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Illness (Fiction) as Activism: Intersections of Injury and Stigma in Twenty-First-Century Migration Narrative

Adrienne Erazo
Appalachian State University

INTRODUCTION: NOVELS ABOUT MIGRATION AS ILLNESS NARRATIVE, OR MIGRAPATHOGRAPHY

Health and common risks for it are essential topics within contemporary narrative about Latin American migration. For example, in texts by Mexican and Latina authors such as Alejandro Hernández, Graciela Limón, Sonia Nazario, and Pedro Ultreras, migrant characters face a range of health hazards, including disabling injury and death caused by falls from the infamous train, "la Bestia." This representation reflects reality: it's estimated that half a million undocumented Central American migrants ride atop the train every year, and that over 120,000 travelers have disappeared or died on this journey since 2006.[1] Beyond exploring the health risks that migrant persons confront during their journey, these texts also study cultural implications surrounding migrant health. Racist views of Central American migrants in Mexico, for instance, contribute to high rates of violent crime against them. In turn, migrant persons who lose limbs after falling from the train also lose social status due to stigma surrounding disability and illness. Through their multifaceted examination of migration and its common health outcomes, contemporary texts like the ones studied below depict a crisis of inhumane migration policy that frequently contributes to health issues for the undocumented migrant population, and also exacerbates the marginalization and dehumanization of the migrant community. The following article studies the strategies through which twenty-first-century migration narrative engages with these realities as a method of social criticism that is simultaneously didactic and accusatory in nature.

In their exposition of the health perils associated with migration sans documentation, various works of literature align meaningfully with the pathography genre, or "illness narrative." Anne Hawkins defines pathographies as "autobiographical accounts of [people's] experience of illness and treatment," that often "serve as guidebooks to the medical experience itself, shaping a reader's expectations about the course of an illness and its treatment" (127). Other critics clarify that pathographies are not always autobiographical, though they are generally intimate in nature. The most direct definition of "pathography" is the

[1] See Andronik (2020) and Villegas (2014).

writing of suffering, drawing from its Greek roots in the words -graphiā, meaning "to write," and pathos, meaning "suffering" (Couse and Davis-Fisch 5). Pathographies can be didactic, aiming to educate and help the reader (Hawkins 128). They can also be angry, critical, and/or analytical, pointing out deficiencies in the healthcare system and relating health problems to political and cultural issues (Hawkins 128-29). Though none of the texts analyzed in this study are autobiographical, they draw heavily on migrant testimonies, thereby incorporating a personal context that hearkens to the nature of the pathography, and similarly aim to have a particular "rhetorical effect" for the reader (Chambers 712) and to "speak to a broader audience" (Egerod et. al 195). They also depict realistic experiences of health impairment and refer to actual healthcare and political institutions and resources (in both Mexico and the United States). Therefore, these narratives offer an informative depiction of the migration experience, parallel to how some pathographies provide "an academicized account of the illness experience" (Egerod et. al 195).

I propose the term "migrapathography" to distinguish this branch of migration narrative, which blends the representation of personal experiences and general trends within migration to elucidate health outcomes. Comparably to that which critics assert is the goal of pathography, I argue that migrapathography endeavors to "translate the pain, fear, and anxiety" that come with migration and relevant health consequences (in lieu of illness, more broadly), into "conventional representational knowledge systems, and into problems that can be articulated" (Couse and Davis-Fisch 6). Traditional pathographies offer insight into the illness experience for others who may endure similar ailments, these patients' loved ones, and medical personnel. Meanwhile, migrapathography targets the general public—on both sides of the border—in an effort to promote broader knowledge about migration and suggest a response of empathy and activism. Evidencing this focus, journalist Sonia Nazario explains why she decided to write her 2006 text, *Enrique's Journey*:

> In much of the United States, legitimate concerns about immigration and anti-immigrant measures have had a corrosive side effect: immigrants have been dehumanized and demonized. […] Perhaps by looking at one immigrant—his strengths, his courage, his flaws—his humanity might help illuminate what too often has been a black-and-white discussion. Perhaps, I start thinking, I could take readers on top of these trains and show them what this modern-day immigrant journey is like. (xiv)

Nazario articulates the urge to help people unexperienced with migration understand what it frequently entails; this desire seems to guide many migrapathographic texts. For similar reasons, migrapathography tends to be polyphonic, presenting an assortment of narrative voices that "permite la elaboración de juicios y visiones de distintos sectores de la sociedad," thereby enabling a multifaceted view of the migration experience (Gálvez Cuen 13). These novels are also hybrid in narrative style, creatively mixing fact and fiction and marked by "un carácter testimonial y referencial que hace imposible desvincularlas de la realidad" (Zárate 181). Contributing to this hybridity is the incorporation of elements unconventional in traditional literature, such as photographs, data points, footnotes, and interviews. Critics suggest that these supplementary resources can help the reader to "visualize a topic or area about which they [have] little knowledge or experience" (Boyd and Dyches 37). A final essential characteristic of migrapathography is its simultaneously didactic and critical nature. Migrapathographic texts employ personal

accounts of health impairment and subsequent experiences of stigma and mental health crisis to educate readers about the migratory health landscape and social standards surrounding it (didacticism). For example, migration narrative elucidates the role of biocitizenship in the popular imaginary. Biocitizenship outlines ideals for national identity based on specific biological presuppositions, particularly perceived health and ability; undocumented migrant persons, especially those who become ill or injured, fall short of these ideals.[2] Migrapathography also denounces sociopolitical influences in health risks and discrimination surrounding migrant and differently-abled bodies (criticism). Julio Zárate clarifies that due to the difficulty in many cases of gathering actual migrant testimonies, novels such as these "constituye[n] una denuncia desde la ficción sobre la condición de los migrantes a su paso por México" (188). Via a dual didactic and critical approach, migrapathography performs social criticism, working to expand the audience's understanding of contemporary migration and its health ramifications for migrant persons, and suggesting a range of particular responses in the reader.

