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Haunted Bodies: Spectrality, Gender Violence and the Central American Female Migrant in Recent Mexican Cinema

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Abstract: The ghostly, the spectral and the idea of haunting as theoretical framework has been previously used to discuss violence(s) in Latin America (Petersen / Ribas-Casasayas 2016, Hopenhayn 2002) as well as gendered violence in Mexico (Petersen 2016). I argue that the spectral allows recent Mexican films to nuance the seen and unseen processes of violence that Central American female migrant bodies experience and the reactionary performances those bodies enact to counter the violence. I first discuss Guatemalan migrant Sara's gender performance and transformation in *La jaula de oro* (Quemada-Díez 2013) as a result of looming gendered violence. *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas* (Mandoki 2014) is examined in tandem with journalist Óscar Martínez's metaphor of sex trafficking as "fantasma" and current transnational feminist debates on consent and victimhood. *La vida precoz* provides a complex vision of Honduran migrant Sabina's "choice" to perform sex work in the *zonas de tolerancia* on the Mexico-Guatemala border where the specter of sex slavery and regional gender violence constantly lurks. The article concludes with a reflection on the implications of spectrality, gendered violence and victimhood as it relates to current asylum policy.

Keywords: Mexican Cinema, Central American Migration, spectrality, gender violence, victim

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Haunted Bodies: Spectrality, Gender Violence and the Central American Female Migrant in Recent Mexican Cinema[1]

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The Pew Research Center reported in 2017 that although Mexican migration to the United States had decreased by 6%, Central American migration from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras had risen by 25% between 2007 and 2015.[2] Yet, these statistics derive from Central American migrants who *arrive* to the US. An even greater number of migrants who attempt to cross through Mexico end up killed, maimed, robbed, raped or entangled in sex trafficking in the lawless state of exception that is Mexico today. After increased pressure (and even direct funding) from the US in an attempt to secure its own border, Mexico also escalated border security, including former President Peña Nieto's Plan Frontera Sur in 2014. An increased concern for Central American migrants' well-being echoes amongst NGOs and academics,[3] Castillo from the Council on Hemispheric Affairs notes that "instead of deterring unauthorized immigration, Programa Frontera Sur has dispersed many displaced people and made them vulnerable to extortionists, rapists, and thieves" (Castillo 2016: 4). Kovic and Kelly argue that current policy "targets and makes vulnerable migrant bodies" (Kovic / Kelly 2017: 3). What is more, official discourse invisibilizes the violence migrants experience; governments frequently refuse to acknowledge abuse, criminal organizations 'disappear bodies' to hide evidence, and violence is written off by conflating it with 'accidents', thus obscuring the structural violence that Central American migrants flee in their countries of origin.[4]

Central American female migrants in Mexico are doubly vulnerable: as migrants and women, coming from and passing through patriarchal, misogynistic societies, they endure difficult-to-document violence(s).[5] A November 2017 report from FM4 Paso Libre, a migrant rights group based in Guadalajara, explains that female migrants regularly confront "miradas lascivas, las agresiones verbales, los tocamientos, las intimidaciones e incluso las violaciones sexuales" from "hombres (migrantes, mexicanos, autoridades y delincuentes)" (2017: 110).

[1] A resounding thank you to Carolyn Fornoff for generous feedback on an early version, to Fran Dennstedt for a lively discussion on feminism and sex work, to Ana Puga for sparking my interest in this topic and to Alberto Ribas-Casasayas for his meticulous reading.

[2] See Cohn et al. (2017: 2).

[3] See Isacson et al. (2017) and Armijo Canto / Benítez Manaut (2016).

[4] See Kovic / Kelly (2017: 2).

[5] For more on the intersection of gender and migration, see García-Aguilar (2017).

