Profit over People:
Disposable Life and Neoliberal Capitalism in Two Novels of the Central American Diaspora, *The Tattooed Soldier* and *The Ordinary Seaman*

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Abstract
In this thesis, I demonstrate how neoliberal capitalism undergirding post-Modernity produces disposable brown labor in two US Central American novels from the diaspora: Francisco Goldman’s *The Ordinary Seaman* (1997) and Héctor Tobar’s *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998). In both novels, the narrative structures orient the subjectivities of undocumented immigrants/refugees within the framework of a neoliberal US economic order. Using the decolonial theories of Aníbal Quijano (the coloniality of power), Achille Mbembe (necropolitics), and Nelson Maldonado-Torres (the coloniality of Being) as interrogatory tools, I argue that neoliberalism sanitizes multilateral violence against brown bodies in U.S. social spaces. Here, these diasporic subjects are relegated to warring spaces and forced to imbibe dominant neoliberal patterns of power as a means of survival, contributing to their own invisibility. Their lives made unimportant in the eyes of the law, US Central Americans appear disciplined to remain complacent in these novels, unable to challenge the terms of their exclusion. As a transgressive medium, literature from the Central American diaspora not only exposes but also problematizes these social truths and inequalities, which are part and parcel of neoliberal, neocolonial systems of oppression.

Introduction
Héctor Tobar’s first novel, *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998), and Francisco Goldman’s second, *The Ordinary Seaman* (1997), both detail a transformative and traumatic moment in the lives of US Central Americans: forced migration to the United States. Largely a post-1980 phenomenon (Zong and Batalova), the Central American diaspora was driven by war and economic insecurity, stemming from a constellation of interlocking social issues plaguing the region. Rapid urbanization that deepened poverty and economic inequality, gang-perpetuated violence, and political corruption contribute to the region’s socio-political landscape.

Tracing its origins to 19th century, the United States’ military intervention in the Central American region in large part precipitated not only the multilateral violence perpetrated by right-wing paramilitary “death squads”, but also the massive diaspora the violence engendered. In the late 1800s, the model of Central American nations as banana republics came into being. Grounded in the vertebral ethos of “Manifest Destiny” and the Monroe Doctrine, banana republics were understood to be spaces in the United States’ “backyard” (González 77) – as former President Reagan called it – from which valuable natural resources were to be extracted. These spaces cultivated more than just coffee, bananas, and sugar cane, however. As agricultural products became more profitable, US companies resorted to more violent means to enforce hegemony. To maintain social stratification, U.S. supported ruling elites militarized these republics, turning the nations into what philosopher A. Mbembe would call “spaces of war and death” (Mbembe 33).¹

The infamous United Fruit Company, for example, launched a corporate, colonial conquest into Central America, enacting an endless state of terror in the region through debt slavery, mass layoffs, and massacres to keep its workers compliant. Military occupation of foreign lands and curtailment of Central American nations’ sovereignty were understood to be “good for America,” and “good for the world,” as the circular logic of American exceptionalism claims.

At the turn of the 20th century, the US employed more covert means of protecting its economic hegemony in the region under the guise of fighting regional Communist insurgencies. Much of this rhetoric irrigated the discursive field of US politics, giving rise to the obsessive desire of the highest-ranking White House officials “to portray the region as pivotal to the worldwide battle between democracy and Communism” (González 131). Riding the waves of McCarthyism, anti-Communist hysteria took hold in the U.S. cultural imaginary. As a result, large-scale propaganda-oriented maneuvers were orchestrated through the Office of Public Diplomacy (Peace 94, Andersen 108) and anti-guerilla warfare manuals were authored by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to dismantle any resistance to US imperialism (Blum 294). In all, these geopolitical moves worked to further secure economic hegemony while keeping a steady flow of cheap, brown labor coming into the U.S.

Without any other options, and particularly after the eruption of Civil Wars in the region, impoverished Central Americans have felt the intoxicating, magnetic pull to *El Norte* – the so-called “Land of Opportunity” – to achieve their own slice of the elusive “American Dream”. Complicated by neoliberal logics, however, the reality of the

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¹ Though Mbembe specifically elaborates his theory in the context of contemporary regimes of colonial occupation, the *Urus* should also be interpreted as a death-world for the Central American crew because violence and coloniality shape the lived realities of subjects in both cases.
“American dream” more often than not betrays its idealistic portrait. Since the 1970s, neoliberalism has reigned supreme as the dominant economic, cultural, and political ideology of the US. This multivector system of interlocking economic, cultural, and political trends explains three general shifts in the United States: (1) a trend of upward redistribution of economic resources, (2) a rationality by which individuals must reconfigure their understanding of themselves as “human capital” (what scholar Wendy Brown calls *homo oeconomicus*), and (3) a project of statecraft marked by shrinking social services and growing law enforcement apparatuses (Brown 30, Golash-Boza 2-3, Spade 21, Duggan 11, Wacquant 5).

As is exemplified by the very literature produced by Central Americans in the diaspora, once in the US, diasporic Central American subjects must contend with this neoliberal economic system that further pushes them to the margins. In Tobar’s *The Tattooed Soldier*, Antonio is forced to flee his native Guatemala for Los Angeles, California, after a soldier with a jaguar tattoo brutally murdered his wife and child in front of him. While in Los Angeles, however, he comes face to face again with the tattooed man: ex-sergeant Guillermo Longoria. Driven mad by Longoria’s presence and haunted by feelings of helplessness that shape his reality, Antonio murders Longoria just as the 1992 Los Angeles riots break out. The murder goes unnoticed, as Longoria is merely another dead body of color among the masses.