Though many twenty-first-century texts about Latin American migration exhibit the aforementioned similarities with pathography, this article studies a representative selection of what I label migrapathography, which exemplifies a comparable didactic and critical mission, while also filtering the narrative representation of migration via a specific temporal context and geographical trajectory. Alejandro Hernández's *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas* (2013), Pedro Ultreras's *La Bestia: La tragedia de migrantes centroamericanos en México* (2012), Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey* (2006), and Graciela Limón's *The River Flows North* (2009) are published within a 7-year period. These texts' publication after the turn of the century contextualizes their goals; contemporary critics position immigration as a "timely, salient issue" around which debate continues to rise (Boyd and Dyches 33). Texts by Mexican authors Hernández and Ultreras focus on happenings within Central America and Mexico, while Latina writers Nazario and Limón study the whole of the border-crossing experience, from Central America into the United States. All four texts blend fact with fiction, employing creative license backed by research to craft a narrative depiction of either actual events during migration or a realistic version of them (Gálvez Cuen 12). The author of *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas* is a journalist, Alejandro Hernández, who collaborated on a 2009 report by Mexico's National Human Rights Commission about the kidnapping of Central American migrants in Mexico. Hernández's novel draws on this research, recounting a Honduran family's dangerous journey through Mexico. The novel's afterword implies that the text is based on real-life people and events, and that none of the protagonists—who are waylaid by deportation, injury, rape, and multiple kidnappings—successfully arrive in the U.S. Meanwhile, *La Bestia: La tragedia de migrantes centroamericanos en México* is a narrative version of a documentary film by the same title. It prioritizes the narration of interviews and observations from the author's investigative work in Mexico, and focuses on Central American migrants' testimonies about the dangers of northbound travel. *Enrique's Journey*, a nonfiction novel by an Argentine-American journalist, is similarly based on interviews and research travel, and follows the 17-year-old Honduran, Enrique (who is an actual migrant), describing his many attempts to cross Mexico and then the first phases of his assimilation process in the

[2] See Rose and Novas (2005) and Johnson, Happe, and Levina (2018).

U.S. Finally, *The River Flows North* collects the stories of nine Mexican and Central American migrants, traversing time to explain why they migrate, recount their experiences in the Sonoran Desert, and expose the limited success of their journey: at the novel's end, only two of the group emerge from the desert into the broader U.S. Importantly, Limón credits the photojournalist John Annerino's work on migration for inspiring *The River Flows North*, which is fictional but based on reality. In a study of pathographic theater, Candace Couse and Heather Davis-Fisch suggest that creative practices "have the ability to marry complex and inarticulable embodied experiences with a desire to transmit those embodied experiences and incite empathy, care, and connection" (5). Along these lines, the four books I analyze below function both independently and in tandem to depict migration in a personal yet informative way, educate the reader about the dangers of migration, and call attention to sociopolitical factors that further complicate all phases of the migratory process. These goals unite as a method of activism that invites the reader to dynamically respond to the current state of migration, whether this be a reaction of increased understanding and/or empathy, or of action to incite sociopolitical change and offer better support for migrant persons.

DIDACTIC STRATEGIES IN MIGRAPATHOGRAPHY: ELUCIDATING COMMON RISKS AND INJURIES DURING UNDOCUMENTED MIGRATION

While pathographies contains guidance that can influence a "reader's expectations about the course of an illness and its treatment" (Hawkins 127), so too, contemporary migration narrative offers a realistic portrayal of the health risks that emerge during migration. Felipe Fuentes Kraffczyk proposes that authors plan plot lines to educate the reader about migration's common dangers—for example, *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas* highlights "los dos principales riesgos que todo migrante enfrenta en su paso por México: la Bestia y el secuestro" (44). Relevantly, typical health issues are replicated across the four texts in this study: the migrant characters suffer health concerns ranging from dehydration, malnutrition, and minor infections, to serious injury and/or trauma as a result of rape, to the amputation of limbs after falling from atop the train. The texts that I categorize as migrapathography employ different strategies to execute a common goal of exposing health hazards posed by the migration process as both grievous and inevitable phenomena. All four novels studied here offer personal depictions of health problems—the texts' protagonists or loved ones either undergo or observe them—and also speak more broadly about health issues. The texts are therefore simultaneously intimate and analytical in nature, and the interjection of personal narrative can both "have a powerful rhetorical effect" and serve as "yet another data point for a larger argument" (Chambers 712).

Personal accounts of illness or injury across these texts tend to include graphic details and emotional commentary, which together deepen the reader's understanding of health issues for the migrant population and provoke empathy. While these texts focus on the migration experience and related health outcomes, they also contextualize the choice to immigrate, depicting this as a painstaking decision that often centers around health risks. For Walter's family in Hernández's novel, "La decisión emergía de la necesidad" in the face of deepening poverty after Hurricane Mitch's devastating impact in Honduras in 1998 (36). The family deals with "gran temor" as they ponder the journey northward, but also see migration as the sole means to attain "una vida sin angustia" (Hernández 36, 40). Poverty is also a push

factor for the teenager Enrique in Nazario's nonfiction text. Enrique's principal motivation, however, is his mental health: devastated by his mother's long absence after her own economically-motivated move to the U.S., Enrique resides in a constant rotation of family members' houses and uses drugs to cope with depression. As a fifteen-year-old, Enrique already "fears that he will become like the hundreds of glue-sniffing children he sees downtown," and "coughs black phlegm" due to his unhealthy habits (Nazario 37). After a death threat from his dealer and a failed robbery as an attempt to get out of debt, he decides that "his life is unraveling" and "he has to go find his mother" in the U.S. in order for things to improve (Nazario 41). Hernández and Nazario detail comparable states of desperation and emotional torment around the choice to migrate, and affiliate these decisions with worsening health conditions for migrant persons in their home country of Honduras. In so doing, the authors rationalize migration as a difficult but understandable means of pursuing better health outcomes.

