

Disposable Bodies: Undocumented Migrants and *La jaula de oro's* Poetics of Austerity

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ABSTRACT: The film *La jaula de oro* (*The Golden Dream*, 2013), by Mexican-Spanish director Diego Quemada-Diez, begins in a landfill in Guatemala City and ends with one of its main characters, Juan, gathering waste in a meat processing plant, somewhere in the northern United States. Having crossed two borders, survived riding La Bestia across Mexico, and lost Sara, Chauk and Samuel on the way, Juan's transnational journey comes full circle to end pretty much where it started: at the very bottom of the consumption cycle. A strength of *La jaula* is its ability to make visible that main condition of undocumented migrant bodies: their disposability, the banality of their disappearance and/or death. In this paper I take this line of thought further and explore the ways in which, through its documentary-like style and neorealistic use of non-professional actors and real locations, Quemada-Diez's storytelling develops what I will call a *poetics of austerity*. On one hand, the film tells a story about four teenagers whose lives have been made redundant by the effects of neoliberal austerity recipes—states' disengagement from social investment and wealth redistribution—; on the other hand, its austere style counters excess by relying on the moving image and conspicuously avoiding dialogue or other non-visual ways of creating meaning—such as non-diegetic music, for instance. Weaved together, these two approaches make up a revealing poetics, capable of baring the structural verticality hidden in globalization's DNA.

KEYWORDS: Diego Quemada-Diez, austerity, waste, migration, border, neorealism, neoliberalism, globalization

The film *La jaula de oro* (*The Golden Dream*, 2013), by Mexican-Spanish director Diego Quemada-Diez,² begins in a landfill in Guatemala City and ends with one of its main characters, Juan, gathering waste in a meat processing plant, somewhere in the northern United States. Having crossed two borders and survived riding La Bestia across Mexico, Juan's transnational journey comes full circle to end—this road movie seems to suggest—pretty much where it started: at the very bottom of the consumption cycle.

Juan is not alone in this passage—at least, not at the beginning. He leaves Guatemala with Samuel, who works collecting recyclables at the landfill, and Sara, who, in preparation for a trip known to be extra dangerous for women, takes contraceptive pills, cuts her hair short, and flattens her chest with a bandage to pass as Osvaldo. Soon after crossing the border with Mexico, the three mestizo friends run into Chauk, a young Maya-Tzotzil who does not speak Spanish. Like Sara/Osvaldo, Samuel and Juan, the non-Tzotzil speaking audience encounters a communication barrier with Chauk, as the film does not provide translation when he speaks. Despite this obstacle, and notwithstanding Juan's initial racist rejection of Chauk, the four adolescents head north together by way of the Mexican freight-train system known as La Bestia. According to Valeria Luiselli, "as many as half a million Central American immigrants" ride these trains every year, "atop the railcars or in the recesses between them" (19). Frequent derailments and falls, as well as the fact that not carrying documents makes these travelers

defenseless against criminals and corrupt authorities, account for thousands of deaths and grave injuries.

As in most road movies, the protagonists of *La jaula* bond and evolve over experiences lived during the trip. In a film based on the testimonies of more than 600 undocumented immigrants (whose names appear in the final credits), many of those experiences happen to be life or death situations that reveal the characters' extreme vulnerability. Thus, early in the journey the four youngsters get robbed by Mexican police agents who deport them back to Guatemala—Samuel decides then to stay while the other three head toward Mexico again. The three remaining travelers escape a raid of the Mexican *migra*, get temporary jobs cutting cane in a plantation, and have just begun developing a love triangle when robbers stop the train and take Sara away—along with all the other women traveling in that group. Now alone against thieves, kidnapers, and drug smugglers, Chauk and Juan save each other's lives and manage to cross the US-Mexican border together, but as they walk through the desert a sniper shoots Chauk down and forces Juan to run away. Soon after, we encounter Juan again, working at the meat processing plant.

The dump left behind in Guatemala, as well as the bloody spoils that Juan must deal with at his job in the US, stand for the place that the protagonists of the film occupy in society and highlight their kinship with waste. As *La jaula* makes clear, Juan could have just as easily become waste himself—like Chauk (certainly)

and Sara (most likely) did. Although, perhaps, the more subtle implication is not that death or disappearance will turn someone into waste, but that someone becomes waste at the very moment when they are seen as disposable. Zygmunt Bauman addresses the production of “wasted humans” (the excessive, the redundant) as an “inevitable outcome of modernization” (5). If we apply to this story his definition of redundancy as a concept “that shares its semantic space with ‘rejects’, ‘wastrels’, ‘garbage’, ‘refuse’—with *waste*” (12, emphasis in the original), we cannot but conclude that even though Juan survives the passage to the US, his life and those of the friends lost on the way have been redundant, wasted lives, long before the journey started.

