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CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES IN THE YOUNG ADULT NOVEL *WE ARE NOT FROM HERE*, BY JENNY TORRES SANCHEZ

*MIGRACIÓN CENTROAMERICANA A LOS ESTADOS
UNIDOS EN LA NOVELA JUVENIL WE ARE NOT FROM
HERE, DE JENNY TORRES SANCHEZ*

Abstract

This article analyses *We Are Not from Here* (2020), a young adult novel by Jenny Torres Sanchez. The book follows the journey of three adolescents from Guatemala to the United States on top of La Bestia, the train that goes across Mexico. This article analyses the different narrative techniques that Torres Sanchez utilises to cover the themes and topics that structure the novel. The novel focuses on the network of altruistic solidarity that has bloomed all over Mexico to assist migrants while illustrating the brutality of an exhausting journey towards the north, a fact connected to the theoretical framework used to approach the text. Accordingly, diaspora theory (Bromley, Ashcroft et al., Brah, Fuentes Krafczyk) will play a fundamental role in the following analysis exploring the way in which trauma, vulnerability and affect (Pollock, Tal, Butler, Ganteau, Thraikill) complement each other in the text; and how the Latin American Gothic (Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz) juxtaposes magical realism (Di Iorio Sandín and Perez, Murwood) in certain episodes.

Keywords: Central American Migration; Diaspora; La Bestia; Trauma; Vulnerability; Affect.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza *We Are Not from Here* (2020), una novela juvenil escrita por Jenny Torres Sanchez. La trama se desenvuelve alrededor del viaje que realizan tres adolescentes desde Guatemala a los Estados Unidos a lomos de La Bestia, el tren que atraviesa México. Este artículo analiza las diferentes técnicas narrativas que Torres Sanchez utiliza para explorar los diferentes temas que estructuran la novela. La novela se centra en describir la red de solidaridad que recorre México para ayudar a las personas migrantes mientras se ilustra la brutalidad de un viaje extenuante hacia el norte, algo conectado con el marco teórico utilizado en este análisis. La conocida como Diaspora Theory (Bromley, Ashcroft et al. Brah, Fuentes Krafczyk) jugará un papel fundamental en el siguiente análisis a la hora de explorar la forma en la que trauma, vulnerabilidad y afecto (Pollock, Tal, Butler, Ganteau, Thraikill) se complementan en el texto y cómo el gótico latinoamericano (Casanova-Vizcaíno Et Ordiz) se yuxtapone al realismo mágico (Di Iorio Sandín y Perez, Murwood) en ciertos episodios.

Palabras clave: Migración centroamericana; Diáspora; La Bestia; Trauma; Vulnerabilidad; Afecto.

1. Introduction: Central American migration to the United States and literature

Millions of people are now on the move. From Africa to Europe, from Central to North America, women, men and even children experience migration, whether within comfort or conflict zones. The Mexican-U.S. border represents one of the iconographic images of contemporary diasporas as thousands move towards the north each year. Most of the migrants that manage to get to the North American borderland arrive from countries such as Guatemala, Honduras or El Salvador, failed states¹ that motivate the massive exodus of their people towards the Mexican-U.S. border. Many of these migrants are children and adolescents who embark, sometimes on their own, into an exhausting journey filled with dangers that might last weeks or months.

The data provided by official institutions is significant in this respect. Even if we consider the added complications caused by the global Covid19 outbreak in 2020, it is estimated that approximately 65,000 migrant children and teenagers arrived alone on the southern U.S. border during the first six months of 2021. This means that the number of unaccompanied children trying to cross the border increased in that period almost threefold.² Most of these Central American migrants must cross Mexico in the most precarious conditions and risk their lives on top of La Bestia, the train that goes from south to north through the country. Thus, Mexico turns into a passageway for these migrants who have no intention to remain in the country longer than necessary since Mexico does not offer them the opportunities they are looking for to improve their lives. Mexico is for these migrants an extremely hostile place, not only because of its complex geography. Maras, narcos, kidnappers and human traffickers are constant menaces for migrant adults and children who need to cross the country.

These threats are possibly why migration literature is booming on both sides of the borderland in Spanish and English, as current events inspire much of contemporary literary production. Novels in Spanish —such as *La Mara* (2004) by Rafael Ramírez Heredia, *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* (2009) by Yuri Herrera, *La fila india* (2013) by Antonio Ortuño, or *Las tierras arrasadas* (2015) by Emiliano Monge— bear witness to the importance of migration in Mexican literature. Some others in English are also illustrative of this literary phenomenon. *The River Flows North* (2009) by Graciela Limón, *The Distance Between Us* (2012) by Reyna Grande, *The Line Becomes a River* (2018) by Francisco Cantú or *Bang* (2018) by Daniel Peña, are some of the U.S. English language produced literature on Central American migration to the United States.