Goldman’s *The Ordinary Seaman* details the tribulations of a crew of Central American men hired to refurbish a decrepit ship. With distinct motivations, the crew flees their home countries in search of economic security in *El Norte*. However, the crew realizes their “American Dream” may be further out of reach than they thought as their employers keep the crew onboard for months in poor sanitary conditions and without access to fresh food or clean water. Tied to the exploitation and suffering of the crew, under neoliberalism, the US legal system can afford protections to wealthy capitalists who engage in dangerous adventurism at the expense of invisibilized brown bodies.

In this thesis, I demonstrate how the neoliberal capitalism undergirding post-Modernity produces disposable brown labor in the above-mentioned US Central American novels from the diaspora. In both novels, the narrative structures orient the subjectivities of undocumented immigrants/refugees within the framework of a neoliberal US economic system. Using the decolonial theories of Aníbal Quijano (the coloniality of power), Achille Mbembe (necropolitics), and Nelson Maldonado-Torres (the coloniality of Being) as interrogatory tools, I argue that neoliberalism sanitizes multilateral violence against brown bodies in U.S. social spaces. Diasporic subjects are thus relegated to warring spaces and forced to imbibe dominant neoliberal patterns of power as a means of survival, contributing to their own invisibility and disposability. Their lives made unimportant in the eyes of the law, US Central Americans are represented as disciplined to remain complacent, unable to challenge the terms of their exclusion. As Tobar and Goldman’s works demonstrate, diasporic literature functions as a transgressive medium that not only exposes these social truths and inequalities that are part and parcel of neoliberal, neocolonial systems of oppression.

**Permanence of the War Mentality in *The Tattooed Soldier***
The Tattooed Soldier (1998), by Guatemalan-LA author Héctor Tobar, explores the difficulty US Central American diasporic subjects face in confronting the unimaginable violence in their home countries. Both protagonists in the novel, Longoria and Antonio, are forced to leave their homes in order to escape the violence perpetuated by the US-backed Guatemalan military apparatus in that Central American country during the 1980s. This violence is distinctly circuitous in nature: it transcends national borders as well as confinement in its historical moment. When Antonio sees the man who murdered his wife and child—Guillermo Longoria—at a bus stop in Los Angeles, a nagging desire for revenge consumes him and eventually drives him to murder Longoria. Against the backdrop of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, violence and death come full-circle in a more even field of power. Here, the US legal system and the Guatemalan military constructs what scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres would term, “a coloniality of Being”: “the normalization of the extraordinary events that take place in war” (Maldonado-Torres 255). As a result, brown bodies are understood to inhabit violent spaces and to be frequently subjected to what philosopher Achille Mbembe calls “necropower”: “the [maximized] material destruction of human bodies” (Mbembe 14). Once enshrined in the US cultural imaginary, evinced through a total lack of law enforcement to protect brown life, this coloniality of Being is also perpetuated by diasporic subjects themselves, contributing to brown bodies’ state of disposability.

A product of Guatemala’s disciplinary military apparatus, Longoria represents the potency of the US-backed military apparatus of Guatemala as a necropolitical tool of social control. Longoria was forced to enlist at the age of 17 when the military stormed a movie theater where he was watching a film. An impoverished campesino boy of Mayan descent (162), the Guatemalan military disciplined Longoria to reject his heritage and commit atrocities against his own people. These atrocities were part of a project orchestrated by the Guatemalan military to eradicate all traces of lo indio (Indianness): the living negation of the rational subject. Military training of the US-backed Central American “death squads” instilled in its recruits an understanding of indigenous people as “backward”, precluding “progress” and anchoring the public in retrograde. Stuck in the past and unable to make the leap to Modernity, these “backward” Indians and their “superstitions and their bad habits” (221) were to blame for the country’s current state of disarray. The Guatemalan public even scapegoats them for the country’s economic troubles (221). Subsequently, an image of lo indio as a cancerous contamination of the Guatemalan body social grows out of this rhetoric. Under this racist logic and given the purported ties of indigenous communities to guerilla resistance and to Communist ideologies, extirpation of all bodies associated with the “virus” was necessary to “make sure the virus was dead” (63).

Ideologically, the Guatemalan army viewed all bodies as synecdochal to Guatemalan society—“Guatemala was like a human body”—and indigenous bodies, carrying the “virus” of Communism, were understood to be sites of contamination for this body social: “if you didn’t kill these organisms[,] the body could die” (64). In this way, Longoria is able to sanitize the army’s ethnic cleansing and reduce it to merely eliminating the “[threat] to Guatemala’s sovereignty” (64). Thus, the murderous project is intimately bound up with a notion of protecting sovereignty. A reductive binary is generated: armed soldiers against unarmed indigenous civilians configured as “cancerous”. These bodies are situated in an uneven field of power, permitting the unlimited exercise of necropower—“the [maximized] material destruction of human bodies” (Mbembe 14)—driving the
massacre of indigenous bodies. Not incidentally, Longoria shows no outward dislike for any of the people, predominantly Mayans, that he kills (Tobar 64, 162). Rather, as an instrument of the State, Longoria kills them because he is disciplined to do so.