According to the Migration Data Portal, between 1996 and 2020 “more than 75,000 migrant deaths” were recorded globally. This number, the portal warns, represents “only a minimum estimate because the majority of migrant deaths around the world go unrecorded.” As they navigate an underworld where they are “excluded from the law and therefore ‘not its concern’” (Bauman 32), undocumented migrants and refugees fall in one of the deepest of the “zonas de exclusión” generated by neoliberal capitalism, “donde las personas son, y saben que son, completamente superfluas al orden histórico global” (Pratt 15). It seems safe to say that it is this awareness of their redundancy—this knowing in the gut that no state or multinational corporation is out there fighting to prevent their fall—that is pushing people to head toward the Global North and, with luck, recover scraps of the wealth extracted from their land.

Bauman affirms that, when it comes to disposing of leftovers, we do it “in the most radical and effective” manner: “we make them invisible by not looking and unthinkable by not thinking” (27). Making wasted lives visible and, therefore, thinkable, may be then among the most radical and effective ways of disrupting the current global order of excess and waste. Like Nadia Lie, I find that a strength of *La jaula de oro* is, precisely, its ability to make visible that main condition of undocumented migrant bodies: their disposability, the banality of their disappearance and/or death (143-146). In this paper I take this line of thought further and explore the ways in which, through its documentary-like style and neorealist use of non-professional actors and real locations, Quemada-Diez’s storytelling develops what I will call a *poetics of austerity*. On one hand, the film tells a story about four teenagers whose lives have been made redundant by the effects of neoliberal austerity prescriptions—states’ disengagement from social investment and wealth redistribution—; on the other hand, its austere style counters excess by relying on the moving image and conspicuously avoiding dialogue or other non-visual ways of creating meaning—such as non-diegetic music, for instance. Weaved together, these two approaches make up a revealing poetics, capable of baring the structural verticality (read inequality) hidden in globalization’s DNA.

By proposing the concept of poetics of austerity, I am making a direct reference to Italian neorealism and the filmic tradition that it

helped shape in Latin America. Through its rejection of Hollywood’s stylistic and thematic establishment, as well as its commitment to telling urgent stories—of poverty, of social struggle—ignored by the mainstream studio system, in the 1940s and early 50s Italian neorealism developed storytelling strategies that bypassed that system and empowered filmmakers around the world—in particular in the Global South. In the wake of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution (1959) and throughout the 1960s, filmmakers such as the Brazilian Glauber Rocha (“An Esthetic of Hunger,” 1965) and the Cuban Julio García Espinosa (“Por un cine imperfecto,” 1969), as well as the Argentinians Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas (“Hacia un tercer cine,” 1969), regarded Italian neorealism as a trailhead for their political cinema. Through films and the aforementioned manifestos, they articulated a poetics that found in cinema not just a form of art apt for denouncing a reality of poverty, hunger, and violence, but an instrument, a “weapon” (Getino and Solanas 49) that, in the hands of the oppressed, could not only represent but incite and celebrate the revolution against a colonialist and capitalist status quo.

Half a century later, *La jaula de oro* honors this Latin American neorealist tradition by filming in location; casting non-professional actors; telling a story of poverty, oppression and injustice, and following a storyline that emulates a real-time chronological order. However, not surprisingly, the revolutionary ambitions of the 60s are gone. In that sense, Quemada-Diez’s opera prima dialogues more fluidly with neorealist films of the 1980s and 90s, such as Hector Babenco’s *Pixote* (Brazil, 1981) and Víctor Gaviria’s *Rodrigo D: No futuro* (Colombia, 1990) or *La vendedora de rosas* (*The Rose Seller*, 1998), whose young protagonists are non-professional actors enacting stories pretty similar to their own struggles for survival in the streets and slums of Sao Paulo and Medellín. Another relevant antecedent is Walter Salles’ *Central do Brasil/Central Station* (1998), less purely neorealist—it pairs a non-professional child actor with a Brazilian star as protagonists—but also a film about youth at risk, and the first of a wave of Latin American road movies to which *La jaula* belongs.

While these direct predecessors of *La jaula* are already bringing to the fore the economic and social effects of neoliberal austerity among vulnerable youth in Latin America, Quemada-Diez’s film, released in 2013, takes this pursuit to the road and the national borders that block it. Then again, *La jaula de oro* is not the first film to tell a story about contemporary transnational migration from Central America to the United States; its genealogy goes as far as Gregory Nava’s *El Norte* (USA, 1983) and, more recently, Rebecca Cammisa’s documentary *Which Way Home* (USA, 2009) and Cary Fukunaga’s *Sin Nombre* (USA, 2009). The film is not unique either in approaching this subject matter as a neorealist road movie—in fact, Quemada-Diez’s has recognized its indebtedness to Michael Winterbottom’s *In this World* (UK, 2002), the story of two Afghan cousins who leave a refugee camp in Pakistan and must travel through Iran, Turkey, Italy, and France as undocumented immigrants on their way to London (Democracy Now). What I find unique and

particularly haunting about *La jaula de oro* is the way in which its stylistic and narrative austerity—its reliance on what moving images can convey by themselves; its littered real locations; its voids and absences—seems to fit the representation of lives made redundant by the effects of neoliberalism and its belt-tightening policies. As a neorealist road movie, *La jaula* affords itself a cinematic language capable enough for exposing the transnational impact of neoliberalism; for making visible the thread that ties consumerist excess—and its uncontrollable production of waste and redundant population—with massive labor migration from south to north, and for baring the contemporary role of national borders—where human mobility is granted or denied—as the sites where *flow*, 'the preferred metaphor of globalization' (Pratt 241), uncloaks itself as a fallacy.