Graciela Limón's novel, *The River Flows North*, switches between relating the narrative past and present in alternating chapters to elucidate health-related push factors for undocumented migration from Latin America to the United States. Though Limón's characters are fictional, the novel's polyphonic nature and range of characters offers a multifaceted overview of experiences that are typical before and during undocumented migration and "tries to restore dignity and identity" to "faceless migrants who are daily in the news" (Bordin 218). The brothers Néstor and Nicanor Osuna and the woman Celia Vega, all from Mexico, migrate due to financial insecurity (which can, of course, contribute to health concerns via malnutrition, inability to seek medical aid, etc.). Importantly, Celia's economic instability increases after her husband is mutilated by the train in a failed migration attempt, which suggests the ripple effect of migration-related health outcomes. Meanwhile, the Salvadoran Menda Fuentes pursues asylum in the U.S. to escape domestic violence. Limón portrays health complications in provocative detail; for example, she describes Menda's experience of losing her virginity to her husband in first-person voice and incorporates language devised to appeal to the reader's emotions: "Without explanation he became rough and hostile. At first I thought he was playing until he took my arms and twisted them painfully. I screamed and begged him to stop, but he laughed. After that he got on top of me and forced himself between my legs" (21). The author explains that Menda's husband prevents her escape and "pushed and punched me in the stomach and shoulders so hard that the pain nearly made me faint" (22). The first-person narration invites the reader to empathize with Menda's experience of abuse, thereby suggesting a compassionate response to her eventual choice to migrate. Meanwhile, the description of specific harmful actions and resulting pain inform the reader's understanding of women's experiences with domestic violence. Limón also explicitly frames the health complications caused by domestic violence as a push factor for migration: "My mind went in circles until these thoughts nearly overwhelmed me [but I knew that only] one thing would stop him [Menda's husband], and that would be the border into the United States" (32). By crafting a comprehensive representation of domestic violence and coupling it with the portrayal of desperation and uncertainty around the decision to migrate, Limón advocates for women who find themselves in comparable situations and suggests a reaction, on the part of U.S. citizens and policymakers, of empathy in lieu of criticism.

While the narration of personal experiences of health complications can clarify the rationale behind the decision to migrate for readers who may otherwise be

unaware of typical push factors, the authors also use representations of health issues to elucidate common risks during migration. For example, Limón describes her characters' injuries and despair after suffering a sandstorm in the Sonoran Desert: "they looked at each other's faces and saw bloated masks whitened by the blast […] Blotches of blood showed where the sand had scraped off skin […] They huddled against one another as they cried and moaned, hardly believing they were still alive" (84). Limón's explicit language exposes the severity of injuries that migrant persons frequently undergo, and simultaneously illuminates these health outcomes' emotional toll. The characters' ensuing realization that one of their number has been lost in the storm and is now presumed dead reinforces this scene's already dramatic impact. As a point of comparison, Alejandro Hernández employs similar narrative strategies in *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas* even when detailing less serious health issues that can emerge mid-migration. His protagonist Walter agonizes over gastrointestinal upset that obligates him to find a hidden place to defecate: "El culo me ardía. El orgullo se había ido a la mierda […] un dolor agudo en el vientre me hacía correr hacia las vías […] Cuántes veces, desde entonces, tuvimos que limpiarnos con yerbas o caliche, con frutas o piedras o, cuando no había más remedio, frotarnos en una turunca" (87). Like in Limón's narration of Menda's experience of marital rape, Hernández employs a first-person narrative voice and incorporates specific details, which help the reader relate to Walter's discomfort and embarrassment. These examples demonstrate some of the narrative strategies that these writers use when documenting personal experiences of health impairment in order to humanize migrant persons, while simultaneously educating the reader about typical health risks.

Beyond personal accounts of health crisis, migrapathography also sometimes narrates the health consequences that migrant persons confront in general terms, often employing in these cases a terse or matter-of-fact tone. This different narrative style prioritizes the transmission of exemplary information about the migration experience, and also serves to normalize certain trials within migration. For example, Nazario's *Enrique's Journey* focuses on the 17-year-old Honduran Enrique, but the journalist also intersperses her text with descriptions of the challenges that countless undocumented migrants face. The text's second chapter, "Seeking Mercy," exemplifies how Nazario couples these narrative techniques. The chapter begins with a "startling sight," revealed to be the text's protagonist: "a battered and bleeding boy, naked except for his undershorts. It is Enrique. He limps forward on bare feet… His right shin is gashed. His upper lip is split. The left side of his face is swollen. He is crying" (45). Nazario's narration mixes a clinical appraisal of her protagonist's injuries with an acknowledgment of their emotional impact; her later description of Enrique's thoughts directly after he is attacked by six men atop a moving train underscore this emotional appeal. Concussed after a severe beating and stripped nearly naked by bandits, Enrique despairs: "How will [my family] know where I have died?" (55). Enrique's lament reveals his hopelessness and further humanizes him, reminding the reader that in addition to being an undocumented migrant, he is also a son, a grandson, a sibling, and a boyfriend. Nazario affiliates other injuries and fatalities with Enrique's experiences by positioning him as a key figure in a timeline of negative health outcomes surrounding the train tracks in the southern Mexican states of Chiapas and Oaxaca: "Two weeks before Enrique's March beating, a Salvadoran was found crumpled and unconscious and by the tracks, his left arm broken" (59). Nazario thus frames her recurring emphasis on Enrique's experiences as prototypical