Quantitative numbers on sexual harassment, abuse and/or violence are incomplete and difficult to estimate. This is due to a lack of reporting, caused by low levels of confidence in authorities and impunity in the justice system, the women's irregular migration status, and the clandestine nature of cartel violence and sex trafficking networks. While the Guatemalan government estimates that eight out of ten female Central American migrants will face some type of sexual abuse on their journey through Mexico, the Mexican government ballparks the number to be six out of ten.[6] Although both figures are unthinkably high, the 20% discrepancy is a huge margin of difference. This violence, statistically ungraspable and discursively erasable in the public arena, is nevertheless extremely real for Central American women, haunting their travels and affecting the ways they perform and conceptualize their bodies.

This paper explores how cultural production, released around the time that Mexico's Plan Frontera Sur went into effect, makes use of the spectral to see or imagine what is missing from 'official' discourse or imperfect statistics. The ghostly, the spectral and the idea of haunting as a theoretical framework has been previously used to discuss violence(s) in Latin America[7] as well as gendered violence in Mexico.[8] Two recent Mexican films that depict young Central American migrants' experiences in Mexico – *La jaula de oro* (*The Golden Dream,* Quemada-Díez 2013) and *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas* (*The Precocious and Brief Life of Sabina Rivas,* Mandoki 2012) – find common ground in the way that they juxtapose the visible with the invisible, presence with absence. Spectral aspects in narrative and cinematographic techniques allow the films to nuance the seen and unseen processes of violence that Central American female migrant bodies experience and underscore the bodily performances that women enact to counter the violence. The framework of spectrality, or haunting, functions to communicate the gravity of the violence(s) migrant women face in Mexico while still avoiding the damaging, agency-robbing paradigm of the migrant as a helpless victim.[9]

The first section of this essay discusses Guatemalan migrant Sara (Karen Martínez)'s gender performance and bodily transformation in *La jaula de oro*. I read her unresolved kidnapping as a haunting reminder of looming gendered violence. The latter half of the paper explores how *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas* dialogues with El Salvadoran journalist Óscar Martínez's metaphor of sex trafficking as *fantasma* on the Guatemala-Mexico border in his

[6] See Martínez (2010: 84).
[7] Martín Hopenhayn writes of a different kind of "ghost" (*fantasma*) that haunts the Latin American metropolis: "la droga y la violencia" (2002). Hopenhayn's theoretical understanding of the fantasma is not based in Derrida nor Lacan.
[8] See Petersen (2016).
[9] Throughout this paper, I contest conflating the figure of the migrant and/or sex worker with the term "victim" because it denies agency to already precarious subjects. In no way do I contest that migrants and/or sex workers have experienced crime, abuse or exploitation that deserves justice.

chronicle 'Las esclavas invisibles', part of *Los migrantes que no importan: En el camino con los centroamericanos indocumentados en México* (2010). *La vida precoz* intervenes in ongoing feminist debates surrounding consent in migrant sex work by problematizing and nuancing Honduran migrant Sabina (Greisy Mena)'s 'choice' to participate in the sex industry in the *zona de tolerancia* where the specter of sex trafficking lurks. The film further uses haunting to insinuate incestuous, sexual abuse in Sabina's past through a ghost-like brother, Jovany (Fernando Moreno), who stalks Sabina in Mexico and underscores the violent situation she left in Honduras.

Pérez-Melgosa traces a history of how the Latin American migrant body became the "central motif of the migration-film genre in the Americas" (Pérez-Melgosa 2016: 217). He argues that despite intentions to condemn migrant abuse, films like *Espaldas mojadas* (Galindo 1955), *Bolivia* (Caetano 2001) and *¿Quién es Dayani Cristal?* (Silver 2013) ultimately "reduc[e] migrant subjects to the condition of victimized bodies" (Pérez-Melgosa 2016: 217). Mutilated or dead, this imagery robs migrants of agency. The first fiction film to explore Guatemalan-US migration, Gregory Nava's *El norte* (1984), does not neatly fit Pérez-Melgosa's paradigm. Suffering migrant bodies do appear in *El norte* – just consider the horrifying scene where rats attack Guatemalan siblings Rosa (Zaide Silvia Gutiérrez) and Enrique (David Villalpando) in the sewage tunnel that leads from Mexico to the US. Yet, after the border-crossing, Enrique's capable body determines his identity: his strong arms (a characteristic emphasized in dialogue) make it possible for him to perform labor. The last image of *El norte*, a medium close-up of an unidentifiable severed head hanging from a tree, suggests that Nava's film may indeed conform to the typical portrayal of mutilated migrant bodies.