Exploring Longoria’s enduring identity as a soldier, we can detail how biopower, necropower, and discipline intersect to not only subject indigenous bodies to death, but also to produce docile soldiers to commit these atrocities. For Longoria, though he is long retired and lives in Los Angeles, the military remains an integral part of his identity in the diaspora, a force shaping his reality: he keeps his head shaved tight (77), religiously cleans his home each day (20), and treats his relationships with women as if they were prostitutes to fulfill his sexual urges (Byrne 17; Tobar 32, 33). As such, Longoria represents the State-regulated body par excellence, disciplined by necropower. His identity as a docile instrument of the State represents not only “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence”, but also his murderous actions point to the army’s necropolitical project: “the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (Mbembe 14).

Indigenous bodies, Longoria’s victims, exist at the threshold between life and death, in spaces that Mbembe calls “death-worlds”: “a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity” (21) where “new and unique forms of social existence” are rationalized and integrated, “conferring upon [racialized bodies] the status of living dead” (40). Using race as a metric, the State selectively exposes certain “living dead” bodies to the totalizing power of death. For Mbembe, race and racism are enduring technologies of necropower “in Western political thought and practice” that have been repeatedly deployed in “imagining the inhumanity of, or rule over, foreign peoples” (17).

Necropolitics does not necessarily only deal with biological death, however. It does not always take the form of a literal blow. Rather, in many ways, necropower reifies the inherent disposability of racialized bodies as absolute enemies within a society. Necropower then, as exercised, is the sovereignty to deem bodies are disposable (27). For Longoria, indigenous bodies are configured as disposable through military necropower. Maintaining indigenous bodies in death-worlds, Longoria confidently notes that “peasants can only learn through brutality” (Tobar 222), and so he must engage in intense cruelty to ensure progress can be made.

Military Necropolitics Cross the Border

In this way, we can understand the military apparatus itself as an enduring necropolitical structure that persists long after the end of the Civil War (1960–1996). It endures not only in the minds of the soldiers, but also in the transnational cultural imaginary. This war mentality, transcending national boundaries and historical confinement, forms an important component of diasporic subjects’ psyche as they migrate to Los Angeles. When in the US, these individuals, like Longoria’s Central American boss, Duarte, rehash the military’s teleological narrative of “cleansing” as the driver of progress. Duarte goes so far as to claim the army is necessary “to bring order” because “without the army we’d just be a country of poor peasants, illiterates” (28). If not for the brutalities, he claims, they would be tethered to the “Dark Ages, [. . .] living in complete chaos” (28). It is only in eliminating the enemy, lo indio, that progress can be made. This logic of necropower posits the destruction of docile, racialized subjects (indigenous Guatemalans) in order that non-indigenous Guatemalans may live. With this in mind, light can be shed on Duarte’s paradoxical claim that “the army is the glue that holds everything together”
Though the extermination of lo indio suffuses unimaginable violence through the body politic of Central American countries, it binds the country to Modernity. Necropower channeled selectively onto indigenous bodies, not only propels the nation into Modernity, but also manufactures a fatalistic understanding of these deaths at the hand of the State. When speaking of the military’s violence, for example, Duarte states: “That’s just the way it is” (28). The military apparatus and its constituents sanitize brutality.

Having seen the atrocities committed in Guatemala, Antonio, for example, normalizes a certain degree of violence within his view of US society. When Antonio faces Longoria—the man who murdered his wife and child—his war mentality comes to the fore, bringing with it a marked psychological change. No longer suffocated by a sense of powerlessness, he begins to plan how he will murder Longoria. Antonio understands the mere existence of Longoria—“the enemy” (165)—in Los Angeles to be a “violation” of an unstated law (183). According to Antonio, who shores up military rhetoric, Longoria is an “indelible” (184) “stain on the earth” (183-184). Longoria becomes a marked body, one “indelibly” transformed by its murderous (past) proclivities. Lacking the weaponry and status he achieved in Guatemala, Longoria is displaced from his military hierarchy and, subsequently, situated in a more even field of power in Los Angeles. It is important to recall that the Guatemalan military apparatus discards both victims (like Antonio) and perpetrators (like Longoria) alike into US urban spaces as a byproduct of its necropolitical project. The collective war traumas and war mentalities of both groups leads them to view the existence of the other as the enemy, a threat to “[their] potential to life and security” (Mbembe 18). With this mentality rationalized and internalized, Antonio avenges his lost wife and child.

Though it is Antonio who commits murder at the end of the novel, he does so seeking to fulfill the absent role of law enforcement. Antonio’s vengeance is rooted not in indoctrinated ideological leanings, as Longoria’s murders were, but rather in a desire for “bringing justice [. . .] because there was no one else to do it” (229). Not merely condemning Antonio’s action as unconscionable murder, Tobar aptly reframes the murder and Antonio’s criminal activity within the context of the failures of the US and Guatemalan justice system to protect diasporic subjects. Without reducing the consequences of the murder, Tobar questions a monolithic reading of the legal system and law enforcement apparatus as inherently fair or just.