evidence of the span of ailments that migrant persons regularly endure. The writer ensures a clear depiction of train-related risks by detailing the daily responsibilities undertaken by the Red Cross in Arriaga, Mexico, explaining: "They pick up three migrants mutilated by the train in as many days. One loses a leg, another his hand; the third has been cut in half. Sometimes the ambulance workers must pry a flattened hand or leg off the rails to move the migrant. Other times, the migrant is dead by the time they arrive" (58). Nazario's blunt, graphic description further educates the reader about the dangers that migrant persons confront on the train, while also illuminating the limited capacity of first responders to assist injured migrants. The mention of the frequency of this type of incident ("three migrants… in as many days") alludes to the high rate of migrant injury not only in this particular region of Mexico, but anywhere that *la Bestia* traverses. Qualifying temporal expressions ("sometimes," "other times") underscore the normalization of the health perils that the list of injuries conveys. The frank reference to migrant death also highlights the relative helplessness of humanitarian organizations to solve this issue: the text presents groups such as the Red Cross as triage support, necessary due to the lack of a better solution that attacks the problem at its root.[3] Considering that *Enrique's Journey* is written in English and has become part of many high school and university curricula in the U.S.[4], the text serves an important didactic purpose for a public that may otherwise be unaware of migration's health risks. For example, university professors Ashley Boyd and Jeanne Dyches explain that they intentionally incorporate Nazario's text in their classroom teaching "to disrupt […] normalized assumptions and deficit narratives of immigration" (32).

The inclusion of numerous examples of migrant injury, like in Nazario's text, is a popular strategy within migrapathography. For example, the nonfiction text *La Bestia: La tragedia de migrantes centroamericanos en México* launches almost at its very beginning into a description of the massacre of 72 migrants by gang members in 2010 in the northern border region of Tamaulipas, Mexico. Hernández describes the same massacre in the afterword to his novel, *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas*. Beyond this striking (and shared) example, Ultreras relates in his polyphonic chronicle the testimonies of some nine Central American migrants, all from different backgrounds: there are men and women of various ages, some people with families and others who are single or childless, many who have already attempted the journey or been in the U.S. for a time, and still others for whom this is their first try at crossing Mexico. Ultreras also includes in the text the viewpoints of other people who observe migration patterns in Mexico, including the perspectives of two religious leaders (Padre Alejandro Solalinde and Doña Olga Sánchez Martínez) who, respectively, run migrant shelters in Oaxaca and Chiapas. (These two figures feature in Hernández's and Nazario's texts as well). All of the people interviewed detail numerous tragic events that they have observed, whether as travelers, humanitarian volunteers, or employees of Mexican institutions. Several of the interviewed migrants have been deported more than once, as is the case for the Nicaraguans Silvio José Blanco Hernández and Maribel Centeno and the Salvadoran Alicia Rivera. Multiple migrants, such as the Hondurans Eva García Suazo and José

[3] In 2022 alone, the International Organization for Migration recorded 686 deaths and disappearances of migrants in the US-Mexico border zone, and 1,457 migrant deaths and disappearances throughout the Americas ("US-Mexico Border World's Deadliest Migration Land Route" and "Migrant Deaths and Disappearances").

[4] See the "Educators & Students of *Enrique's Journey*" page on the book's website, and Boyd and Dyches (p. 33).

Carlos Alemán Guardado, lament the loss of limbs to the train. The sheer volume of testimonies, and the similarities between them, function to craft a picture of migrant injury and death in Mexico that is not only horrifying, but also virtually inescapable. This imagery grows in critical power because it is not unique to Ultreras's chronicle – Hernández, Limón, and Nazario describe in their texts comparable examples of violence, rape, mutilation, and death among their migrant characters.

Across these four texts, the authors draw attention to a range of negative health outcomes for migrant persons who travel without documentation. The variety of examples they recount effectively demonstrate that risk factors span from discrimination and acts of violence, to exposition to harsh weather, to the dangerous methods of travel employed to avoid apprehension. The mixture of personal accounts, use of provocative language, and volume of examples function to educate the reader and suggest an empathetic response.