The two films I analyze here offer an alternative to prior migration cinema; they fully reject the trope of the dead or dismembered migrant body, instead intimating violence and suffering in more subtle ways, often implied off screen. Sara and Sabina, the young Central American migrants in *La jaula de oro* and *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas*, actively refuse to assume the label of victim, but their suffering is implied through bodily performances. The films offer a more nuanced vision of the female migrant as strong, resilient and resourceful, yet constantly haunted by the possibility of gender-based violence that lies outside of her control.

The immeasurability and invisibility of the horrors that Central American migrant women face demonstrate the usefulness of the framework of the spectral in this context. *The Spectralities Reader* (2014) charts the so-called spectral turn in criticism, notably beginning with Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, published in 1993. Editors Blanco and Peeren clarify that, as opposed to the "ghost", the notion of specter and spectrality "specifically evoke an

etymological link to visibility and vision, to that which is both *looked at* (as fascinating spectacle) and *looking* (in the sense of examining), suggesting their suitability for exploring and illuminating phenomena other than the putative return of the dead" (Blanco / Peeren 2013: 2). In their edited volume, *Espectros: Ghostly Hauntings in Contemporary Transhispanic Narratives* (2016), Ribas-Casasayas and Petersen note that Derrida moved attention towards "the immaterial conditions that can be felt, or the intangible that […] sees us without being seen" (Ribas-Casasayas / Petersen 2016: 2f.). Derrida's conceptualization of the specter – perceptible, yet invisible because of its immateriality and immeasurability – holds great potential for discussing the experience of Central American women traveling through Mexico that is largely erasable from official accounts or statistics. The specter of gender violence, the vulnerability of an irregular migration status, and an inability to return to unlivable poverty (or abuse) in their home country haunts Central American migrant women's journeys.

Perhaps most important is that spectrality offers the possibility to read migrant narratives and performances against the grain. Spectrality's implied interest lies in absences; what is not there, rather than what is plainly visible. Citing Avery Gordon's work *Ghostly Matters*, Ribas-Casasayas and Petersen note that "social discourse fails to include violently silenced stories because humans are primed to pay attention to the visible, the present, the eventful, and not the invisible, the absent, or the non-occurring" (Ribas-Casasayas / Petersen 2016: 3). By actively searching for absences and reading into the invisible, the non-occurring or the unspoken within these films, we find truths in cultural productions that have been systematically silenced at official levels of discourse.

Quemada-Diéz's directorial debut, *La jaula de oro*, taps into timely social issues as it tells the story of three Guatemalan teenagers' journey across Mexico to the US. The film was awarded 32 prizes from film festivals around the world, including the Gillo Pontecorvo award for "social commitment, vigor and narrative freshness" at Cannes.[10] *La jaula* was the highest grossing film at the Cineteca Nacional in 2013, a figure that attests to its status as highbrow festival fare.[11] While previous work on *La jaula de oro* underscores various aspects of the film's engagement with and representation of reality,[12] I shift the focus from the main male characters to one of the minor characters, Sara, for she opens a window onto the female migrant experience. I analyze Sara's body and its relation to the spectral in two important sequences: her embodied gender performance prior to the journey and her abduction once her body is discovered.

[10] See Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (2013: 237).
[11] See Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (2014: 72).
[12] For more on this see Estrada (2016), Lie (2017) and Domínguez Cáceres (2017).