In the first minute and a half of *La jaula de oro* we meet Juan. A shaky hand-held camera follows him around, revealing a noisy labyrinth of makeshift homes and dusty alleyways as he walks by fast, ignoring a couple of soldiers in uniform who cross his path, as well as two children playing gangsters—who "shoot" him with toy guns. After taking a couple of minutes to introduce Sara (and her transformation into Osvaldo), the film then returns to Juan, now inside one of those precarious dwellings. A wide shot finds him in a room enclosed by walls made up of repurposed corrugated zinc sheets and flattened carton boxes. Sitting on one of two beds haphazardly put together, he hides a few rolled dollar bills inside the waist band of his jeans, and then leaves the room wearing those pants and a pair of old cowboy boots. Outside, the camera does not follow him anymore. We see him walk away, passing neighbors who go about their business amidst the improvised housing, as the diegetic sound of loud music, dogs barking, and babies crying makes this environment feel increasingly crowded and claustrophobic.

This is basically all the contextual information that we will get about Juan (Brandon López), and it is in fact more than what the film reveals when it comes to its other three protagonists: Sara (Karen Martínez), Samuel (Carlos Chajon), and Chauk (Rodolfo Domínguez). Some scholarship dwells in this lack of explicit and specific information about the personal stories as well as the economic, political, and social circumstances that would explain why the four adolescents undertake the dangerous journey toward the US. Alicia Estrada, for instance, has criticized this void in the particular case of Chauk, pointing out that the film's "ambiguity around the Maya protagonist's immigration further highlights his Otherness" (182). Other critics, meanwhile, seem to suggest that Quemada-Diez's movie makes up for these "gaps" by invoking intertextual connections with other "US border genre" films—like *El Norte* and *Sin Nombre*—that have already told similar stories (Curry 50). Above all, this scholarship points to the direct intermedial reference to the corrido "*La jaula de oro*,"² which establishes the film's critical stance toward the "American Dream" (Archer 91, Curry 49-50).

In my view, however, these voids are not narrative gaps that the film must make up for in some way or another, but narrative

devices that are intrinsic to *La jaula de oro*'s poetics of austerity and its effect on the viewer. For all we will not learn about Juan's individual story, for instance, the initial scene is telling us, with plenty of visual detail and not a single word, about the big picture that is expelling him from home. We will not find out until much later that he comes from "Guatemala, Zona 3" (1:11:52-1:14:33), but the neighborhood that we experience with him in location, through diegetic sound—or, rather, noise—and shaky camera work that reminds the viewer of documentaries, does not need further introduction as a shantytown. The young man who walks fast through those dusty alleyways—and whose name we don't know yet—runs into men in uniform and children playing with toy guns, which hints toward the violence reigning in that quarter. We finally learn that he is not a visitor: he lives in the area and his precarious dwelling looks cramped and made up of random, old-looking, and repurposed objects. In this way, *La jaula* manages to introduce life at the margins of neoliberal capitalism—and to make clear why one would want to escape from it. Right off the bat, the film also establishes a certain symbiosis between human (wasted lives) and non-human waste. As Luis I. Prádanos puts it, "there is a clear correlation between global economic growth spurred by the planetary expansion of capitalist modernity and the massive proliferation of both unmanageable waste production and surplus population" (194). Throughout the duration of the story, *La jaula* will continue stepping out of a purely anthropocentric portrayal and bringing to the fore this culture-nature continuum, this kinship between debris and "surplus" human lives.

A slum is not a casual place to begin a story about migration. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, poverty belts (favelas, villas miseria, chabolas, invasiones, etc.) formed in the outskirts of big Latin American cities, populated by poor peasants just arrived from the countryside. Lured by the promise of a better life in the urban space—which had come to represent modernity's ideals of progress—these migrants settled in improvised neighborhoods that now stand for the failure of that main narrative: progress. As Mary Louise Pratt put it, back in 2007, "the idea of a world in which all will at some point be equally 'developed' has been so thoroughly abandoned that we have to be reminded that this was recently a globally shared expectation" (238). The policies of neoliberalism ensured that equal levels of development would not be reached. Upholding the principles of individual freedom, private property, and free market, the neoliberal doctrine began to spread in the 1970s, when the ruling elites around the world saw their income dramatically reduced by the global economic crisis (Harvey 5-38). It consolidated in the 1990s and has now acquired a global reach. In terms of concrete policy, its main principles have been implemented as "deregulation of financial and trade markets, privatization of public assets and institutions, social service cuts, protection of private property and corporate profits, an ideology of individualism and competition, and enhanced enforcement to coerce labor while policing impoverishment" (Walia 42). And yet, according to David Harvey, this neoliberalization of economies has not been very effec-

tive in revitalizing global capital accumulation; however, "it has succeeded remarkably well in restoring (...) the power of an economic elite" (19). In fact, the indelible mark left by neoliberalism in Latin America (and throughout the world) is the increase of poverty and inequality, as proved by the expansion of poverty belts in urban areas (Romero).