ACTIVIST DIDACTICISM: CRITIQUE OF MIGRATION POLICY AND DISCRIMINATORY VIOLENCE WITHIN MIGRAPATHOGRAPHY

Beyond exposing migration's common health risks, migrapathographic texts also explain why migration is so perilous, pointing not only to travel conditions, but also to systemic violence via immigration policy, as well as symbolic violence as a source of marginalization and cruelty. By developing this cause-and-effect relationship, these works combine a didactic and critical purpose that functions as a call for sociopolitical shift in reaction to an ongoing trend of undocumented migration—and to a lack of humanitarian policy change to ameliorate related conditions. Systemic violence materializes, according to Slavoj Žižek, as "the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (1). Both Hernández's *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas* and Ultreras's *La Bestia: La tragedia de migrantes centroamericanos en México* reflect upon and denounce the interaction of Mexican and United States immigration policy—which aims to deter Central American migration through Mexico—for its devastating impact on migrant health outcomes. Hernández's novel features a bitter monologue in which the narrator laments that the U.S., so ready to offer solidarity to other countries when natural disasters strike, simultaneously contributes to migrant death via extensive policies of deterrence and the denial of these policies' repercussions on human life. The narrator highlights the U.S. government's ability to change this circumstance through the rhetorical question "Por qué no acepta que necesita trabajadores" and the subsequent repetition, four times, of "Si lo reconociera" (169). In each sentence, the narrator depicts the possibility of better conditions for migration: "Si lo reconociera […] acabaría con la pesadilla que es intentar internarse en su territorio clandestinamente […] ni andaríamos subrepticiamente los caminos, temerosos y culpables, hambrientos, siempre al filo del abuso, el atraco, la violación, el homicidio" (169). The monologue concludes: "Nos morimos solos […] Nadie es culpable más el que se muere. Locuras del tiempo nuestro" (170). Hernández's grim analysis of U.S. policy's role in negative health outcomes for migrants, and ultimately, in migrant death, functions to reorient this tragedy as one that is in large part manufactured by international policy, and is therefore avoidable. The use of sarcasm, accompanied by the prompt shift after this monologue back to a description of Hurricane Stan's impact in Honduras and Mexico in 2005, implies that this sort of lamentation is hopeless, because the systemic violence inherent in migration policy is so entrenched that change is improbable, if not impossible.

Comparably, *La Bestia: La tragedia de migrantes centroamericanos en México* incorporates several references to the negative influence of migration policy enacted by the United States and Mexico. For example, the priest Alejandro Solalinde summarizes the problem: "México es el único país del mundo donde se busca, se persigue, se localiza, se veja y se encarcela a los migrantes en todo su espacio, en todo su territorio" (42). Solalinde, who observes long-term trends of migrant injury in his role as director of a refuge for migrants, blames the government, explaining, "México, o más bien el gobierno de México, quiere ser un gobierno obediente a los intereses de Estados Unidos y cuidarle bien su traspatio, más que ser hermano de nuestros hermanos centroamericanos y tratar de ayudarlos" (42). This juxtaposition of priorities—allegiance to the United States' foreign interests versus compassion for Central American migrants—works not only as a critique of Mexican policy, but also as an implicit call for those who think differently to offer humanitarian support to this community. As Ultreras indicates later in the text, extra-governmental support resources such as Padre Solalinde and Doña Olga's shelters are often migrants' "única esperanza" (143). Meanwhile, the fact that all four of the texts studied here refer to immigrants' reliance on sources of aid beyond governmental resources (namely, via humanitarian volunteers or migrant shelters like the one run by Solalinde) serves to underscore the political system's failure to respond appropriately to this population's needs.

While Hernández, Nazario, and Ultreras's texts focus on logistical, cultural, and systemic issues that complicate health outcomes for migrants while they traverse Mexico, Limón's *The River Flows North* gives higher priority to the dire situation later in the migratory trajectory, in the Sonoran Desert. Though Limón's novel does not directly analyze the influence of immigration policy on health outcomes for migrants crossing the desert, a critique of this policy's ramifications is implicit in the nine protagonists' ill-fated journeys. Of the nine, all suffer from perils such as dehydration, malnutrition, and exposition to extreme weather, and several die due to these conditions. Jason De León studies the interaction of immigration policy and migrant health and death in his anthropological text *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, published in 2015. He explains:

> The terrible things that this mass of migrating people experience en route are neither random nor senseless, but rather part of a strategic federal plan that has rarely been publicly illuminated and exposed for what it is: a killing machine that simultaneously uses and hides behind the viciousness of the Sonoran Desert. The Border Patrol disguises the impact of its current enforcement policy by mobilizing a combination of sterilized discourse, redirected blame, and 'natural' environmental processes that erase evidence of what happens in the most remote parts of southern Arizona. The goal is to render invisible the innumerable consequences this sociopolitical phenomenon has for the lives and bodies of undocumented people. (4)

Rather than isolating severe desert conditions as an unfortunate but circumstantial risk for migrants, De León positions them as an intentional piece of a migration deterrence strategy. This theorization of causation (in lieu of correlation) frames the desert environment as an essential component of systemic violence enacted by the U.S. government. Importantly, Hernández echoes this critique in *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas*, directly accusing the U.S. of upholding a migration policy that "instala tecnología de guerra en

la paz y empuja a los migrantes a los desiertos, las montañas, los ríos y los canales, en donde cientos mueren de hipotermia, deshidratación, golpe de calor, envenenamiento y soledad" (169). Of the preventive strategies that De León enumerates, the "natural" environmental processes that dominate the desert in southern Arizona, whose impact Hernández also laments, are the most prominent causes of negative health outcomes in *The River Flows North*. Indeed, the migrant characters' paid smuggler Leonardo Cerda focuses exclusively on these risks, scolding his migrant followers: "Dealing with you is like being with a bunch of stupid kids! What do you think can happen? Somebody breaks a leg, or is bitten by a snake, or falls off a rock, or there's a sandstorm" (61). Beyond the obvious foreshadowing (two of the listed perils do come to fruition, leading to three characters' deaths), the fictional coyote's prioritization of these health dangers over the risk of apprehension by the U.S. Border Patrol suggests that the desert represents a more fearsome enemy than legal enforcement agents. Limón's painstaking description of the suffering and death that migrants confront in the "wasteland" of the desert—spanning from the novel's protagonists' experiences to the characters' discovery of multiple crudely-dug graves and, once, an overturned van full of decaying corpses—coincides with a didactic purpose to educate the reader about how dangerous this journey often is (157). Considered within the critical framework of systemic violence that De León proposes, however, this didactic goal aligns with a larger critical message about the cruelty of a migration policy that makes this perilous trajectory so tempting for migrants traveling without documentation.