In this first sequence, the camera allows us to bear intimate witness to Sara's purposeful bodily transformation and hints at the looming violence that Sara expects from the journey. *La jaula* opens on a bustling street in Guatemala. A shaky, handheld camera (imitating documentarian aesthetics) follows Juan as he masterfully navigates various obstacles. Juan's free movement directly contrasts Sara's slow, pensive movement in the scene that follows, setting up a gendered[13] opposition in migrant bodies: male – mobile, female – impeded, and as we will see in the following analysis, haunted. The sounds disappear as the camera cuts to the inside of a wooden structure where Sara is next to a bathroom stall clearly labeled 'Damas'. The abrupt silence and relatively slow narrative tempo allow spectators to focus solely on Sara and voyeuristically watch how she prepares/transforms her body for the journey. The camera hovers at eye level. Sara gazes at her reflection in the mirror and begins to cut her hair. The dorsal shot allows us to fully view the initial length of her hair as well as the contours of her back, emphasizing her youth. Sara looks down silently as she wraps her breasts with an elastic bandage-like cloth. She then pushes her shoulders back and stretches her head to one side, as though she is physically adjusting her body to perform this new masculine gender. The hovering camera becomes a material representation of the looming presence – invisible, yet perceptible.

If at this point the audience questions why we have observed this transformation, the answer quickly follows as the camera cuts to a close-up of Sara's hands holding birth control pills. There is a brief close-up of the side of Sara's face as she swallows a pill sans water. Her eyes close and flutter slightly. This anguished expression is fleeting, almost non-occurring, but still noticeable. The presence of the birth control pills registers what is absent visually: the specter of gendered violence, specifically Sara's fear of getting pregnant on her way to the US if a fellow migrant, law enforcement official or member of a criminal organization rapes her. Sara takes the pill at the end of her transformation, reminding us explicitly that even though her bodily performance will allow her to move more fluidly as a migrant, that same body remains at risk and vulnerable to an unwanted pregnancy. Sara views her body as the means to migrate and move, yet unlike Sabina (in *La vida precoz*) who sees her body as a commodity from which to profit, Sara understands her gender-female body as exponentially increasing her risk of maltreatment.

Bodily harm does come to Sara later in the film, but the film alludes to even greater violence off screen by rendering her a specter. Cartel members remove the migrants from *La bestia* by force; everyone is lined up and one of the aggressors separates the women from the line. The

[13] My analysis here follows Judith Butler's classic notion of gender as a performative, embodied act (1997). Though I understand gender as a spectrum and not a binary, I refer to "male" and "female" here to best reflect how the subjects of the films (heteronormatively) define their gender identities.

men initially pass up Sara, but as soon as she is discovered to be a woman, they dehumanize her: "¡Esta es hembrita!" He lifts her shirt to expose her wrapped breasts and aggressively rubs her torso, exclaiming, "¡Qué rico! Esta debe de ser virgencita". The camera tightly frames this violent assault in a medium close-up, subjecting the viewers to every ounce of Sara's nightmare-come-true. Juan and Chauk jump to Sara's defense, but they are held back. The narcos drag Sara, kicking and screaming, to a black SUV. Sara's voice seems to become disembodied as she continually shouts, "Juan! Chauk!" in the midst of the chaos. Her anguished yelps echo as her body disappears into the SUV. This is the last time we see Sara in the film.

Ribas-Casasayas and Petersen tell us that "[t]he unfinished, unresolved, and fractured allude to the concept of undecidability that is central to theorizations of the ghost" (Ribas-Casasayas / Petersen 2016: 2). Sara's unresolved condition, a total taboo in Hollywood-style storytelling that prioritizes distinct narrative resolution, speaks to the spectral. This important narrative choice turns Sara into a specter whose simultaneous presence/absence haunts the second half of the film. During her life, Sara mediated Juan and Chauk's volatile relationship, but in Sara's absence, Juan and Chauk's shared, looming loss pushes them to work together and propels them towards the US.

La jaula leaves Sara's story purposefully untold for two reasons. First, it avoids the trope of the migrant as a victim. Despite being outnumbered, Sara is depicted as indignantly fighting her assailants until she disappears from the screen, imbuing her with dignity. Second, the film deploys a classic horror film tactic of leaving the most horrific off-screen, thus inviting the audience to imagine the horrific violence that awaits Sara's body. In this way, Sara's unfinished story becomes an affective impetus for spectators, what Ribas-Casasayas and Petersen call an "imperative", "a demand for uncovering what seems to be absent" (Ribas-Casasayas / Petersen 2016: 1). What happened to Sara? The unfortunate answer is likely sexual abuse or even sex trafficking, another type of spectral haunting that threatens Central American migrant women in Mexico.