Longoria’s unnoticed and unpunished murder demonstrates how law enforcement normalizes the deaths of racialized bodies and perpetuates a “coloniality of Being”. For racialized bodies, “murder and rape become day to day occurrences” through this process of coloniality. Longoria, like all diasporic subjects, is always already configured by the coloniality of Being as a living dead subject, a walking corpse. Even as Antonio plans “to kill [Longoria] within two hundred feet of [a] patrol car”, his “presence” is “barely registered” (203) by the officers on site. Violence against racialized bodies is not prevented, but ignored: the police officer continues to nonchalantly “sip coffee and tug at the bulletproof vest under his midnight blue uniform” (203). Longoria’s death is routinized in the warring urban space of Los Angeles. Extrajudicial murders like those of Longoria and Rodney King are integrated into the justice system. As Maldonado-Torres contends, “killability” is inscribed into the image of racialized bodies, making them unworthy of protection. When Antonio kills Longoria and law enforcement turns a blind eye to the
murder, the insistence of death for beings consumed by coloniality is perpetuated not only by law enforcement, but also by Antonio himself.

**Enforcing Invisibility of Racialized Bodies**

The failed US justice system shapes the realities of diasporic US Central American subjects by invisibilizing them and perpetrating State-sanctioned violence. After Antonio’s eviction from his apartment, he finds himself homeless, invisible at the margins of Los Angeles. In a homeless “camp” (45), he happens upon former Mayor of Los Angeles Thomas J. Bradley: “a black man with a sad, gentle face” (46). While briefly talking with Antonio, the Mayor acknowledges the growing number of brown bodies occupying the margins of Los Angeles in makeshift, cardboard homes: “there’s all sorts of Latins here now, more every day” (47). As sociologist Cecilia Menjívar contends, the existence of undocumented bodies at the outer limits of society is a result of not only being denied access to crucial social services and welfare resources for their wellbeing, but also of concerted efforts by the same bodies to remove themselves from the public gaze (Menjívar 1002, 1007). The permanent impermanence of diasporic subjects “shapes [their] incorporation and membership in the host society” (1009). In the U.S. cultural imaginary, US Central American diasporic subjects are folded into society as “depoliticized labor migrants” (1011).

Depoliticizing racialized subjects in a purportedly “colorblind” society tears them from their traumatic and vulnerable social context and places the responsibility for survival on the individual. According to neoliberal logics, individuals are to blame for their own failures, and failures do not signal a need for State-intervention. The State can, therefore, unconscionably deny access essential resources: what is State-sanctioned violence. In *The Tattooed Soldier*, Tobar makes it clear that brown bodies are unable to challenge these systems of oppression because they are “powerless against such overwhelming injustice” (Tobar 46).

State-sanctioned violence against racialized bodies in the United States takes its most visible form in the hyperpolicing of communities of color. Forced to inhabit filthy spaces, Antonio notes that in “looking as shabby” as he did “no one paid much attention to him” (164): “he blended in just fine” among drug dealers (293). Relegated to these spaces of magnified law enforcement surveillance, Antonio is under constant pressure to avoid its gaze. As Tanya Golash-Boza notes in *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*, “immigrants who arrive in heavily policed neighborhoods” –one of which is Los Angeles (Zong and Batalova)– “must contend with the impact of heavy policing on immigrant integration” (Golash-Boza 96). Increased police presence, however, does not necessarily equate to increased security. Throughout the novel, law enforcement demonstrates strong propensities to *heighten* rather than to *prevent* violence against vulnerable bodies: they displace the already homeless from their “illegal encampments” (Tobar 231), “chas[e] [street vendors] away” from popular locales (66), brutalize bodies (i.e. Rodney King), and they are invoked as a threat to evict Antonio from his apartment (4). Furthermore, the social backdrop of the novel –the 1992 LA riots, brought on by the brutalizing of Rodney King by the Los Angeles police department– further highlights the coloniality of Being as the operating mode of necropower. In this way, the Los Angeles police department functions as a life-shortening apparatus to keep brown life in a state of vigilance, under permanent surveillance.
Invisibilized and racialized US Central Americans live in constant economic insolvency without any safety net, protection, or resources. Consequently, they are forced to resort to increasingly dangerous means of survival in order to escape the watchful, necropolitical gaze of law enforcement. Longoria and Antonio for example, continuously demonstrate the difficulties of remaining solvent “in the context of deindustrialization and a hollowed-out job market” (Golash-Boza 95). Antonio struggles to keep a steady job finding employers would “[fire] [him] on the spot” for questioning “dangerous conditions” (Tobar 50). As mentioned, he eventually finds himself unemployed and homeless. Longoria “had worked in a series of factories” for pitiful pay before finding employment at El Pulgarcito Express (26-27), based on his military background, which Duarte exploits to terrorize his clients for financial gains. Like other refugees/migrants holding a liminal status in Los Angeles, Antonio and Longoria are instruments of the neoliberal “free” market.

The desire for elusive financial security pits diasporic subjects against each other for survival. Representative of the systemic structural violence against US Central Americans, Longoria’s own actions open vulnerable diasporic subjects to further economic violence. After striking an old woman in El Pulgarcito in Los Angeles, Longoria notes, “the rules are different here (161). Though he cannot perpetrate the same corporal violence he committed in Guatemala, he resorts instead to non-physical forms of violence. Robbing customers of their remittances and blaming them for their own naïveté (25), the employees of El Pulgarcito Express contribute to the injustices committed against their peers for the sake of their own survival. Thus, necropower takes a visible form in economic injustices. Expanding the purview of necropolitical capitalism, El Pulgarcito Express contributes to the destruction of US Central Americans as they are robbed of their means of survival. Marketed as a safe and “reliable service” for US Central Americans –“BECAUSE WE’RE CENTROAMERICANOS LIKE YOU!” (155)– El Pulgarcito Express’ theft forces their diasporic peers into insolvency, further contributing to the production of coloniality.