In addition to offering an analytical view of how migration policy in both Latin America and the United States makes northward travel more hazardous, the writers link systemic violence with subjective and symbolic violence in their portrayal of discrimination and related acts of cruelty that further endanger migrants. Marissa Gálvez Cuen clarifies that migrapathographic narrative affiliates migrant characters' undocumented status with violence, positioning this legal condition as the "motivo del rechazo social que sufren los migrantes de las novelas, así como un pretexto para justificar los abusos a los que son sometidos" (17). In all four texts, police and migration control officers—representative of Mexico's system of federal authority—are depicted as frequent perpetrators of anti-migrant crime. Nazario, in *Enrique's Journey*, aligns federally-endorsed officials with extralegal aggressors: "Arrayed against [the migrants] is *la migra*, along with crooked police, street gangsters, and bandits" (68). Meanwhile, in *The River Flows North*, the Salvadoran Menda Fuentes quickly learns that in Mexico, "la Migra is unforgiving with outsiders. Many of the officials are thieves [and others] make a habit of violating women, and they beat men just to get whatever they think is useful" (33). As a Nicaraguan migrant interviewed by Ultreras explains, "Nosotros [los migrantes centroamericanos] acá somos el blanco perfecto para todos los mexicanos, y las autoridades a veces son los peores" (27). Together, these texts portray an unsafe landscape in which migrants have little option for support, and subjective violence, defined by Žižek as "directly visible" and "performed by a clearly identifiable agent," is common (1). The four texts at hand depict subjective violence in the form of physical assault, rape, robbery, extortion, etcetera, because these acts of violence are all undeniable sources of negative health outcomes for migrant persons. However, as Žižek explains, systemic violence, often invisible, must also "be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be 'irrational' explosions of subjective violence" (2). The texts therefore also make visible the networks of violence that cause

harm to migrants—abuse in these books is not random; instead, it is habitually perpetrated by the State's agents (police and migration control officers), and implicitly accepted or even condoned by the State as a natural course of action. Sharon Pickering clarifies, for example, that "rapes along the border have been systematic and racialized," and that rape becomes a "form of national security" (14). By crafting this connection between violence, its impact, and systems of federal authority, the texts perform an essential (migrapathographic) didactic and critical function, providing their audience with a clear source of wrongdoing that must be addressed in order to improve migratory conditions.

In consideration of Pickering's theory of "racialized" rape, Hernández's *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas* offers a distressing example of how subjective, systemic, and symbolic violence intersect to cause harm to Central American migrants. Mexican policemen taunt a Honduran woman's family members after raping her, revealing an utter lack of compassion for one specific woman among countless victims: "Que quién violó a la migrante, preguntan… Que quién qué. La migrante, comandante, que quién la violó. A cuál de todas, dijo, y los policías celebraron la ocurrencia. Ha de ser a la última. A la última todavía no la violan, pendejo. Otra vez las risas" (125). The brusque "a cuál de todas" and casual reference to a future rape of another victim allude to the frequency of this type of violence.[5] Meanwhile, the rude jokes at these women's expense point to a broader social issue of symbolic violence that dehumanizes migrant persons and positions them as the "perfect" targets for violence—which, of course, has adverse implications for health outcomes among this community. Žižek proposes that symbolic violence is "embodied in language and its forms" (1). It is the words with which corrupt officers like the ones in Hernández's novel dismiss the migrant woman that they have raped, but on a deeper level, it is the system of cultural images, symbols, and signs that guide these officers and others like them to think that migrants are inferior and deserving of this violation (Bourdieu 80, Žižek 57). The performance of the subjectively violent act of violation, along with other negative and marginalizing treatment, confirms the inferior status to which symbolic violence designates these women. And the example of one instance of rape justifies future violations, thus feeding into a cycle that worsens conditions for Central American women: Hernández's narration of the Honduran Elena's rape and the officers' reaction to it, then, functions as one case study of how discriminatory perspectives lead to various negative health outcomes for the migrant community.

In their narration of different types of violence and their intersections to create harm in migrant persons' lives, the authors studied here further demystify health crises that are typical in the migration process. For example, instructors who used *Enrique's Journey* in a university literature course observed that "Not only did the text humanize immigrants, but it prompted students to see how the issue of immigration has systemic implications and to analyze it on a macro scale" (Boyd and Dyches 38). Critics assert that "Narrative Medicine was introduced as a discipline to help doctors to understand and increase their compassion for their patients" and ultimately has the goal of opening new channels to "help future patients" (Egerod et. al 195). Similarly, migrapathography aims to foster increased understanding of the multiplicity of forces that complicate health outcomes for migrant

[5] Criminology scholar Sharon Pickering elucidates the risks of migration for women, including the high possibility of sexual violence, explaining, "Migration holds more dangers for women – notably during the journey, when they may experience physical, sexual or other forms of abuse. Travelling to a border is in itself a physical endurance test, in which women are at a social, cultural and physical disadvantage" (61).

persons, and thereby enable more informed and targeted activist responses.