In Guatemala City, for instance, it is estimated that about 20 percent of the population lives in slums (Volume). Zona 3, the shanty town that Juan leaves behind in *La jaula* is made up of the city's main landfill and 22 quarters with a population of about 30,000 people (Pérez) who, like Samuel and perhaps Sara and Juan too, live off the garbage dump.³ According to Prádanos, "immigration may be understood as people displaced by (or escaping the toxicity generated by) the flows of material, labor, and energy mobilized by economic modernization to facilitate its consumerist, predatory, and wasteful practices" (194). While shantytowns are literally the garbage dump where twentieth century capitalism deposited its surplus population, in the globalized-neoliberal-twenty first century capitalist era the dump is, fittingly, transnational: those whose lives have been made redundant may try and escape from the slum (or skip it, like Chauk), just to end up chewed up and spit out by La Bestia; buried in mass graves; drowned at sea or dehydrated to death in the desert; shot and killed at the border; left to languish in camps right at the doors of the developed world, or, if lucky, let into that world through the back door, just to continue a life-long relationship with waste (like Juan).

Rather than lecturing on these details, though, *La jaula* trusts the viewer to connect the dots; it moves away from pedagogy and toward an economy of language that might remind one of poetry. In fact, Quemada-Diez's description of his film as an "epic poem" (Democracy Now) turns out quite accurate not only because it is a story about unsung heroes, as the director explains, but also because of its economy of (filmic) language—one of several strategies that the film deploys as part of its poetics of austerity. Previous scholarship has pointed to "the overall absence of dialogue" in *La jaula* and how it emphasizes "the primacy of the visual image to tell the story" (Curry 48). Indeed, we don't hear any spoken word until over seven minutes into the story, when Sara, Samuel, and Juan are crossing by boat the border between Guatemala and Mexico. Once Chauk joins the group, the fact that he does not speak Spanish and that the other three protagonists do not know his language, Tzotzil, becomes a natural limitation for dialogue.

At the level of spoken language, by not providing translation when Chauk talks the film aligns the non-Tzotzil speaking audience with the other three mestizo protagonists—who get to know him through his actions and get attached to him despite not being able to understand his words. Of the four main characters, Chauk is also the one about whom we do not learn any personal context, since he simply shows up while the Guatemalan friends are waiting for the train, near a nondescript pond. For Estrada, Chauk is represented as having "no personal history, nor clearly articulated dreams and de-

sires" (182). In her view, this is one of several ways in which *La jaula* would be contributing to a tradition of filmic representations that reproduce "colonial legacies" and their "stereotyped construction of Maya culture and identity" (179-180). The film certainly provides a little more "personal history" about the mestizo protagonists, but none of them gets to clearly articulate their dreams and desires. In fact, the only dream that we get to see and, toward the end, to understand, is Chauk's recurrent dream of snow falling against a dark night sky.

This dream is perhaps the best illustration of *La jaula's* economy of language—a main feature of its poetics of austerity. It's always the same long take (over 10 seconds long) in which a fixed camera shows snowflakes falling from a night sky. While the film uses very little non-diegetic music, the three times that this scene plays it comes accompanied by the same soft piano theme. The first snow scene (00:15:36-00:15:59) may leave the viewer a bit disoriented, as the irruption of this element—which clearly does not belong to the otherwise neorealist narrative—will not become clear until later, when thanks to its second and third iterations we realize that this long take always comes associated with moments when Chauk has fallen asleep. Dreams have been used in neorealist films as a way of letting the viewer into the psychology of the characters, through sequences that often abandon constrictions of the neorealist style such as natural lighting or slice-of-life storytelling, for instance. Pedro's nightmare of guilt and hunger for affection, in Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (*The Young and the Damned*, Mexico, 1950), and Mónica's drug-induced dreams of a happier time with her dead grandmother in Gaviria's *La vendedora de rosas*, come to mind. Quemada-Diez's film acknowledges this tradition and even seems to break its own rules by introducing music but, sticking to its austere ways, it condenses the dream down to one shot, one tune, and one concept: snow.