Most of these novels explore the darkest side of humankind through brutal realism,³ a term that refers to the use of explicit descriptions of extreme violence through an almost forensic vocabulary. There is no space for hope or optimism in most of these texts that revolve around the need to cross the borderland, and which are inspired by what award-winning author Emiliano Monge describes as the 'Central American holocaust'. This holocaust refers to the hundreds of thousands of people who have lost their lives trying to reach the United States in the last decades.⁴

1 'Failed state' is a term used, above all in journalism, to describe those countries that cannot guarantee a minimum sense of security to the majority of its citizens due to different conditionings, be they economic or political. Author Horacio Castellanos Moya (in Blas Vives, 2019: online) has coined the term 'estados tullidos', crippled states, to report the situation of many Central American countries that seem to be overwhelmed by the pressure and violence of 'maras', 'narcos', and other criminal gangs that work, in occasions, in partnership with official institutions.

2 Data provided by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection office and available at <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters> (accessed on 05/04/2023).

3 For more information about the term 'brutal realism' as a narrative technique, see Alonso Alonso (2019).

4 Mexican author Emiliano Monge has written extensively about Central American migration through Mexico. In his award-winning novel *Las tierras arrasadas* (2015), translated into English as *Among the Lost*, he uses the expression 'Central American holocaust' to describe the magnitude of the drama he talks about in his novel.

This research focuses on one of these migration narratives, specifically on Jenny Torres Sanchez's *We Are Not from Here*, published in 2020 and awarded some important literary prizes for Young Adult fiction.⁵ Torres Sanchez is not the first author to deal with child precarious migration. Valeria Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019) was longlisted for the 2019 Booker Prize, which is significant because it represents these extreme migratory experiences through fiction. In this particular case, *We Are Not from Here* is a fundamental case study because it is a Young Adult novel which deals with the dangers of migration in an eye-opening and thought-provoking way. This article analyses the different narrative strategies that Torres Sanchez utilises to write from the United States about those underage alien migrants who have been put in the spotlight even before the period known as the Trump Era (2017 – 2021) started.⁶ *We Are Not from Here* succeeds in showing the dangers of Central American migration through Mexico towards the United States while illustrating the network of solidarity that this complex phenomenon has fostered throughout the country. Thus, this analysis will cover the different themes and topics that structure the novel. Accordingly, Diaspora Theory (Bromley, Ashcroft et al., Brah, Fuentes Krafczyk) will play a fundamental role exploring the way in which trauma, vulnerability and affect (Pollock, Tal, Butler, Ganteau, Thraikill) complement each other in the text; and how the Latin American Gothic (Casanova-Vizcaino & Ordiz) juxtaposes moments of magical realism (Di Iorio Sandin & Perez, Murwood) in certain episodes.

2. The journey starts: migration towards the North in *We Are Not from Here*

This is a novel about three undocumented adolescents aged 13, 15 and 17, who emigrate on their own from Guatemala to the United States. Chico, Pulga and Pequeña are the three protagonists of the text, although only Pulga and Pequeña take the role of first-person narrators, interchanging their points of view in each chapter. The book is divided into five parts headed by a title in Spanish and its translation into English: *Mi Tierra – My Land*, *Donde Vive La Bestia – Where the Beast Lives*, *El Viaje – The Journey*, *Despedidas – Goodbyes*, and *Al Borde de Tantas Cosas – At the Border of So Many Things*. The novel has a linear narration, which is necessary to achieve a particular effect discussed in the following analysis. Each of the parts in which it is divided focuses on one specific topic. Thus, the first part explains why three adolescents take the radical decision to leave their homes behind and emigrate on their own, while the second follows their dangerous trip on top of La Bestia. The third describes the complications of a journey under life-threatening precariousness. The fourth narrates the death of one of the protagonists, and the final part follows the different paths that the two remaining protagonists take once they cross the border.