Héctor Tobar’s The Tattooed Soldier exposes the multilateral violence to which vulnerable, unprotected, and insolvent US Central American subjects are subjected and traces it to its originary moment in 19th and 20th century U.S. military interventionism. The U.S.-backed Guatemalan military’s necropolitical project of eradicating lo indio irrigated the entire body social and its cultural imaginary. As a result, subjects internalized and rationalized the military’s ideology of genocide. When discarded en masse in U.S. urban spaces, the unprotected bodies of US Central American diasporic subjects are forced to situate themselves and their peers in further danger, normalizing the coloniality of Being and inadvertently becoming subjects of necropower. Much in the same way Longoria’s jaguar tattoo lingers permanently under his skin, the disciplinary technologies of the Guatemalan military indelibly mark both Longoria and Antonio’s existence in the US. Neither can escape the disciplinary necropower exercised against them. Therefore, oppressive and totalizing neoliberal capitalism—a necropolitical force shaping the realities of diasporic subjects—reinforces the coloniality of Being for and by diasporic subjects.

**Manufacture and Maintenance of Disposable Subjectivities in The Ordinary Seaman**

In The Ordinary Seaman (1997), Guatemalan-American author Francisco Goldman explores how the genocidal logics of neoliberal capitalism manipulate individual rationalities and structure the U.S. legal system. Based on true events, the novel details the
lived experiences and tribulations of fifteen newly minted Central American “seamen” held captive in Brooklyn on a berthed and decrepit ship—the *Urus*—as they attempt to restore it for their employers: Mark and Elias. The crew, composed largely of novice seamen—some of whom have never been on a boat or even seen the ocean—make the treacherous journey to *El Norte* seeking economic stability and reprieve from the violence that permeates their post-war societies. Mark and Elias push the crew to the brink of death after abusive exploitation for months onboard, only to discard the crew back in Central America to face the violence from which they fled in the first place. Racialized, undocumented laborers like the crew exist at the intersection of the legal, immigration, and neoliberal economic systems. Here, neoliberal logics magnify contemporary forms of legalized violence, surveillance, and discipline. As a result, diasporic subjects must contend with this violence, which not only sanctions violence against them, but also forces them to be complicit with the injustices they face.

The dangerous working conditions that the crew navigates onboard the *Urus* embody what philosopher Achille Mbembe calls a “death-world”. For Mbembe, the selective exercise of necropower on racialized populations creates death-worlds: “world[s] of horrors and intense cruelty [. . .] in the interest of maximum destruction” of bodies (Mbembe 40). In the case of the Central American crew, Mark and Elias bring about the crew’s “destruction” by withholding access to clean water and fresh food. Consequently, the crew must experience the daily “horror” of drinking water poisoned by a rotting rat skeleton (47) and eating meals made from rancid rice filled with roach exoskeletons and feces. When the crew subsequently falls ill, Mark and Elias both refuse to tend to them. Instead, the crew is “kept alive [. . .] in a state of injury” (Mbembe 21, emphasis original) amid the “floating squalor” (Goldman 144) onboard.

In doing so, the actions and dismissive rhetoric of Mark and Elias demonstrate how profit takes precedence over the lives of the Central American crew. As conditions grow increasingly perilous onboard, the oldest crewmember, Bernardo, suffers a third degree burn to his leg (237). Since the crew is interpreted as a source of disposable labor, both captains ignore the crew’s desperate pleas that Bernardo be admitted in a hospital. Instead, Elias treats Bernardo himself. With no formal medical training (248, 279) and only a rudimentary understanding of homeopathic medicine (279), Elias layers a powerful blistering agent over Bernardo’s open wound (253). Predictably, his condition worsens, and Mark eventually acquiesces to the crew’s pleas as Bernardo’s condition brings him closer to death. Rather than taking him to a nearby hospital in Brooklyn, however, Mark carefully selects a Manhattan hospital “far away from the ship” (320) to safeguard himself from accusations of gross negligence, manslaughter, or murder. Mark’s actions exemplify the “intense cruelty” of necropower: “the right to kill [. . .] or to expose to death” (Mbembe 12). Necropower delimits the asymmetrical power dynamic between Mark and Elias and the crew. Bernardo’s fatal condition is “no big deal” to the captains, since the remaining crew can easily replace his labor. In the eyes of Mark and Elias, Bernardo is merely “an injured seaman”: it “happens all the time” (323-324).

Furthermore, denying Bernardo proper medical access exemplifies the logics of necropower that craft docile laborers. While Elias tends to Bernardo, he asks him a series of bizarre questions in order to select a homeopathic treatment for Bernardo’s severe burn. From Bernardo’s answers, Elias determines that he is an “Arsenicum type” (251), which, as Elias explains, refers to someone who
“decides to commit suicide by putting his head in the oven, because that seems the least messy way of doing it. But when he sticks his head in, he sees that the oven needs cleaning, and while he’s cleaning it, he forgets all about committing suicide” (251).

This “Arsenicum type” is marked not only by its docility, but also by its core identity as a laborer. Even in committing suicide—the ultimate, self-destructive exercise of necro-power—labor supersedes the value of the individual’s life. This label is a performative speech act: it constructs the very identity/subject it claims to label. Like the exemplary Arsenicum individual who forgoes their misery cleaning, Bernardo is always already interpellated as a laboring body, working nonstop in “benumbed stupors” (130). Even facing of his own death, Bernardo is made into a docile laborer because Elias labels him as such.