Chauk, then, dreams of snow but he never gets to relate his dream to the other characters. A couple of times, he attempts to tell his fellow travelers about *taiv*, but only toward the end of the film, as the two surviving boys contemplate through the glass a miniature train installation, Juan—and, with him, the non-Tzotzil speaking viewers—understands what his friend has been saying all along.⁴ Chauk points to the fake snow falling on the display and remarks: "taiv." To which Juan replies: "Ah, 'taiv' es nieve, va" (1:22:50-1:23:36). Nothing else is ever said about snow, but in the final scene, when Juan has lost Chauk too and walks alone on a snowy road, he looks up and a POV shot reveals that what he is seeing looks exactly like Chauk's recurring dream: snow falling against a dark night sky. This image becomes then a multilayered concept. Snow, which at the most basic level could be read as a symbol of the north and of everything it might offer that cannot be found in the Global South, now represents Chauk too, as well as a naïve dream that—as the film suggests by having Juan seeing exactly the same shot of Chauk's dreams—is not only his but rather a collective hope, shared by the hundreds of thousands of undocumented Central and South

American migrants that attempt to reach and cross the US-Mexico border every year.⁵

Yet another layer of meaning could be inferred from this image of falling snow, if we think of the uncountable snowflakes as representing the anonymous and fragile lives of those riding La Bestia along with the protagonists of the film. Addressing the link between the increasing migration toward the US and livelihoods destroyed by free trade agreements, a hallmark of globalization, Harsha Walia explains that about 1.3 million Mexican farmers were pushed into bankruptcy during the first decade of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), inaugurated in January 1994 (50). Among those left without their primary source of subsistence are Indigenous Maya, Mixtec, and Zapotec, who contributed to the near triplication of Mexican migration to the US in two decades—from 4.5 million migrants in 1990 to 12.67 million in 2008. “Before NAFTA, Indigenous people made up 7 percent of migrants from Mexico, but a decade later they constituted 29 percent” (51). While *La jaula* does not inform the viewer about the particular circumstances that cause Chauk to migrate, his centrality to the story—as well as his role as the bearer of the collective dream—makes visible the ever-growing presence of Indigenous people among the population of undocumented migrants headed to the United States.

In this way Chauk and the other three protagonists of Quemada-Diez's film perform as archetypes, as composites of the people they represent. They also function as an expression of the kinship between these archetypes and waste. The film conveys these two fundamental premises, I argue, through a second main strategy of *La jaula's* poetics of austerity. This strategy entails, on one hand, a narrative structure and visual style that tend to fuse the journey of its main characters with that of the collective of undocumented migrants traveling with them. On the other hand, and mainly through its visual style, this strategy also fuses the protagonists with the ruins and the debris that surround them practically wherever they go.

At the narrative level, Sara, Juan, Chauk and Samuel's personal stories are austere in the sense that, as mentioned earlier, they do not abound in specifics. Having been introduced with minimal or no individual context, the protagonists of the film are meant not to stick out but to merge with the crowd of migrants and peasant workers that travel with them most of the time. These characters have not been made special or different by their backgrounds like, for instance, the gangster fleeing from his own *mara* in Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre*. Even Sara's transformation into Osvaldo, which invests her story with a narratively powerful twist, is based on the well-known fact that “eighty percent of the women and girls who cross Mexico to the to the U.S. border are raped on the way” (Luiselli 25-26). While trying to ride La Bestia disguised as a man may not be a common resort, taking contraceptive precautions before heading north makes Sara representative of all young women appearing in the film. In the slice-of-life and on-the-move structure of this neorealist road movie, its protagonists are never alone in their struggles—until, perhaps, when Juan and Chauk finally get to the

US-Mexico border and encounter the wall. The story moves along with the train, and every new obstacle (the Mexican *migra*, the robbers that take Sara away, the kidnappers that threaten to kill Chauk) hits the travelling collective and not just the main characters.

This fusion of the protagonists with the migrant crowd is reinforced by the film's austere neorealist style, in particular through its *mise-en-scène*. *La jaula de oro* was filmed on (key) locations such as Zona 3 in Guatemala City, the shelter in Arriaga (Mexico) where Chauk and Juan recover after having lost Sara, and, most importantly, on top of the moving trains of La Bestia. In that sense, it follows the steps of what the documentary *Which Way Home* and the feature *Sin Nombre* had done already. However, it is the casting of non-professional actors who come from areas and backgrounds that typically feed La Bestia that seals the film's convincing insertion of its main characters in the migrant collective. Quemada-Diez has explained that it took months to find Rodolfo Domínguez (Chauk) in his community in Chiapas, and that Karen Martínez (Sara), Brandon López (Juan) and Carlos Chajon (Samuel) all come from impoverished neighborhoods in Guatemala. Moreover, most of the sparse dialogue that characterizes the film is, according to the director, the language that the actors proposed for loosely scripted scenes (Democracy Now).

This believable sense of belonging gets strengthened by a cinematography and editing designed to have the main characters appear often with the migrant collective as a backdrop, or within a series of close-ups that include shots of individual migrants mixed with the familiar images of the protagonists. Not by chance, in these scenes the close-ups of the anonymous migrants are left on the screen for as long as those of the main characters: about eight seconds each. *La jaula* tends to use these montages to portray the rides on top of La Bestia, in combination with landscape shots—which road movies typically rely on to represent movement across a geography and, therefore, the progression of the story. At this level, a sequence that clearly illustrates the film's kinship with the genre comes when Juan and Chauk, having survived a band of kidnappers in an indistinct town, enter the desert lands of northern Mexico riding a train. As in the case of Chauk's dream scenes, the film allows itself to abandon its commitment to mostly diegetic sound, but for this one time it does so through a song with lyrics about the resilience of undocumented migrants trying to cross the border: “La caña,” by Son del Centro, plays as multiple shots of the tracks, of the train cutting the landscape, and of the people traveling on top of it are edited together (1:19:51-1:23:10).