Despite it being a tough reading, Torres Sanchez does not recreate herself in some of the most brutal dangers that migrants have to face. Contrary to most of the literary production for adults above mentioned, this novel is inspired by the sense of sorority that traverses Mexico to assist migrants. Nuns, priests, strangers, charities, NGOs and other organisations illustrate that not everything is lost. Even though the journey towards the north is full of people who will try to abuse migrants, others are there to help in the best way they can. The novel is preceded by a prologue and finishes with an afterword where the author contextualises her motivation to write a story about such a complex topic. The book includes a map with the route followed by the protagonists: from

⁵ The novel was awarded the following prizes: Pura Belpré 2021 Young Adult Author Honor Book, BookPage Best Book of 2020, Chicago Public Library Best of the Best of 2020, School Library Journal Best Book of 2020 and New York Public Library 2020 Top Best Book for Teens.

⁶ Images of children separated from their parents at the borderland and kept in cramped cage-like facilities in government-detention camps became viral as an example of the harshness of Trump's immigration policies. President Joe Biden decided not to follow Trump's zero-tolerance policy and some of these children started to be reunited with their families during the first months of 2021. For more information, see <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56405009> (accessed on 05/04/2023).

Puerto Barrios, on the Southern East Coast of Guatemala, to Mexicali, on the Northern West coast of Mexico. The lines that connect each of the stops that these three underage adolescents must make are illustrative of the odyssey represented in the book. More than four thousand kilometres separate these two places, including jungle and desert lands.

As Torres Sanchez acknowledges in the afterword, it is almost impossible to imagine how arduous a journey like this can be: "this is a trip impossible to truly know unless one has taken it personally. Until it is over. Each migrant's story is vastly different. And each migrant's story is also the same" (p. 345).⁷ The author clarifies after the novel comes to an end that she began writing the text in 2015, before Trump became a president, "as news spread of children fleeing their countries and arriving unaccompanied to the United States" (p. 345). As her surname indicates and as she acknowledges herself in this afterword, Torres Sanchez is the daughter of immigrants who know the feeling of leaving their home country behind. Thus, she is a second-generation migrant who has never experienced migration as such but bears a sense of migrant consciousness due to her familial background. She writes about what Roger Bromley refers to as the discursive and political 'third scenario' that migrants inhabit as they represent a sense of "displacement, alienation, pain, loss and, perhaps even in the end for some, of opportunity" (2000, p. 2).

Displacement, for these precarious migrants, implies the dislocation of referents, be they geographical or metaphorical. This sense of lack of place manifests in myriad ways. For instance, it implies a process of identity formation that will imply the negotiation between a culture of origin (the Latin American one in the case of the text under study) and the culture of the host country (Mexico as the three protagonists of this novel travel across the country, or the United States after they arrive to their desired destination). Alienation, accordingly, might appear naturally from this conflictive experience of precarious migration to a place where the migrant is not welcomed and considered an alien which, as will be discussed below, is the point of departure for *We Are Not from Here*.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin suggest in their foundational text *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) that diasporas have an immediate effect on individuals since migration fosters the development of a sense of self-identification with the different places they inhabit. In this particular case, it is the 'empire' who writes back from within. Torres Sanchez has never experienced migration; she is a U.S. citizen, but she is also the result of a process of transculturation. She inhabits what Bhabha refers to as a 'Third Space of enunciation' (1994, p. 37); that is, Torres Sanchez occupies a space in-between with all the burdens that this ambivalent status might imply. For the protagonists of the novel and for migrants in general, however, transterritorialisation motivates the deconstruction of individual identity and the reconstruction of it in new terms according to the multiple experiences migrants must overcome. For Central American migrants, Mexico conditions both the deconstruction of their particular identity and its reconstruction anew. To put it another way: Mexico is an immense borderland that these migrants need to cross to reach their destination; a borderland that will change them forever.

Mexico, as the materialisation of this physical and metaphorical borderland, represents "la realidad dramática en la que viven los migrantes centroamericanos que pasan por México" [the dramatic reality that Central American migrants endure in their way through Mexico]⁸ (Favaro, 2020, p. 233). Mexico, thus, is also an excellent example of what Avtar Brah (1996) would refer to as a 'diaspora space'; that is, a place where those who arrive from outside the national borders coincide

7 Quotations from the novel will be included parenthetically in the body of the analysis and will make reference to the edition of the book mentioned in the bibliography.

8 All translations from quotes in Spanish are mine.

with those nationals who are affected, in some way or another, by this migration. A 'diaspora space', Mexico in this particular case, is positioned at an intersection where the politics of location operate. It is a place where tensions appear as "multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and transgressive imperceptibly mingle" (Brah, 1996, p. 208).