Within this neoliberal, necropolitical framework, the captains normalize the abuse and subjugation of the crew. Rehashing neoliberal thought, Elias suggests individuals are predestined for success or failure according to their DNA (374). Couching his language in pseudo-scientific, biological terms, Elias feeds neoliberal narratives of progress that falsely dignify the crew’s labor and treat the crew’s subordination and domination as a consequence of their own personal failures. This type of highly coded, racial language recalls a wealth of problematic “culture of poverty” or “cultural deficiency” theories that permit the “abandonment”, “repressive social control”, and “containment” of racialized populations (Robinson 180). Consequently, the veil of neoliberal ideology allows the captains to conceal their complicity with brutal domination and the intentional destruction of lives behind. As a mode of necro-power, neoliberalism not only manufactures docile, disposable subjectivities. It also simultaneously sanitizes the brutal treatment of the crew, normalizing the coloniality of Being.

Guided by these logics of necro-power, Mark and Elias engage in violence against the crew to maintain them in permanent captivity and injury in their death-world. Elias employs terror tactics to keep his “seamen–slaves” (305) docile and compliant, cultivating a fear of the surrounding social space of Brooklyn. He claims he “would avoid los proyectos enti...” (26) and instead suggests the crewmembers confine themselves on the Urus indefinitely. Disobeying Elias’ ostensibly friendly advice, the crew ventures out into Brooklyn, becoming victims of gang violence: a gang robs and beats the men, stealing their few belongings (35). When Elias realizes what happened, he “laugh[s] with exasperation” and contemptuously reminds the crew of his advice: “You see? Didn’t I tell you?” (57). Elias’ remarks demonstrate not only a disregard for the seamen’s lives, but also a calculated effort to heighten the crew’s fears of disembarking without permission. With the exception of Esteban, the crew remains invisible on the Urus in complete spatial confinement and temporal disconnection (84). Their existence is contingent on the megalomaniacal proclivities of Mark and Elias, who take it upon themselves to “write [their] own rules” (71) for the seamen.

Legal Necropolitics and Neoliberal Capitalism Aboard the Urus

Rather than protect the crew, the U.S. legal system, like the neoliberal economic system, facilitates the exploitation of brown life. Mark and Elias view the restoration of the Urus—“dumped by an owner too impatient and cheap and unimaginative and law-abiding to know how to make her seaworthy again” (295)—as a profitable endeavor. With a little
patience, capital, and law breaking, the two men can reinvigorate the “dead ship” (295). They make use of loopholes in the U.S. legal system, primarily the “flag of convenience” registry system, to “import the cheapest possible crew” (276) for easy exploitation: undocumented immigrants.

Historically, the capitalist system has provided an avenue for anonymity to protect wealthy (White) economic actors like Mark and Elias who exploit undocumented labor. Since the mid-19th century, British ships would fly various flags to avoid the gaze of authorities seeking to root out nautical slavery (Richardson and Eltis). The modern practice of registering ships mimics a similar means of avoiding law enforcement authorities that indirectly hinder the flow of capital (Shemak 182). In this way, the Panamanian registry of the Urus (Goldman 155) affords Mark and Elias absolute anonymity: even if labor abuses onboard are discovered, the two will escape all legal repercussions.

As a result, neoliberal logic nullifies the liberties and legal protections of laborers. As legal subjects, the crew knows their liminal status spells out danger once they disembark from the Urus. With their legal documents presumably signed (but withheld), the crew members believe they can legally remain on the boat as Panamanians, but as soon as they step off the boat, they are undocumented and subject to deportation on U.S. soil (25). The crew’s legality thus becomes contingent on their presence on the decrepit Urus, forcing them to remain onboard, slaving away at their Sisyphean task of refurbishing the ship. It is later revealed, however, that the crew “never signed [the proper] shipping articles” (155) to afford legal protection—a common tactic employed “to legitimate and conceal slavery” (Bales 26) reducing them to undocumented, stateless workers. Now “unlicensed seafarers” (Goldman 155), the crew has “nothing but their natural humanity” since their human and labor rights have become legally “unenforceable” (Smith 204) and directly tied to the State, which denies their existence. In other words, “when human lives are stolen” under neoliberal capitalism “nothing happens to the offenders since, according to free market’s sense of conscience, there is no crime” (Greider 359).

Thus given full license to engage in economic adventurism with impunity at the expense of their “little brown guys” (Goldman 305), Mark and Elias exemplify how profit supersedes brown life in a capitalist framework. Elias, for example, refers to the crew as his “property” (305), modeling himself after the “jungle explorer” Indiana Jones (305). This colonialist performance of exemplary White Western subjectivity (Dussel 133) engages what philosopher Enrique Dussel calls the ego conquiro (I conquer) logic. Predating the Cartesian cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am), the ego conquiro posits the destruction of the racialized Other as the elemental core of White subjectivity. In this way, Mark and Elias both believe their economic “security” must “be obtained at the expense of the lives of others” (Maldonado-Torres 246). It becomes clear why they treat the crew as a disposable market commodity. For Mark and Elias, the bodies of the crew represent a conquerable source of profit. Neoliberal capitalism affords full license to the ego conquiro mentality of Mark and Elias to do so, reducing the crew to profitable “property” (Goldman 305). Invisibilized onboard the Urus, the crew “is extremely profitable” because the undocumented Central Americans are “highly vulnerable”, “deportable”, and “super-exploitable”: a “vast” source of capital “accumulation” (Robinson 205, emphasis original).