In his chronicle, 'Las esclavas invisibles' from *Los migrantes que no importan*, Óscar Martínez examines the spectral logics of sex trafficking in Tapachula, Chiapas.[14] Through interviews with self-identified Central American sex workers in the *zona de tolerancia*, Martínez reads into the absences and the non-occurring in women's testimonies (avoiding the term *trata* at all costs) to underscore the spectral nature of guilt and responsibility. Keny, a Salvadoran sex worker, tells Martínez that the women (girls):

[14] I fervently disagree with the way in which Martínez portrays the women he interviews; even he cannot avoid sexualizing his subjects and turning them into victims. His account, however, was the first to consider the spectral nature of sex trafficking.

> han venido por su propia voluntad, porque ellas quieren. He escuchado comentarios de mujeres que las venden, pero cuando ya ven el lugar, se quedan. He hablado con algunas de ellas, y me dicen que se quedaron porque les ha gustado el dinero. Entonces es por su propia voluntad (Keny in Martínez 2010: 91).

This discourse is common: women come 'freely' and 'choose' to stay because they want to make money. Martínez later reflects on Keny's comment:

> Otra vez el fantasma. Otra vez la fina red que hace que la trata no parezca trata. Culpa de la muchacha. Ella quiso quedarse. Los métodos de chantaje de los tratantes se camuflan como propuestas en las mentes de mujeres acostumbradas a sufrir y a ser valoradas como mercancía. Al final, nadie tiene la culpa. Las cosas son como son. Así han sido siempre (Martínez 2010: 91).

'Las esclavas invisibles' traces the metaphor of the *fantasma* in order to demonstrate that by thrusting fault and choice onto the women, the traffickers and the practice of trafficking disappear.[15] The invisible exploitation is conflated with visible, voluntary sex work. Discursively and in practice, the waters between (unregulated) sex work and sex trafficking are muddy, especially when intersected with migration.

As Lamas outlines in '¿Prostitución, trabajo o trata? Por un debate sin prejuicios', discourse and how we discursively differentiate prostitution, sex work[16] and sex trafficking matters.[17] Predated by the term 'sex slavery', sex trafficking has become a complicating factor in the debate on the sex industry (namely, to regulate or to abolish).[18] Some scholars, like Lamas, believe that by regulating sex work, we recognize its emancipatory possibilities for women in a precarious economy and are able to protect women's rights and prevent trafficking or other forms of exploitation.[19] On the other hand, radical abolitionists, often NGOs, have taken up sex trafficking as a justification for criminalizing and outlawing any kind of sex work as they conceptualize all women to be 'victims'.[20]

At the heart of these debates lies the issue of consent, connected closely to victimhood and agency. Abolitionists argue that no woman would ever voluntarily choose to sell her body for

[15] But the metaphor does not stop there, and in fact, becomes more complicated. When Martínez asks Tamayo, the "fiscal anti-trata" in Tapachula, about the frequency of sex trafficking cases involving Central American women, Tamayo responds, "Han llegado muy pocos. Este tipo de delito casi no se denuncia, porque quienes intervienen, Migración, y otras instituciones, no los canalizan acá, las deportan, y se pierden las denuncias. Es un fenómeno preocupante, pero fantasmal, no se ve" (Tamayo in Martínez 2010: 92). Tamayo, of his own volition, uses the "phantasmal" nature of sex trafficking to shirk his duties as prosecutor, hiding behind the excuse that the practice remains unseen and women are deported before they can report.

[16] Like many feminist scholars, Lamas prefers the term sex work (*comercio sexual*) to prostitution as the former "da cuenta del proceso compra-venta, que incluye también al cliente" while the latter is a disparaging term often linked to judgment (Lamas 2014: 164).