Mexico, as a borderland diaspora space, is highly complex. It is a place where the dichotomy between 'internal' and 'external' racism is evident. John McLeod defines 'external racism' as "a form of xenophobia when groups of people who are located outside the borders of the nation are discriminated against on the groups of their 'race'" (2010, p. 13). Guatemalan immigrants in Mexico, like the protagonists of the book, suffer from this kind of racism: "[t]hey call us animals [...] Rodents and beasts" (p. 158), one migrant neighbour from Puerto Barrios says after he is deported. This racism is something that the three protagonists experience themselves when they are on their way:

We're near a highway, I think; cars are passing us by, some beeping and some people shouting out to us every now and then.

"Why are they telling at us like that?" I ask Pulga. His eyes are looking everywhere.

"Some don't want us here," Pulga says, shrugging. (p. 152-3)

However, Mexico also represents a form of 'internal racism' "directed at those who live within the nation but are not deemed to belong to the imagined community of the national people due to their perceived 'race'" (McLeod, 2010, p. 133). Indigenous people and poor Mexican migrants are also victims of this kind of xenophobia within the national borders despite being Mexican nationals. This xenophobia implies that racism, in this particular case, goes beyond a straightforward national ascription to embody other forms of discrimination. Migrants, thus, whether nationals or foreigners, go through an othering process within Mexican diaspora space depending on their point of departure: "We are to Mexico what Mexico is to the States" (p. 153), Pulga says. Hence, there is a dichotomy between those who are on the move vs those who are not on the move. Movement is what justifies the violence and racism suffered by migrant subjects, which follows Felipe Oliver Fuentes Krafczyk's assertion when he says that "el emigrante es el sujeto por excelencia de la tragedia contemporánea" [the migrant is the subject, par excellence, of contemporary tragedy] (2018, p. 48).

We Are Not from Here is indeed a contemporary tragedy. However, the author makes sure that the reader understands the dramatic dimension of the novel from the prologue, where an anonymous narrator explains how it feels to live under a constant threat even in your home country.

*When you live in a place like this, you're always planning your escape [...] You can look at all this and still be planning your escape [...] You plan your escape because no matter how much color there is or how much color you make yourself see, you've watched every beautiful thing disappear from here [...] You plan your escape because you've seen your world turn black. You plan your escape.*⁹ (p. 1)

The need to escape will mark the novel's first part, set back in Puerto Barrios, Guatemala. There is an apparent intention to justify migration at the beginning of the book. What would make three adolescents take the drastic decision of leaving their families and friends behind to embark on the most dangerous journey? The prologue itself is significant in this respect. The author uses

⁹ The whole prologue is written in italics.

what could be labelled as brutal realism to offer an accurate context of how daily life is for the three protagonists in their hometown:

Because you've also seen how blood turns brown as it seeps into concrete. As it mixes with dirt and the excrements and innards of leaking dead bodies. You've stared at those dark places with your friends on the way to school, the places people have died. The places they disappeared from. The places they reappeared one morning months later, sometimes alive, sometimes dead, but mostly in fragments. You've watched dogs piss in those places. On those bodies that once cried with life. (p. 1).

Violence characterises the existence of most migrants, and not only during their journey. It is their motivation to escape in some cases. Pequeña, Pulga and Chico also live under a constant threat, despite how young they are. Chico, 13, is an orphan whose mother was killed by a random *sicario*¹⁰ in the street in front of him. Pequeña, 17, has just given birth to her first child after being repeatedly raped by Rey, the leader of a local *mara*¹¹ who also recruits Pulga, 15, and Chico for his gang. The three seem entirely aware that they have to migrate to escape the violence they are already victims of. This awareness is why Pulga searched on the school computers for all he could gather about getting to the United States. He wrote a travel book over the years that he keeps checking and memorising overnight, being fully conscious that those notes would come extremely useful one day.

This first part serves as a contextualisation. It is constructed through the violence and the constant threat that rules the daily life of the protagonists, as well as their obsession with escaping. Torres Sanchez expresses the urgency to flee through repetitions where Pequeña, Pulga and Chico first become aware that they have no other choice. So, they take the final decision. This decision is not a spontaneous process, as the narration of different episodes interlaces with this process of realisation.

Pequeña is possibly the more determined character. Rey demands her to leave her home to live with him. He does not give her an option as he believes she and the baby belong to him. The total disgust that Pequeña feels towards Rey conditions the relationship she has with her baby to the point that she has to be forced by her mother to breastfeed him. Despite her young age, she understands that her lack of maternal instinct is a result of a traumatising forced relationship, and that is why she insists that they need to leave home when she says, "[a], Pulga, you have to get out of here one day. You know that, right? [...] We all need to get out of here" (p. 13). Words such as 'trapped' or 'crushed' are repeated over these first pages to create a sense of desperation, together with the verbs 'run' or 'let's go', which appear more frequently as Part One comes to an end. Their urgency to escape is indeed motivated by trauma. Anne Whitehead considers that trauma "acts as a haunting or possessive influence which not only insistently and intrusively returns but is, moreover, experienced the first time only in its belated repetition" (2004, p. 5). This consideration implies that when a traumatising event is not fully assimilated, it returns in different forms.