This phantom-like invisibility of enslaved US Central American subjectivities also forecloses opportunities to challenge the unjust legal system. In many cases, the crew is
literally invisible to those meant to bring justice to labor abuses against undocumented bodies. For example, the Ship Visitor, a mysterious figure ostensibly employed to protect nautical workers, does not keep track of the bodies he is meant to protect. While Esteban searches for fresh food near the Urus, the crew notes that “apparently” the Ship Visitor never “noticed that Esteban left”: he “[hadn’t] realized that today is the first time he’s seen Esteban” (346-347). Furthermore, he does not bother to learn the crewmembers’ names, asking for clarifications more than ten times (348). Unnamed and trapped on the Urus, they are “so easy to forget” (311). They are reduced to just “another abandoned flag of convenience crew” (136), lost and forgotten in the very bureaucratic system meant to protect them.

Even the legislation meant to protect laborers from abuses and secure labor rights fail because legal language is manipulated to narrowly define what constitutes “abuse”. After the Ship Visitor sees the conditions in which the crew lives, he remains blithely ambivalent to their fate. Though he notes that it “must be hell out on that ship tonight” for those “poor kids”, he claims that there is “not much even the Coast Guard can do unless conditions onboard are immediately life threatening” (135). The crew is disqualified from the legal protections of the 1920 Jones Act, which affords seamen labor rights and allows them to make claims and collect for negligence (US Department of Labor). Since the crew has “a bit of food” – though rancid and filled with rat skeletons and feces (27, 47) – and open “fires” to protect them from “freez[ing] to death” (135), the Ship Visitor decides there is no “imminent threat” to their safety. For the Ship Visitor, lack of fresh food, sanitation, and warmth do not constitute an “imminent threat” to the crew’s wellbeing.

In describing his own work to protect seamen against abuse, the Ship Visitor downplays the gravity of the crimes. He claims he “deals with crimes, if you want to call them that, against seamen” (150). For the Ship Visitor who is exposed daily to human rights abuses, brutalities are made routine. The crew becomes a topic of casual discussion for the Ship Visitor’s friends, who label the crew “losers” and “complete dupes [. . .] incapable of helping themselves” (379). By ignoring structural violence, the Ship Visitor and his peers normalize processes of coloniality by victim blaming the crew for their current state.

In a striking exercise of State necropower, the Ship Visitor suggests his team do what he believes to the the “most humane thing to do” in responding to the crew’s current dilemma: “take them off the ship and fly them home” (135). Undocumented immigrant/refugee bodies are subjected to the full force of State administrative violence and legal necropolitics. They are kept in nautical death-worlds in the name of maximizing profit under neoliberal capitalism only to be sent back ‘home’ to face the same unimaginable violence from which they fled in the first place.

The Production of Complicit Subjectivities

When Central Americans arrive in the United States, they must navigate preconceived notions of Central-Americanness shaped by the media and intentional attempts by the U.S. government to manufacture disdain for Central-Americanness. When Esteban asks men in a café “Are the Sandinistas still in power in Nicaragua?”, for example, his question is met with an angry “storm of ambiguous expletives” (242-243). As historian William Blum details, “loathing of this magnitude” (301) is the result of a conscious effort by a Reagan-era propaganda project to sour U.S. support for the Sandinista government during the Nicaraguan Civil War (1979-1990). In 1983, the administration concocted an
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effective propaganda machine, the Office of Public Diplomacy, for the U.S. American public’s consumption to reframe the events taking place in the region. The Office soon became a “huge psychological operation” (Andersen 106) “actively engaged in a covert effort to manipulate and intimidate the mainstream media” (Peace 84). Confronting this massive propaganda effort in the United States, diasporic subjects are forced to, as Esteban claims, “completely [overlook] all the implications of being in the United States” (Goldman 267) if they want to survive and receive the legal protections of citizenship.

For Esteban and his peers, the U.S. propaganda apparatus regulates their terms of citizenship. Gesturing at explicit biases in the bureaucratic process of meting out citizenship, Gonzalo warns Esteban “it will be much easier for you to get legal status here [in the US] when you tell them you’re fleeing those maldito Sandinistas”; if he were to “say the opposite,” he “wouldn’t stand a chance” (267). According to Gonzalo, Esteban would be viewed as a worthy/assimilable individual if, and only if, he espouses pro-Contra rhetoric. The governmentality of State apparatuses “instills proper normative behavior and identity in newcomers”, as sociologist Aihwa Ong contends (Ong 738). Therefore, eschewing their truths and adopting the dominant patterns of power is an obligatory prerequisite to social inclusion in the United States.

The propaganda within the borders of the United States even coopts other Latinos to engender disdain towards U.S. Central Americans. When an elderly Argentinian couple happen across Bernardo doing laundry near the Urus, they begin to speak in Spanish, but Bernardo notices that the duo had been “frowning at his accent” (117) during the conversation. Though they eventually acquiesce to help Bernardo and the crew access resources to fight their oppression, the unconscious reaction to his accent highlights how hierarchies are maintained even for oppressed groups. The indigeneity of US Central Americans marks them as foreign threats, foreign to U.S. Latino-ness. As scholar Arturo Arias argues,2 “brownness has become the syntax with which to configure, disfigure, devalue or undervalue subjects of Central American origin” (Arias 12).