As mentioned above, through its austere visual style *La jaula* is also highlighting the symbiotic relationship, the continuum between human beings (the main characters, and with them the collective of undocumented migrants) and the non-human environments that mark their journey (real locations characterized by the omnipresence of waste). Such an approach invites reading through the lens of what Stacy Alaimo calls “trans-corporeality,” or a conception of the human that sees it as “always intermeshed with the

more-than-human world" (2). Litter, debris, and discarded industrial objects populate *La jaula*'s mise-en-scène with an understated persistence; this key feature of the film's trans-corporeal vision is subtly registered by the camera and never remarked on by the characters. By portraying the ubiquity of garbage while avoiding big gestures—verbal or cinematographic—to acknowledge it, the film points to how "intermeshed" the characters are with waste. Previous scholarship on the treatment of trash in *La jaula de oro* has focused on both the shantytown/landfill and the meat processing plant sequences that bookend the story. Prádanos, for instance, points out that "waste materials and surplus population converge in the shantytown, acquiring agency and refusing to accept the disposable, passive, and invisible place assigned to them by the economic system that produced them" (203). He reviews *La jaula* as one of several contemporary cultural artifacts that, in his view, succeed at making visible the political ecology of waste. While I agree with this perspective, I would like to complement it by displacing the focus of my reading from those two sequences to other moments in which *La jaula*'s austere (and trans-corporeal) visual style suggests the kinship between its protagonists and waste in a more subtle way.

According to Jane Bennet, all matter is "vibrant," and waste is not an exception given that "a vital materiality can never really be thrown 'away,' for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity" (6). In *La jaula de oro*, discarded commodities are presented as "active" beginning with the initial scene in Juan's shantytown, where, as Prádanos points out, people live off the vibrant landfill, which provides income (through recycling) and takes care of many of their immediate needs, ranging from walls and roofs for their makeshift houses to improvised furniture and even appliances. Once they leave the shantytown behind, and when they are not riding on top of freight trains, Sara and Juan (as well as Chauk) find a sort of home in abandoned rail cars. The first time they choose a boxcar to spend the night, the film introduces the viewer to a real location that looks decrepit in the outside while empty and dusty in the inside. For the three teenagers, however, this out-of-commission rail car is a reliable refuge. A close-up of Chauk's hand touching the rusted and flaky surface of the boxcar seals this trans-corporeal moment, evoking for a few seconds the symbiosis between the young travelers and the debris that La Bestia discards. Then Chauk looks up and the scene cuts to a shot of snow falling against a dark sky (his dream), in a juxtaposition that emphasizes the contrast between reality and hope (00:31:37-00:32:00). Later in the journey, after Sara's abduction, Juan and Chauk must come to terms with the fact that they may never see her again: because of the language barrier, the two boys cannot really talk to each other but, in a scene in which the location choice is key, they are sitting in a passenger car whose ruinous condition seems to reflect neatly their equally devastated emotional state. *La jaula* creates, in this way, another distinct moment of trans-corporeality, a scene in which the kinship between the surviving protagonists and discarded pieces of the rail system becomes visible (1:01:32-1:03:06). This symbiosis

between human beings and waste, however, is neither restricted to the film's main characters nor limited to rail debris. While litter seems ubiquitous in the small urban centers where the protagonists of the film stop to switch trains, the accumulation of garbage along the train tracks reaches an overwhelming level in the generic town where Chauk, Juan, and several other migrants get kidnapped by criminals seeking ransom. If in Juan's shantytown waste appears repurposed with practical intent, here the characters move among pieces of trash and piles of rubble that seem to have been randomly placed and then abandoned. In fact, the understated emphasis that a series of establishing and wide shots put in portraying the overpowering and chaotic presence of trash in this town make the viewer know, long before the characters find out, that this place is bad news (1:11:40-1:12:20). The continuum between human beings and non-human environments is, in this case as in the previous ones, effectively conveyed through an austere filmic style that relies heavily on real locations and the image in movement.

Finally, a third strategy that *La jaula de oro* deploys as part of its poetics of austerity is the use of voids and absences as narrative tools. I have discussed earlier how the voids surrounding the personal histories of the main characters explain, in part, their ability to fuse themselves with the undocumented migrant collective. In this section, I would like to address how Quemada-Diez's film, in its own austere way, uses absence and loss to represent violence and thus reject its treatment as a spectacle. Previous scholarship on the topic has pointed out that "the motif of the disappeared" (Lie 45), is introduced early in the film through a shot of a wall covered with poster pictures of disappeared people. These could be photos of disappeared migrants, as Nadia Lie suggests, but because of the emblematic way in which the old-looking pictures have been arranged on the wall I believe that this is rather a subtle reference to the twentieth-century history of political repression and disappearances in Guatemala and Latin America in general. About 200,000 people died and other 45,000 disappeared during the 36 years (1960-1996) of civil war in Guatemala; a vast majority of those victims were Maya civilians (Amnesty International). *La jaula* might even be nodding to its direct predecessor, Nava's *El Norte*, a movie about two Maya siblings who must flee Guatemala in the early 1980s to escape the violence directed against Indigenous peoples.