10 *Sicario* is a term used to refer to the hired assassins, very young people in most cases, who operate above all in Central America and which have also inspired much of Latin American contemporary literary production. Its etymology comes from the Latin word *sica*, meaning 'dagger'. *Sicarios* usually work for criminal gangs, including *narcos*, or work as freelance killers for whoever hire them.

11 *Mara* is the name given to Central American extremely violent gangs, such as *Mara Salvatrucha 13* or *Barrio 18*, which perpetrate all kinds of criminal acts. Tom Ward (2012) situates their origin in Los Angeles after the end of El Salvador Civil War (1980 – 1992), where many young people emigrated to escape from the violence of their country of origin. When these small gangs became stronger and started to operate under a specific structure, the U.S. government deported these young people back to a home country that was still suffering from the aftermaths of the war. Nowadays, Juan José Martínez D'Aubuisson defines them as transnational organisations that are "la historia del fracaso de unos países que no supieron qué hacer con unos muchachos que no sabían qué hacer con sus vidas" [the story of the failure of some countries which did not know what to do with a group of young people who did not know what to do with their lives] (2015, p. 11).

Although this first part follows the linear narration that characterises the novel, there are a few flashbacks to specific violent episodes that marked the lives of the three protagonists, who are not blood-related but act as if they were family. The most traumatising event for the three was when Chico's mother was killed in the street. Chico was 11, and Pulga was 13 by that time and, even though they witnessed many criminal acts, including when Rey murdered shopkeeper Don Felicio in front of them. Chico's mother returns now and again throughout the novel to illustrate their trauma. These visits even continue after Chico dies on top of La Bestia. The idea of this latent trauma, the fact that the life of your most loving person can be taken for no reason at any moment, corresponds to Griselda Pollock's definition of return in trauma narratives. For Pollock, trauma narratives "bear similar characteristics of being inspired by an event that evokes an older, childhood memory, through which is brought forth, fictionally, the new staging of possible difference from the unsatisfactory present" (2007, p. 218). Thus, there is a double sense of latency in the novel: one related to the possibility of dying and the other related to the need to survive. These two have been assimilated by the protagonists of the novel naturally as part of their existence since they know they belong to a subaltern¹² group of citizens who are given few choices, as Pequeña acknowledges:

"We are small people," Pequeña said again. "With small names, meant to live small lives." She looked like she was in a trance. "That's all we're allowed to live, that's all the world wants us to live. But sometimes even *that*, even that it won't give us. Instead, the world wants to crush us." (p. 12, emphasis in the original).

A naturalised trauma such as daily violence is juxtaposed in the following four parts of the novel to the trauma of precarious migration through a conflict zone such as Mexico. The beginning of the journey in Part Two is also the beginning of Pulga's radical transformation. As previously mentioned, the novel is narrated by both Pulga and Pequeña, and the voice of Chico is heard through these two other narrators. They describe the expected bus route someone would take from Puerto Barrios to Guatemala City, the capital, then get to the Guatemalan – Mexican border between Tecún Umán and Ciudad Hidalgo, where crossing the Suchiate river would pose no problem. From Ciudad Hidalgo, migrants must get to Arriaga, a city on the southwest coast of Mexico, where the journey on La Bestia starts.

The next destination is Lechería, the station where La Bestia follows three different routes: the East route to Nuevo Laredo, which is geographically the easiest one but used to be a Zeta territory;¹³ the Central one to Ciudad Juárez, which is the most popular one to enter El Paso in Texas and where the *maquilas* give plenty of precarious job opportunities to occasional migrants waiting to cross the border; and the West one, the longest and hardest one of all that implies crossing the Sonoran desert to Mexicali, a borderland city on the north of the Baja California peninsula. Pulga, Pequeña and Chico follow this last one, also known as the 'hell route' for obvious reasons.

12 In her acclaimed essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak uses the term 'subalternity' to make reference to the dynamics of oppression and imbalance that different subjects occupy in a hierarchy of power-relations, subjects who cannot directly express their voices by taking over individual or collective agencies.

