelayo Rangel 2024; Díaz 2019; Bo
ym 2008; Kristin and Andrew 2004; Bustamante 2015; Frías 2019; Leandro Solano 2020; Benjamin 2017; Fojas 2004; Berger 2009; Moralde
2014; Ibarraran-Bigalondo 2021; Durón 2014)

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