In any case, by evoking the weight of absences that are ever present, *La jaula* is priming the viewer for its own take on loss and violence. Midway into the film, a band of robbers attacks the train and Sara, her disguise uncovered, is kidnapped along with all the other women in the group. As the robbers drive away, Sara can be heard calling: "Juan...Chauk... Juan... Chauk..." while they both lay on the ground, injured and unconscious (00:54:27-00:58:02). Critical work on *La jaula* revisits this scene as the moment in which the viewer gets acquainted with loss and the particular kind of trauma caused by disappearance, as Sara will not be seen again (Curry 62-65, Lie 144). From the point of view of the film's poetics of austerity, this scene is key also because of the way in which the trauma is nar-

ratively constructed. Since *La jaula* uses a restricted narration that sticks exclusively to the point of view of those who remain in the migrant collective, the viewer, like Juan and Chauk, never gets to find out what happened to Sara. Although road movies often adopt this narrative approach, it is not always the case—once again, *Sin Nombre* comes to mind. In a more traditionally constructed film, the camera could have detached itself momentarily from Chauk and Juan to show the viewer how things looked from Sara's perspective, but not in *La jaula*. Austerity, in this case, takes the shape of absence, of everything that is not said and, above all, neither shown nor seen.

Another notable absence in *La jaula* is that of blood or, to be more exact, of bleeding human bodies. In a film whose protagonists—and the collective of undocumented migrants with them—are constantly exposed to violent robberies, kidnappings, and even a shooting, such absence is not the product of lack of opportunities: *La jaula* gets out of its way to avoid gore. Thus, for instance, when Juan gets badly wounded with a machete while trying to stop Sara's abduction, the camera remains, in the scenes that follow, distant from his body, focusing instead on Chauk and his attentive expression as he dresses his companion's wound (00:58:09-00:59:25). A similar approach applies to the scene in which an anonymous sniper shoots Chauk down. Once the relentless sniper forces Juan to run away, silence returns to the scene. A medium shot shows Chauk's motionless body lying on the ground; the camera is close, but he is partially hidden behind—and surrounded by—the golden desert brush. No wound in sight, just a boy who looks like he is sleeping. The camera then switches to Juan, as he becomes a moving speck in the immensity of the desert (1:34:15-1:36:10). Like in the scene when Sara is taken away, this shocking moment is not artificially intensified by non-diegetic music; the shock comes instead from its unadorned banality.

Comparing *La jaula* to *Sin Nombre*, a road movie that also focuses on undocumented youth migration from Central America (Honduras) but from the angle of gang feuds, Curry finds that in Quemada-Diez's film, violence, "if timid by comparison, seems to serve more melodramatic ends" (51). This may be true but, in my view, *La jaula's* choice to have the viewer "experience" violence through absence and loss rather than visual display has less to do with melodrama than with a deliberate rejection of the spectacular bloodshed. In this way, Quemada-Diez's film resists representing the ubiquitous violence associated with La Bestia and the US-Mexico border as an object of voyeuristic pleasure (the spectacle of disposable bodies killing each other), and seeks instead to generate empathy by placing the viewer in the shoes of the undocumented migrant.

Borders, in particular those that separate rich countries from impoverished former colonies, like the US-Mexico border, have become the stage where the increasing tension between Global South and Global North gets resolved, for lack of a better word, by force. As Pratt explains, although "the imperial character of the new

global order was obscured for a time by a legitimating language of free trade, flow, open markets, a global ecumene," it has become clear that globalization has meant the "restructuring of planetary relations by an imperially designed neoliberalism" (238). The growing number of undocumented labor migrants and refugees pressing at the seams of the walled developed world is not an unintended consequence, but a logical response. Since the 1980s, the most vulnerable sectors in developing countries have been made redundant by the one-fits-all structural adjustment prescriptions handed to their governments by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF): resources that should have gone to health, education, and housing have been, in most cases, obediently redirected to debt service (Harvey 28-31, Stiglitz 3-52). Then right before the turn of the century free trade agreements added even more citizens in the Global South to the legions of the redundant. "The critics of globalization accuse Western countries of hypocrisy, and the critics are right," affirms Joseph E. Stiglitz, referring to the fact that these agreements have forced developing countries to eliminate trade barriers while the developed countries have kept their own barriers intact, which has prevented poor nations from obtaining much needed income from agricultural exports (6). The hypocrisy does not stop there. "As Clinton was signing NAFTA to ensure the movement of capital and goods, the US Army Corps of Engineers was fencing the border to interdict the movement of people," affirms Harsha Walia, for whom the displacement crisis currently experienced throughout the world was, in fact, "foreseen" (51-52).