13 Los Zetas was one of the most powerful Mexican cartels that is now believed to be dissolved after its last leader, José María Guizar Valencia, was arrested in 2018. It was possibly the most violent of all Mexican gangs and performed different crimes such as drug dealing, human trafficking, money laundering or even cybercrime.

3. On route: Torres Sanchez's narrative techniques to represent the dangers of migration

Many are the dangers that migrants must face in any of the three previously mentioned routes, something that does not scare these kids: "We understand danger. We grew up with danger. But this danger feels different" (p. 146), Pulga says as they are on route. The dichotomy between the hometown violence that they are escaping from and the danger of what is defined in the novel as a "dangerous trip [...] an almost impossible trip" (p. 138) is constructed through the resolution of the three protagonists to reach the United States, where they know one distant relative who successfully emigrated years ago. Assumed violence, thus, juxtaposes expected violence. They know they will run into "someone who will want to rob us, or authorities who are already waiting out here, knowing that drivers drop migrants off before checkpoints. Or worse—narcos who will kidnap and hold us until they get money from our families" (p. 155). However, none of the three is ready to witness certain horrible events that occur around them. To describe violent events, Torres Sanchez uses the cinematic technique of 'suggesting rather than showing' in several narrative ellipses to avoid the brutal description of murders, sexual assaults and terrible accidents on top of La Bestia, like the one that killed Chico.

In some cases, for example when Pequeña is narrating the moment she sees how some gang members rape one of the women who accompanied them on top of the train with her daughter and her husband, the use of the Latin American Gothic appears as the preferred narrative effect. Although one could argue that this episode might fall into what Di Iorio Sandín and Perez (2012) would refer as a 'moment of magical realism', the truth is that the reference to insects like in the following episode in the context of violence and trauma begs to be understood as an example of the Latin American Gothic, explained below.

In this specific case, Pequeña introduces a scene that illustrates the double subordination of migrant women:¹⁴ they are subject not only to migrant violence but also to sexual violence. Without describing the assault itself, Pequeña seems shocked by the image of that woman being abused at night in front of her family by these strangers who forced the train to stop to rob the few possessions migrants on top of La Bestia might have. It is at the moment in which Pequeña "breaks [...] into a million little pieces that fall away and drop to the ground below" (p. 222) that an 'army of spiders' emerge from the field and climb up the aggressors "under their pant legs, up their backs, and onto their faces, into their hair. Hundreds and hundreds of spiders. Clusters and clusters of spiders" (p. 222). This narrative effect invites, at least, some engagement with the relationship that Casanova-Vizcaino and Ordiz (2018) establish between magical realism¹⁵ as a metaphor for communal trauma and the Latin American Gothic in relation to violence against women.

For Casanova-Vizcaino and Ordiz, Latin American Gothic appears in literature to represent universal archetypes of horror, as inheritor of North American Gothic, more specifically of Edgar Allan Poe's work. In this sense, Latin American Gothic is an attempt to represent violence in literature through a reinterpretation of local and universal tropes such as spiders, as it happens in this particular case. This violent episode is followed by the death of Chico, who falls under La Bestia and dies in Pulga's arms. This pivotal moment implies the change to insanity of the male narrator, who, until this precise moment, adopts the role of a leader but changes his attitude towards the fact of reaching the United States border radically after Chico dies.

14 Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (1986) use the term 'double colonisation of women' to talk about the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. Similarly, migrant women nowadays suffer a double stigmatisation for being migrants but also for being women. As the novel illustrates, they suffer both physical and sexual violence for the fact of being women.

15 Many are the academic references on magical realism. For a selection of these, see Alonso Alonso (2015); Benito, Manzanos and Simal (2009); Bowers (2004); Camayd-Freixas (1998); Llarena (1997); Menton (1998); among others.

Pulga, who instructed Chico even when they were still in Puerto Barrios to have "a heart of steel" (p. 6) to survive without letting painful experiences hurt you, but still is unable to forgive himself for taking his friend too far into exhaustion that it made him fall from the top of the train. His heart indeed turns into steel after Chico's death. Kalí Tal comments in her inspirational text on trauma narratives on the "effects of trauma upon individual survivors and the manner in which that trauma is reflected and revised in the larger, collective political and cultural world" (1996, p. 5). For Tal, narratives of trauma, like the one under analysis, represent collective memory through particular stories that serve metonymically for collective experiences. It is apparent that Chico's death represents the death of hundreds of thousands of migrants in Mexico. Despite how arduous and traumatic the journey on top of La Bestia is, there is no space in the narration for magical realism to appear again to soften what could now be argued is an experience of communal trauma. Contrary to this, Torres Sanchez does not hesitate to describe how dangerous and exhausting La Bestia is, both for adults and children. La Bestia will change Pulga, and any of those who get on top of it, forever.