[17] For more on defining "trafficking" and the debates on consent, see Doezema (2010).

[18] Due to space limitations here, I gesture towards Lamas (2014) – for the debate from a specifically Mexican perspective – and Kempadoo (2012), who historicizes the debate and discusses the abolitionist, criminal justice and transnational feminist paradigms in depth.

[19] See Agustín (2007), Scoular (2010) and Kempadoo (2012).

[20] See Lamas (2014: 166, 175).

sex, thus, their blanket classification of 'victim'. Transnational and third world feminists like Kamala Kempadoo argue that the term 'victim' objectifies women, denies them any sense of agency or subjectivity and fails to recognize that most do 'not' self-identify as trafficking victims.[21] Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork on migrant communities of sex workers in Peru, Goldstein grapples with 'consent' in a context where, like for Central American migrant women in Mexico, "there is no other viable economic or bodily alternative" (Goldstein 2014: 239). Beyond demonstrating the solidarity built between her subjects and their female madams in addition to underscoring their rejection of the label 'trafficking victims', Goldstein comes to no definitive conclusion about the tricky subject of consent.[22] This utter lack of resolution flies in the face of NGOs, policy-makers and governments who wish to clearly delineate: trafficked (or as Agustín might argue someone who "needs rescuing"), and not trafficked.[23] Goldstein's takeaway echoes that of Lamas: listen to the women.

Condensing this complex feminist debate means inevitably leaving out perspectives, but my purpose here is to juxtapose relevant circulating ideas with a fictional narrative that gives voice to a (possibly trafficked) sex worker who does not view herself as a victim, Sabina Rivas.[24] While there is a tendency in Mexico to disdain mainstream, commercial cinema, Mandoki's *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas* proves to be incredibly cognizant of the complexities and nuances of social reality on the Mexico-Guatemala border in ways that official discourse is not. With a screenplay adapted by Cardozo from *La Mara* (Ramírez Heredia 2004), *La vida precoz* centers on Sabina, a young Honduran woman who works at El Tijuanita, a strip club in Ciudad Tecún Umán for Doña Lita (Angelina Peláez). Mejía has analyzed the film's realistic portrayal of intersectional migrant oppression on the Mexico-Guatemala border, yet both she and Hatfield mislabel Sabina's situation as "prostitution" or "redes de prostitución". *La vida precoz* envisions the tricky intertwining of unregulated sex work and sex trafficking, while the spectral elements of the film hint at unseen violence and gender inequalities that haunt Sabina's bodily performance without stripping her of agency.

[21] See Kempadoo (2012: xxix-xxx). Kempadoo explains that the victim paradigm figures the woman as "pure, unblemished, and innocent prior to the trafficking act" until they are corrupted by "'evil' men" (Kempadoo 2012: xxix). Agustín agrees that these narratives obscure larger processes that play into sex trafficking like the globalization of capitalism and growing wealth disparities that produce forced migrations.

[22] For a philosophical, feminist discussion on freedom, consent and choice in trafficking, see Dickenson (2006).

[23] Casillas' government and NGO-funded study of Tapachula, Chiapas solely treats the "trata" of women, girls and children in the region, seeming to negate any possibility that sex work occurs alongside (or intertwined with) sex trafficking. See Casillas (2006).

[24] Sabina is underage, though when asked, she pretends to be 18. Most feminist debates assume that the sex workers in question are not minors. For the sake of my argument here, there is not enough room to flesh out the question of age, especially in societal contexts where sexual maturity is understood differently than in the US.

The film does not make it easy to diagnose the situation as sex trafficking nor to label Sabina a victim. The narrative spells out that Sabina began doing sex work willingly, with no coercion nor deception. She tells Doña Lita, "ya sabe que yo prometí estar aquí medio año nada más para sacar lo suficiente seguir para arriba. Ya llevo ocho meses […]". For Sabina, sex work is the means to an end: a career as a singer. Although Sabina's stay at La Tijuanita may have been extended due to an exploitative pay structure, many feminists would argue that this is a result of unregulated working conditions, not necessarily sex trafficking. Sabina can freely leave La Tijuanita; at one point she takes refuge at a migrant camp in Mexico before being deported back. Another crucial aspect is that Sabina does not seek salvation. When Jovany offers to save Sabina from what he deems "mierda," she adamantly refuses his help.