As a result, diasporic subjects find themselves molded into the ideal, complacent U.S. subject. These immigrants are forced to imbibe the prevailing doxa and assimilate to U.S. cultural norms. This process is punctuated by traumatic encounters with the necropolitical legal, economic, and social system. Esteban’s undocumented girlfriend (Goldman 261), Joaquina, for example, assimilates through a physical transformation to “Whiten” her features: dying her hair blonde (269), erasing racial and ethnic markers from her appearance. Metaphorically, Joaquina’s transformation demonstrates how the United States indirectly engages in a coercive, colonial era project of racial “Whitening”, convincing racialized bodies that this is the only viable means of successful integration into U.S. society.

Unfortunately, however, these coercive terms of integration fail to secure the lives of precarious, undocumented subjects. When Joaquina makes a brief foray into public spaces on her way to her English class, Gonzalo mutters a short prayer for her as she leaves: “Que Dios te acompañe” (268), “may God be with you” (translation mine). Both exist in limbo, in constant fear of deportation and death. Central Americans are not only “born to give their army more people to murder” (17) as the narrator of the novel grimly suggests, but they are also born to migrate to the El Norte where they can be exploited as silently

2 Here, Arturo Arias is paraphrasing scholar Claudia Milian.

U.S. immigration legislation contemporary to Esteban and his peers’ captivity on the Ursus further exemplifies State efforts to produce a complicit cultural imagination. During the 1980s, the Reagan administration implemented legislation to selectively stem the flow of Central American bodies into the U.S. The 1980 Refugee Act and the 1986 Immigrant Reform and Control Act granted asylum to Nicaraguans at rates between 10 to nearly 20 times higher than their Honduran, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran peers (González 131). As the Migration Policy Institute notes, these disparate acceptance rates “were influenced by U.S. foreign policy toward the home country”: “Nicaraguans were fleeing communist oppression, while the United States was supporting the Salvadoran government against a Marxist insurgency” (Davy). By dictating which immigrants were allowed into the US, a homogenous subjectivity is produced, forcing those who seek citizenship to imbibe reigning, normative U.S. American cultural thought.

Through the lens of the crew’s collective experience and narratives in The Ordinary Seaman, Francisco Goldman problematizes a clean reading of neoliberal economics in a globalized world. The novel explores how neoliberal thought manipulates the U.S. legal system to magnify the violence against undocumented individuals: diasporic subjects are caught in the crosshairs of the State’s necropolitical project. Coupled with the United States’ international anti-Communist propaganda effort during the Nicaraguan Civil War (1979-1990), the U.S. propaganda efforts quelled dissent of U.S. (military) interventionism within the borders of the US. Already invisibilized, made disposable, confronted with multilateral State-authorized violence, and disciplined to self-reproduce the coloniality of Being, these docile bodies were the ideal objects of the disciplinary apparatus that seeks to condition them to be complicit with the injustices they face.

Conclusions

Brown immigrant/refugee life appears folded into U.S. imaginary as disposable and complicit labor in two novels of the Central American diaspora: Héctor Tobar’s The Tattooed Soldier and Francisco Goldman’s The Ordinary Seaman. Lacking State protection, economic stability, and legal protections, immigrant/refugee Central Americans are subjected to multivector, State-sanctioned violence and are forced to contribute to their own invisibility and destruction. With intimate historical ties to European and U.S. imperialism, neoliberal economics colonizes the bodies of racialized Others. In doing so, neoliberal logics unearth the role of race as a structuring axis of post-Modernity in a presumably “colorblind” United States, which authorizes the State to situate racialized bodies squarely in the crosshairs of State necropolitics.

As the narratives of both novels attest, undocumented diasporic Central Americans are situated at a major and violent contact point between the State’s necropolitical project, its economic interests, and its immigration policies. Contemporary political rhetoric claims to safeguard life for U.S. citizens by fortifying and further militarizing the border while keeping so-called “criminal illegal immigrants” out (Feldman, Trump). These myths about border security are purely symbolic, however, appealing to racist fears of immigrants of color deemed “illegal.” In reality, immigrant flow will not be stemmed by these measures.
Rather, the journey to el norte will become increasingly arduous, dangerous, and fatal to the brown bodies that are forcefully displaced from their homes.

As a result, diaspora is not a refuge from violence, as exemplified by the struggles of Antonio and Longoria in The Tattooed Soldier and the Central American crew in The Ordinary Seaman. Rather, diaspora is a continuation and even a magnification of violence for racialized Central Americans. Death, throughout both novels, dominates the lived realities of US Central American protagonists, as illuminated through the theoretical frameworks of coloniality and necropower. The vulnerable bodies of immigrants/refugees are sacrificed to the behemoth of neoliberal capitalism, which as sociologist Loïc Wacquant contends, forces “those who are the living negation of the “American dream” to suffer [further] for their alleged alterity so that, in spite of everything, the [United States] may uphold its faith in the national myth of the prosperity available to all” (Wacquant 58).

Pushing back against these hegemonic narratives that silence the voices of and erode their agency of Central Americans, however, is the act of writing itself. These textual narratives expose, disarticulate, and problematize racisms and inequalities that would otherwise be concealed. By centering marginalized subjectivities and their narratives, literature from the Central American diaspora, therefore, can be read as a transgressive medium that holds the potential to unlock a more holistic understanding of how necropower operates to disfigure and erase immigrant subjectivities.

Works Cited
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