There is an absorbing dual process of (de)humanisation in the parts where La Bestia becomes one of the many secondary characters appearing and disappearing as the three protagonists move north. The humanisation of La Bestia runs in parallel with the dehumanisation of Pulga, who tries so hard not to allow his feelings to interfere with his resolve to reach the U.S. border that he ends up turning into a different person. Or it could also be argued, as the novel suggests, that La Bestia necessarily changes those who travel on top of it forever: "If it doesn't eat you alive, it takes your soul" (p. 124). The novel offers references to La Bestia as if it was a living organism who "lives [and] waits" (p. 162) for migrants in Arriaga and who "will deliver our dreams" (p. 163). Migrants, like Pulga, refer to the train as if it was a subject with its own will, as this description of the first encounter with it illustrates:

We wait, all of us, for the beast to wake up again. We watch as it sleeps, unbothered, unhurried. It doesn't care that my heart is racing. That my mind feels dizzy from the heat and hunger. That my body is prickly with sweat and readiness. It doesn't care that we're dying, literally *dying*, to get as far away as possible from the places we love but that have turned on us.

It doesn't care how desperate we are to go on.

We wait. Until La Bestia is ready. (p. 172, emphasis in the original)

La Bestia becomes a living obsession for the protagonists, someone who "calls to us. And we turn to leave in answer" (p. 211). It represents hope, as it is the only means migrants have to get to the U.S. border, yet it also represents death. Many are the traumatic events described in the novel on top of the train; from the first time they have to jump back to the ground after it slows down because "*Narcos! Kidnappers! La migra!*" (p. 187, emphasis in the original) might be waiting for them, to the man whose leg is "being sliced by the train's wheels" (p. 213) while trying to get on it. La Bestia gives and takes lives; this is clear in the novel when Chico dies near the end. After days of exhaustion and extreme heat, which Pulga and Pequeña narrate through the most scatological descriptions of their body reactions to the lack of water and food, Chico falls off the train. At this point, the narration becomes as blurred as the protagonists feel. A series of repetitive short sentences describe the tragic moment:

So the screams form in you like a thousand bubbles, multiplying, squeezing one on top of the other, filling your chest and your throat. Where they stay and choke you.

And you realize you're choking on screams.
 And you can't breathe.
 And you can't hear [...]
 And you know.
 You know.
 You know (pp. 226-7).

As mentioned above, Chicho's death makes Pulga fall into an obscure state of mind, in which he even has suicidal thoughts. Pulga, who kept repeating himself that "[m]aybe part of us has to die to endure this" (p. 214) and that "[f]eeling too much will kill me" (p. 216, emphasis in the original), learns to stop feeling at all. He becomes a migrant zombie (also applying here Casanova-Vizcaino and Ordiz's approach to the Latin American Gothic) who forgets where his actual destination is, and he wanders around in the desert, waiting for his death to come. This wandering justifies the linear narration that the novel follows, which includes short flashbacks to their lives in Puerto Barrios. Thinking about Chico, about the family they left behind, the baby Pequeña just gave birth to, Puerto Barrios, Rey, or even the shack that was their home would jeopardise their resolution to continue towards the north despite all difficulties they find. Thinking back would imply the end of their trip. Going back would also suggest their death. That is precisely the effect that the straightforward narration of the novel achieves since migrants cannot afford to look back; they must only look forwards.

4. Conclusion: Where the journey finishes

Chico's death culminates Pulga's dehumanisation process, which will last until he reaches the United States. He regrets having forced his friend to go on without realising he was just an injured 13-year-old boy who could not go on without some rest. "I killed him. I killed Chico. It's my fault" (p. 250) are the words that Pulga keeps repeating to himself to the point that he desists on his idea to reach the borderland. Pulga, the expedition leader up to this moment, refuses to continue the journey, and it is Pequeña who must take the lead. The narration of the episodes that follow Chico's death succeeds in illustrating the protagonists' almost unconsciousness. The images are blurred, and the sentences do not make too much sense. The temporal and geographical references are confused after Pulga and Pequeña are abandoned by the *coyote*¹⁶ in the middle of the desert. The *coyote* was taking them, along with another group of five people, to the other side of the border on foot over three nights.