In spite of some ethically questionable behavior, the madam Doña Lita is not simply cast as the evil, villainous sex trafficker, suggesting a more complicated, nuanced reality. Her care for Sabina seems genuine ("eres como mi hija, tú lo sabes") and she gives Sabina special treatment. There is no indication that Sabina sees Doña Lita as her oppressor or captor. Yet, the discourse surrounding Sabina's relationship with Doña Lita gives us a glimpse of how the practices of sex trafficking haunt unregulated sex work by juxtaposing what is said with what is left unsaid. When Doña Lita sees Sabina off at the bus station, she tells her: "tienes una deuda conmigo y trabajaremos juntas hasta que la pagues. Para eso son las fiestas… ¿entiendes?" Sabina nods. This is the only mention of indebtedness in the film, but it implies that obligation is perhaps unspoken, invisibly looming in other conversations. Doña Lita grabs her arm, "sabes lo que es una sociedad." Their relationship is quickly reformulated making it seem more like the two were partners together in a business, mutually benefitting from their solidarity against men.

The two women seem to share an acceptance of the inevitability of gender violence. Doña Lita prevents Sabina from reporting her brutal rape[25] by a US officer at the Mexico-Guatemala border. She tells Sabina, "lo que pasó, pasó, y debes tomarlo como una prueba. Si el del más allá nos pone de pruebas es porque quiere saber hasta dónde llega nuestra fe". Being a victim of rape is recodified as proving oneself a survivor of predestined violence. Thus, performing resilience is a crucial survival strategy for vulnerable women. After Doña Lita physically defends Sabina from a corrupt Mexican police officer, she once again religiously reframes the incident: "ay, las pruebas que nos manda el Señor". She (and other women) conceptualize

[25] Though outside the scope of this paper, important elements in the *mise-en-scene* gesture towards a larger understanding of the politics of migration. When it is implied that the border worker Patrick plans to rape Sabina, a portrait of George W. Bush appears in the corner of the frame. This suggests the US's responsibility in the militarization of Mexico's borders and the increased vulnerability of migrants.

gender violence as ontological destiny for all women, a perception that continuously haunts their bodies.

The spectral presence of Sabina's brother Jovany, a newly minted Mara, gestures towards hegemonic gender inequalities and violence(s) that plague Central American women. During the opening sequence in El Tijuanita, Sabina takes the stage, smiling widely. As she begins to dance, the camera gives a refracted image of Sabina and the visual distortion cues spectators to recognize Derrida's visor effect: she is the subject of the gaze, but cannot replicate it. Sabina freezes, immobilized. Jovany's presence signals her flight from the horrors that Sabina tried to leave in Honduras. By the time the film reveals Sabina suffered her father and brother's sexual abuse, we realize that Jovany's lurking is representative of the haunting effect of violence. He silently stalks Sabina and Doña Lita through the market to the bus station where Sabina departs for a sex party in Tapachula. He hovers silently at Sabina's window, watching as she performs oral sex in exchange for a visa. Both are moments that suggest Sabina commodifies her body and utilizes it for labor because she has been conditioned by past experiences.

La vida precoz presents a vision of the ways unseen gender violence shapes Central American women's expectations of their experiences and their reactionary bodily performances. Many women assume their bodies will be objectified, abused and dehumanized; normalizing or reframing violence and/or exploitation becomes a strategy of self-preservation to maintain dignity.[26] Martínez notes that this performative self-objectification, a survival mechanism, has even consolidated into discourse through the term "cuerpomático" (Martínez 2010: 84). The body becomes "una tarjeta de crédito" that can be used to "conseguir seguridad en el viaje, un poco de dinero, que no maten a tus compañeros" (Martínez 2010: 84). For this reason, many women – like Sabina – reject the term 'victim', and do not perform victimhood. Sabina's rape upsets her most because it leaves her face bruised and scarred, a problem that affects her ability to perform and make money ("si no tengo cara, no tengo nada"). Sabina's understanding of her body as object demonstrates a violent internalization of the patriarchal idea that female worth comes solely from the body. She performs sex work and does not report her rape because she believes it is a price she must pay to achieve her dreams.