Released in the US in 2015, *La jaula de oro* seemed timed to offer a way of making sense of the migration crisis of 2014, when an unusually high number of unaccompanied minors (69,000 in total, according to the Migration Data Portal) crossed the US-Mexico border. Four years later, as the Trump administration enforced the "family separation policy" and undocumented migrant children were separated from their parents and put in facilities that resembled cages, the film's original title in Spanish—which translates literally as 'The Golden Cage'—became somewhat prescient, only the cages in question were anything but golden. The waves of undocumented migrant children crossing the border unaccompanied have now become seasonal and, after having been retained in camps in Mexico since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the numbers of minors crossing the border alone in 2021 promise to break records. Quemada-Diez's road movie is, therefore, a film that has gained relevance since its release, not only because of the numbing statistics, but also—and perhaps above all—because of the kind of critical impact on the viewer that its poetics of austerity is capable of provoking.

Two decades ago, Mary Louise Pratt made a call to find ways to expose the profound inequities generated by globalization through forms of representation that strive to escape the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism (26). In *La jaula de oro's* poetics of austerity I find a response to that call. Through its austere narrative structure, which avoids dwelling on the personal histories of the main charac-

ters, and a visual style (real locations, casting of non-professional actors, etc.) that fuses them with the undocumented migrant crowd as well as with environments that evoke the wasteful practices of contemporary capitalism, Quemada Díez's film resists neoliberal individualism, humanizes the migrant collective, and makes visible the thread that connects consumerist excess with lives made superflu-

ous. Similarly, by banning gore from its storytelling, *La jaula* takes a stand against representations of border violence as a spectacle for consumption; in this way, the film refuses to compete in a visual market that naturalizes the perception of undocumented migrants as redundant and of their bodies as disposable.

NOTES

¹ Several sources, including the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), have published the director's name with an accent on his last name (Quemada-Díez). However, the name Diego Quemada-Díez appears without an accent in *La jaula de oro's* credits. Throughout this article, whenever referring to the director I will use the latter version of his name.

² Released in 1984, the corrido "La jaula de oro" is one of the most popular songs recorded by the group Los Tigres del Norte. It tells the story of a Mexican immigrant who, having crossed the border as a *mojado*, is still 'illegal' after ten years in the US. The corrido's male narrator lives in fear of deportation and cannot travel back to Mexico, thus he describes his situation as living in a golden cage:

¿De qué me sirve el dinero
si estoy como un prisionero
dentro de esta gran nación?
Cuando me acuerdo hasta lloro,
y aunque la jaula sea de oro
no deja de ser prisión.

³ In Latin America's "peripheral modernity" (Dussel 338, Pratt 225), the state never really achieved a strong hold of income redistribution and a welfare system. Any hope that this could happen before the end of the twentieth century got crushed in the early 1980s, when the debt crisis exploded. For the whole previous decade, hungry for building that elusive modernity, developing countries around the world had borrowed heavily from New York banks at rates convenient for the bankers. In 1981, a dramatic rise in the U.S. interest rates pushed these vulnerable economies into default, beginning with Mexico in 1982 (Harvey 28-31). By the end of the 1980s a total of 16 Latin American countries had renegotiated their debts (Sims and Romero), in exchange for applying "structural adjustment" recipes handed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. As Harvey explains, this process demonstrated a fundamental difference between liberal and neoliberal practice:

under the former, lenders take the losses that arise from bad investment decisions, while under the latter the borrowers are forced by state and international powers to take on board the cost of debt repayment *no matter what the consequences for the livelihood and well-being of the local population*. (29, the emphasis is mine)

Invariably, the structural adjustments required governments to cut social and welfare investments (health, education), while privatizing state-owned companies and making labor laws more flexible. Imposed as necessary *austerity* measures, the recipes facilitated that the "free market ideology" take hold of the region—and the developing world in general (Stiglitz 13). According to data compiled by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC, this "lost decade" meant a significant increase of poverty and inequality, thus widening the gap between rich and poor in Latin America (Ocampo).

⁴ Chauk's first attempt to talk about snow occurs during a stop in a small Mexican town. In a scene meant to reveal their media-influenced ideas about the US, the four youngsters decide to spend the little money they have on pictures taken with fake backgrounds that supposedly represent the United States. They are looking at a photo album, trying to choose the backgrounds for their own photos, when Chauk sees something (hidden for the viewer) and says "taiv," but no one pays attention. Soon after, we see Sara and Samuel pose for their shot smiling and holding a little US flag over a backdrop of skyscrapers; conversely, for his photo Juan rides a fake horse and is dressed up with a jacket, hat, and pistol that match his cowboy boots. As for Chauk, he smiles for his shot wearing a Native American head dress and cane—an ironic hint at stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples, given that throughout the whole film he wears a black t-shirt with what looks like a rock band print—against the backdrop of a forest covered in snow (00:21:21-00:22:20).

⁵ According to information disseminated by US Customs and Border Protection, between October 2020 and March 2021, the number of "southwest land border encounters" reached a total of 569,879 individuals, among them 48,587 unaccompanied minors.

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