MIGRAPATHOGRAPHY'S ROLE IN ILLUMINATING MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES (AND RELEVANT CULTURAL INFLUENCES)

A final critical function of migrapathography is to unveil how migrant illness and injury contribute to increased marginalization and stigma. The four texts suggest that both physical health and cultural perspectives influence migrant persons' mental health. A key evidence point is that migrant characters often reveal a sense of shame at what they perceive as their bodies' failings. For example, in *La Bestia: La tragedia de migrantes centroamericanos en México*, Ultreras shares the testimony of a Honduran woman, Eva García Suazo, who lost both her legs after falling from the train. She muses: "A veces le pasa a uno esto por desobediente, porque a mí me decían que no me viniera, que mejor me quedara cuidando los niños, que era bien riesgoso, no, pero a pesar de todo siempre decidí venirme... y míreme ahora" (64). Eva emphasizes her regret, presenting her own situation as an example of what happens when a person ignores well-intentioned advice. The adjective "desobediente" and reference to the more "appropriate" decision to stay in Honduras to parent her children imply that Eva's migration can be seen as a reprehensible choice, at least for some individuals. Pushing this judgment further, if, as Susan Sontag asserts, illness has oft been framed as an "appropriate and just punishment" for some earlier wrongdoing (42), one could similarly think of a disabling injury as a natural or even deserved consequence (within some worldviews) of the choice to migrate. Sontag uses the concept of national identity to analyze the toll that illness and comparable health impairments have on a person's relationship to the world, positing that "Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship" (1). Stereotypes about health often lead to discrimination and inequity. This pattern of stigmatization can cause people with health challenges, like Eva García Suazo, to internalize a sense of shame and otherness, which complicates and even sometimes dismantles their social relationships. As Nazario indicates in *Enrique's Journey*, the feeling of shame post-injury means that some migrants with disabilities "stay in the area, too ashamed to go back and let their families see what has become of them" (58). Meanwhile, others are sent home to carry out a reductive didactic function, namely, as cautionary examples of how *not* to migrate: for example, Nazario writes: "To the many injured who do return to Central America, the hospital social worker pleads, 'Tell other people there not to travel this way'" (58). In both courses of action, injured immigrants are relegated to an alternative space and functionality reserved for those with non-normative bodies.

The affiliation of illness or injury with a person's social value correlates with the concept of biocitizenship as a lens to understand national and/or cultural identity. The model biocitizen is "assumed to be a rational, autonomous actor, [who is] healthy […] and able-bodied […] and has some measure of class privilege" (Johnson et. al 6). Within this paradigm, national identity—and one's sense of belonging within it—is influenced by cultural conceptualizations of health, particularly of supposed "normality" and "wholeness" of both body and mind. Naturally, there is an opposing figure to the model biocitizen: people who do not meet these standards are seen as "troublesome" and/or "impossible" citizens.[6] Similarly, people who migrate are often labeled invaders within popular

[6] See Rose and Novas (2005) and Chavez (2018).

culture, but are also seen as monstrous figures or "external pollutants" who can contaminate or corrupt an otherwise healthy society (Minich 3).[7] Along these lines, in *The River Flows North*, Limón portrays a disabling migrant injury as the ultimate cause for the dissolution of a marriage. After her husband Zacarías's mutilation (caused by a fall from the train), the Mexican woman Celia Vega is filled with "indescribable disgust," as well as "bitterness and anger," and "had to admit that I could no longer love him" (144). Celia's reaction to her husband's disability exposes the blend of stigma and personal angst that often surrounds disabling injuries. However, if we consider the trope of the nuclear family as representative of the nation, the failure of Celia and Zacarías's marriage also functions as a broader critique of the divisive patterns of stigmatization surrounding certain health conditions. In this exploration of the personal experience of shame and marginalization post-injury, migra-pathography aligns with what Hawkins calls the "angry" or critical pathography. Just as pathography as a genre attempts to humanize the experience of illness, so too migrapathography functions to give a human face to stigma around migrant injury and its impact on these persons and their relationships with both country and compatriot.

Migrants' more limited options post-injury demonstrate the import of a certain portrayal of health to have full social access. Within the framework of biocitizenship, a crippling injury or any other condition or event that separates someone from the model biocitizen is equivalent to a "social death" or entrance into a state of "necrocitizenship," in which a person is stripped of their rights and status and remains thereafter in a vulnerable and inferior position, at the disposition of the normative state (Burgess and Murray 56). Nazario communicates the standard reaction of despair to necrocitizenship by narrating the collective story of migrant persons injured by the train: "At the hospital, almost all tell Olga they wish the beast would have killed them rather than leave them like this […] Their eyes speak fear. Who will ever marry them like this? How will they ever work […] They refuse to eat. Some try to hang themselves" (91). These persons' suicidality and hopeless projections for their future attest to their internalization of a worldview that prioritizes whole-bodied productivity. The consequence of having a differently-abled body is an altered relationship to the world and to one's own identity. Comparably, in *The River Flows North*, Zacarías's injury leads Celia to abandon her husband and family to migrate to the U.S. alone. For Eva García Suazo, interviewed by Ultreras, necrocitizenship means that she remains permanently uncertain of her place in the world after her injury – she moves back and forth between Doña Olga's shelter in Mexico, where there is better support, and her home country of Honduras. Tobin Siebers equates this shift in treatment of people with disabilities to the practice of "human disqualification," which highlights people's otherness or perceived defectiveness in order to craft a hierarchy of social value (23, 27-28). In the context of Latin American migration, disabling injuries become a hallmark for the person who has attempted and failed to migrate. Via this affiliation, migrant persons with disabilities are most identifiable by their perceived inability to achieve their apparent dream—and along the same lines, their supposed powerlessness (and perhaps, lack of worthiness) to improve their lot in life or contribute meaningfully to society.