Implicitly contesting the suffering migrant paradigm, the film counters Sabina's bodily commodification and suggest that her multi-dimensional identity cannot be limited to labels

[26] Huffington Post reporter Eleanor Goldberg gives an anecdotal example: Zittlau, an immigration attorney and advocate who frequently works with Central American women, notes that "part of the struggle […] is conveying to her clients that assault shouldn't be part of everyday life. While preparing for a recent hearing, for example, Zittlau said her client from Guatemala repeatedly used the Spanish word for "annoying" to describe how she felt about her husband's abuse. "No. Him raping and beating is not 'annoying', it goes beyond that", Zittlau told her client." (Zittlau in Goldberg 2018).

like (trafficking) victim (of sexual abuse). Mexican critic Ayala Blanco calls Sabina "una heroína que resulta atípica en este tipo de martirologios ejemplares y edificantes" (Blanco 2017: 26). *La vida precoz* gives significant opportunity to 'listen' to Sabina, who self-conceptualizes as a powerful, talented singer. When Sabina performs for audiences, enjoyment radiates through her body and her passion for singing is evident. At an arcade in Tapachula, Sabina plays Dance Dance Revolution, a game where players perform complicated dance choreography on a mini-stage. Joy emanates as she dances freely; people stop and watch, affected by her joy. Unlike the dead, dismembered migrant body, Sabina's body is capable of experiencing a gamut of emotions.

As scholars and cultural producers look for better ways to recognize silenced violence(s) without reverting to the trope of victim, spectrality and spectral theory provide a productive means of acknowledging violence(s) without robbing migrants of agency or dignity. The idea of haunting serves to nuance Central American migrant women's experiences in Mexico, pushing us to read into their absences – what is missing, what is non-occurring in the diegesis or their testimonies – to unveil the specters of violence. While the omnipresence of seemingly inevitable gender violence shapes women and the way they conceptualize and perform their bodies, it does not define them; they are more than the violence they experience. Recent Mexican cinema succeeds in going beyond the mutilated migrant body to showcase the complexities of female migrant bodily performances even if it does not offer a clear path to justice for the fictional Central American women it profiles.

I cannot help but conclude by referencing the political climate in the United States at the time of writing (Summer 2018). This conversation about spectrality, gendered violence and Central American female migration has become all the more relevant in the wake of the Trump administration's 'zero-tolerance' immigration policy, which many suspect to be undermining the asylum process. Blitzer reports that "in 2017, sixty per cent of all asylum cases heard by immigration judges were rejected, the highest denial rate in a decade" (Blitzer 2018).[27] Keep in mind, that is more than half of those who 'sought' asylum. Assuming Sabina made it across Mexico, would the proud aspiring singer apply for asylum if she did not consider herself a victim?

In the current system, there seems to be no alternative to the one-dimensional victim identity if one seeks refuge in the US or Mexico. Participating in what Puga calls the "political economy of suffering", migrants are essentially required to perform victimhood in order to convince

[27] This statistic is not specifically regarding Central Americans nor women, but rather illustrates the trend towards more stringency in asylum cases.

judges to grant their credible requests for asylum (Puga 2016: 75). Refusing to be a victim – as we see Sara and Sabina do – does not mean that migrants have not suffered or are not haunted by very real violence. It does, however, equate to deportation when the burden of proof is not met. Given that unspoken, spectral gendered violence haunts women, policy-makers in both the US and Mexico would be wise and humane to recognize bodily performances of strength, power and dignity as reactionary practices of self-preservation and resilience. We should prime ourselves to pay attention to the absences, and not just the presences, and shape policy accordingly.

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