Through a stream of consciousness narrative technique, the two protagonists describe the hallucinations that they suffer due to the extreme heat and lack of water to drink. Despite all difficulties, the two adolescents continue walking on their own because, as Pulga acknowledges himself, "I walk because I am already dead" (p. 297). At this point, they take different paths without even realising that they had crossed the border. They are already on U.S. soil: Pulga is arrested by a border patrol and taken to a detention centre for illegal immigrants, and Pequeña is found almost unconscious by a random lady. The lady happens to be the sister of one of the women who assisted them in one of the shelters in Mexico. Marta, the name of this lady, happens to be Soledad's sister, one of the ladies who run one of the shelters the protagonists stopped at in Mexico. She fosters Pequeña in her house and helps her get in touch with her mother on the phone. She also makes sure that Pulga's aunt takes him out from the detention centre where he was kept after he was arrested.

¹⁶ Coyote is the name given to those hired guides who take migrants to the other side of the borderland.

The end of the novel reveals a sense of hope and optimism. Pulga recovers his capacity to feel after he hears the voice of his mother on the phone as his:

Heart thunders in my chest; it shakes and trembles and gasps for air.
It reminds me I am alive.
It reminds me who I am.
It reminds me I want to live.
And that maybe, I *will* make it. (p. 344, emphasis in the original)

Despite all the narrative techniques found in the text to soften the trauma of precarious migration, *We Are Not from Here* succeeds in sharing a positive message. This message is the main difference between this and other contemporary migration narratives. As Marta says towards the end: "I'll help you. I know you have seen so much bad. But there is good in the world, Pequeña" (p. 336).

This opens an interesting avenue of research to explore migration literature, above all when this migration is precarious. In this particular case, the novel seems to rely on the very notion of vulnerability postulated by Judith Butler (2009), through which she questions the disempowering dimension of it. Even though vulnerability is not the centre of this article, it is interesting to note how the text connects with Butler's postulations in order to point out further avenues of research. For Butler, vulnerability gives the opportunity of reacting to an unfair situation. Without precariousness and vulnerability, communities and individuals would have no reason to fight for their rights. Jean-Michel Ganteau (2015) refers to Butler when he talks about 'vulnerable texts' as those that present bodily frailty as the common denominator of humanity and centres upon the impact of certain traumatic experiences on individuals and communities. The vulnerability of migrant subjects has propitiated an immense solidarity movement all over Mexico and the south of the United States.

There are many examples of how Torres Sanchez utilises the protagonists' vulnerability to send a positive message. From the young boy who takes the three protagonists on his inflatable boat on the Suchiate from Tecún Umán to Ciudad Hidalgo, to the driver who wishes them the best of lucks, to Soledad who treats them in her shelter as if they were her own children, to other shelter carers like nuns, priests or Marlena and Carlita, to some of the migrants that they find on their way. They meet many good people on their journey, and that makes the narration transmit a positive message. Some of these helpful people are used in the narration to illustrate how "emotions play out in the theatre of the body" (Thraillkill, 2007, p. 9), something which follows the so-called 'affect theory'.

Accordingly, a text like *We Are Not from Here* aims to affect its readership, as the author explains in the foreword that this was her intention, through brutal images and the positive message it implies. Thus, vulnerability empowers precarious migrants who fight for their future and does so with a community that can create a sense of solidarity among so much violence. As Butler puts it, "[a] frame for understanding violence emerges in tandem with the experience, and [this] frame works both to preclude certain kinds of questions, certain kinds of historical inquires, and to function as a moral justification for retaliation" (2004, p. 4). This is probably the reason why a novel like this is addressed to a young adult readership:

[I]f violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again) [...] Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object. The derealisation of the 'Other' means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral. (Butler, 2004, p. 33).

We Are Not from Here is a novel that aims to create an immediate response on its readership, and it does so at a time when migration is put in the political spotlight. Migrants are targets for criminal gangs and also targets for the xenophobic discourses that alienate them to the point that they become despicable subjects for some citizens. This is indeed a novel that, through the different narrative techniques analysed above, illustrates that goodness can be found among wickedness, that sympathy and solidarity is the response to hate and violence. It is a novel inspired by the "[o]ne never-ending scream" (p. 343) of precarious migrants, but it is also a text that gives some hope about the communal response to the violence that surrounds migrants. Thus, it is an interesting case study to analyse what Nicholas Murwood (2017) calls 'from "magic" to "tragic" realism' when referring to a new of writing that does not avoid approaching certain controversial topics, such as child migration, through fiction. It is a text that follows other migration narratives; still, it makes it from a different point of view: that of three adolescent migrants who travel on their own and who find unconditional help to reach their destination, despite the terrible fate that might be waiting for them in a journey that, as we know, also implies death.

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