Hernández's *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas* presents a detailed example of the

[7] "[In] immigration discourse that frames the nation as a body, immigrants are often characterized as 'a *disease* afflicting the body'" and this "'immigrant as pollutant' metaphor has been persuasive in U.S. popular discourse" (Chávez 119).

mental health ramifications of mutilation through its narration of the Honduran migrant Waldo's loss of both legs when he slips while trying to board the train. The novel dedicates five of its fifty chapters to Waldo's story, thus elucidating how essential the author finds it to consider the impact of migrant injury in his study of migration.[8] In the moment after his fall and subsequent amputation, Waldo panics, thinking: "Dónde estaba él. No estaba. Había desaparecido" (59). This imagery of disappearance corresponds both to the physical reduction of Waldo's body *and* to his symbolic banishment from normative society. An "incomplete," disabled person cannot fit into the national imagery of whole-bodied citizens as defined by biocitizenship standards. Hernández narrates Waldo's descent into depression to demonstrate the emotional impact of this sudden rupture with the idealized biocitizen identity. Waldo laments: "Bien hubiera podido decir mierda, me llamo mierda, vengo de Honduras, de la mierda, vine a México, a la mierda, me pasó encima una gran masa de mierda y me quedé hecho mierda" (60). Waldo's analysis of his new social position illuminates disabled persons' marginalized status within the biocitizenship framework. Migrant persons mutilated by the train are represented as waste products of the immigration system, figurative fecal matter that Mexico does not care to clean up and that countries like Honduras do not want back. Waldo's assessment of his situation also has significant ramifications within the framework of migrapathography. His cynical evaluation of his reduced social worth suggests that injured migrants can expect a crisis of identity, and subsequently, an exclusion from their previous social, professional, and national networks.

Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas provides diverse examples of migrant characters who are in crisis post-injury in order to propose that the weight of stigma is so heavy that injured migrants cannot relate effectively to society, or even to their own family units. A migrant patient who resides in Doña Olga's shelter with Waldo laments: "Parezco monstruo. Has visto, ¿no? Sin un ojo, sin nariz, con media boca. Por eso estoy triste, Waldo. Mi mamá se va a desbaratar cuando me vea" (108). The character's application of a negative label of identity ("monstruo") communicates that he has internalized a worldview in which non-normative bodies are inferior, even repulsive. Meanwhile, his rhetorical question underlines a sense of inevitability, implying that the shifts in social interaction post-injury are natural and unsurprising. In turn, Waldo labels himself as a "medio-hijo" (149), and imagines his only possible role in his family post-injury as a "carga, molestia, derrota," since he can no longer be a source of "vigor y esperanza" (62). Hernández's language here affirms the dominance of a biocitizenship-centered perspective in which bodies with disabilities have a lower social status. Waldo's focus on his reduced ability to support his family correlates to a biopolitical and capitalist conceptualization of society, in which people's perceived value is proportional to their capacity to be productive within a specific paradigm.

In consideration of the consequences that Hernández, Limón, Nazario, and Ultreras as a cohort depict for migrant injury, the conclusions that a reader can draw are tragic. Migrapathographic literature intimates that migrant persons that suffer disabling injuries due to traveling conditions will also endure mental health crisis, brought on by a desperate reconsideration of their self-concept in a state of "biographical disruption" (Egerod et. al 199). While pathography posits a "dual process of coping that is simultaneously loss-oriented

[8] Chapters 10, 17, 24, and 27-28 of *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas* center around Waldo, telling the tale of how he is injured, how he is treated in Doña Olga's shelter in Chiapas, and how he finally reinitiates a strained relationship with his family back in Honduras.

and restoration-oriented," migra-pathography critically indicates migrants' relative lack of resources to face their new situation or restore biographical continuity, suggesting instead that injured migrants will confront lasting marginalization in any social sphere they traverse (Egerod et. al 199).

CONCLUSIONS

Pathographies, or illness narratives, allow an ill person to choose "what to include" in an explanation of their experience and "how to frame it," and demand from their reader "a willingness to listen and connect" (Mohlin and Bernhardsson 2841). Similarly, migra-pathographic literature by authors such as Alejandro Hernández, Graciela Limón, Sonia Nazario, and Pedro Ultreras offers an intentionally-curated perspective of contemporary migration that relies on the audience's openness in order to educate this readership and stimulate empathetic response. The use of a creative, literary format acknowledges that migration and migrant illness are "un fenómeno que es difícil explorar en detalle en la prensa" (Zárate 181). Migrapathography is therefore hybrid and polyphonic, creatively representing the health experiences of undocumented migrants through a kaleidoscope of narrative voices that unveil myriad health complications and the risk factors that worsen them. The narration of characters' suffering due to exposure, mutilation, and violence is not only provocative; it also draws attention to the deficiencies and cruelties of migration policy and social perspectives which contribute to these negative health outcomes. The texts also narrate post-injury experiences of emotional angst, interpersonal conflict, and isolation to elucidate the high social cost of failed migration. The generalized exclusion of that which is *other*, combined with additional (biocitizenship-based) stigma surrounding illness and disability, means that injured migrant persons are marginalized from normative society on multiple levels. Ultimately, migra-pathography is activist art, which narrates migration in order to expose and denounce a transnational political and cultural system that increases migrants' risk of injury and then eschews injured migrants as defective. Just as pathography aims to increase understanding of illness as a means of improving persons' experience of being sick (via more effective healthcare and patient support, for example), migrapathography illuminates the migration experience to incite empathy and sociopolitical change, both of which can help ameliorate conditions for undocumented migrant persons.

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