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**Living Behind Bars: Representations of the Costa Rican Home in Cinematic Works by**

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**Living Behind Bars: Representations of the Costa Rican Home in Cinematic Works by  
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**Abstract**

‘¿Por qué hay tantas rejas? Todas esas casas parecen jaulas.’ [Why are there so many bars? All these houses look like cages]. Hernán Jiménez’s central character, Antonio, poses this question in the national box-office hit, *El regreso* [The Return] (2011), upon returning to his hometown of San José, Costa Rica, after a decade living in New York. The home as an imprisoning space which mirrors what Jiménez sees as the oppressive atmosphere of the nation’s capital is a recurring theme in his work and this article therefore considers the domestic space as a place of fear and unease rather than comfort and rest, analysing the role of security, family, and home in Costa Rica. These reflections are explored with reference to three of Jiménez’s cinematic works: the documentary *Doble llave y cadena* [Double Lock and Chain] (2005), and the two feature-length fiction films *A ojos cerrados* [Closed Eyes] (2009) and *El regreso* (2011), which are analysed according to Homi K. Bhabha and Dwayne Avery’s conceptions of the unhomely home.

**Keywords:** Central American cinema, Costa Rica, Hernán Jiménez, Homi K. Bhabha, insecurity, unhomely.

*‘¿Por qué hay tantas rejas? Todas esas casas parecen jaulas.’ [Why are there so many bars? All these houses look like cages].*

The small Central American country of Costa Rica is home to 4.5 million people and, given its non-violent history and relative prosperity, has long preached a rhetoric of peaceful exceptionalism when compared to its neighbours. However, modern-day Costa Rica – like many other nations in the throes of urbanization and a reliance on new technologies – looks visibly different to this traditional image. While agricultural exports formed the backbone of the nation’s income for most of the twentieth century, tourism, services and outsourcing are now outstripping coffee and bananas. San José, the capital city, sits among the coffee-producing territory of the Central Valley’s mountains, and yet appears a far cry from the images of turquoise coastlines and majestic volcanoes that greet tourists at the airport. Each house boasts a corrugated iron roof in an assortment of colours; each sturdy, wooden front door is protected by another of metal railings; standing guard around each house and car are bars of up to three metres high, some of which are covered in carefully looped circles of greying barbed wire.

The cities of the Central Valley that house 60% of the nation’s inhabitants (Quinto censo), then, appear to contradict the associations of both the nation as a peaceful paradise and the home as a place of comfort and rest, instead turning it into a visual space of imprisonment and fear. This threat of violence is denoted by the high rate of crimes on the home, such as burglaries and assaults, which have served to heighten a feeling of insecurity in the country. Indeed, the media outlet *Repretel* estimated in 2015 that 17 homes are broken into in Costa Rica every day (Anon 2015). The home as a place of rest and tranquillity is therefore subverted through media representation and public fear, and is instead replaced with the image of a vulnerable space which can be invaded by violence at any time. The protective

nature of the bars that are meant to enshroud the family is therefore often lauded as a necessary component of modern city life, but at the same time paradoxically serves to increase inhabitants' sense of insecurity. This contradiction is explored in-depth by Costa Rican film director and scriptwriter Hernán Jiménez, and his fascination with the ways in which traditional values clash with contemporary lifestyles in San José will be seen in this article through a focus on his depictions of the domestic space as both the hub of family life and a form of imprisonment.

This article will analyse three of Jiménez's works which deal head on with his preoccupation with the nation and the home. Beginning by considering the traditional importance placed on the home, domestic concerns, and the family within Costa Rica, an analysis of the documentary *Doble llave y cadena* [Double Lock and Chain] (2005) will consider security fears in light of Homi K. Bhabha's definition of the 'unhomely' home which reflects on issues of place and nation. Jiménez's conception of the home is then seen to morph in his first feature film, *A ojos cerrados* [Closed Eyes] (2009), whereby it serves to represent the tensions between traditional, family values and modern life. This film is considered in light of Dwayne Avery's contention that globalisation and the interconnectivities of the modern world situate the home in a more radical sphere – locating it virtually or as straddling borders – and the domestic space here will be seen to function as a 'multi-scalar' concept (Avery 2014: 13). Finally, the idea of the home as a prison will be explored in Jiménez's second feature film, *El regreso* [The Return] (2011), which will be analysed according to Bhabha and Avery's notions of both a return home and the global in the home as uncanny projects, alongside the gendered expectations of the domestic space as forming a patriarchal prison. It is these multi-levelled perceptions of the home which are so prominent in Jiménez's cinematic works, as the director uses documentary and film to consider the potential for oppression and violence within the sphere of the home, forcing it to become a truly unhomely

space, as well as depicting the clash of values which are also brought to the fore through a study of the home as a microcosm of society and nation.

**Insecurity and the Unhomely in *Doble llave y cadena: el encarcelamiento de una ciudad* (2005)**

Born in San José in 1980, Hernán Jiménez is one of Costa Rica's most famous filmmakers, in part because he has also made his name as the country's foremost stand-up comedian. Having gone to the US and then Canada to study acting and filmmaking, his first feature, *Doble llave y cadena: el encarcelamiento de una ciudad*, is a 43-minute-long documentary about San José's problem – or perceived problem – with crime and insecurity. Having been released nationally in 2005, it won several awards at that year's *Muestra de cine y video costarricense* [Costa Rican Cinematic Showcase] in San José, including the people's prize. The idea for the documentary came to Jiménez when he travelled back to San José after years spent in North America. Finding that the city was – in the words of the title of this documentary – imprisoned due to the bars surrounding each house, he began to research the onset of this worrying trend. The documentary therefore revolves around the theme of security and insecurity in the capital, and uses as its protagonist a man whose life has been blighted by the fear of his house being broken into. *Doble llave y cadena* shows interviews with a variety of Costa Ricans, encompassing a range of demographics and professions. This narrative is broken up by musical and dramatic interludes in order to tell a surface narrative of the rise in violence against people in their homes and homeowners' response to this in the form of securing their houses, alongside a subtext which subtly questions the validity of this self-perpetuating chain of events which espouses Bhabha's depiction of an unhomely home.

The importance placed on the home – both the nation as home and the physical, family home – in Costa Rica has been developed and conceptualised by a range of scholars. In their social

studies work, *The Ticos: Culture and Social Change in Costa Rica*, Mavis Biesanz et al assert that Costa Ricans ‘share a sense of national identity. They believe they have a unique way of life and a distinctive national character’ (1999, 6). A large part of this belief is rooted in the historical narrative of the nation as home, which is often replayed in Costa Rican society and which states that the founding fathers of the nation were peaceful, Spanish colonists who arrived in an uninhabited land and began to set up egalitarian farming communities (Bird 1984: 11). This traditional and hegemonic conception of the home is immediately apparent to the viewer of this documentary, as the ideal home here is represented as both a family-centred and safe space, and this notion forms the – often unspoken – foundation of the core interviews around which Jiménez bases his narrative. Isabel Vega, one of the psychologists interviewed, states that the ‘el tico es familista’ [the *tico*<sup>1</sup> is family-centric] and that, for Costa Ricans, ‘la familia es lo más importante’ [family is the most important thing], leading her to believe that the head of the household – assumed to be the father – would do all he could to protect his nuclear family regardless of the consequences of this on the local community.

Indeed, the Costa Rican home in this documentary is not only seen to be a physical space of dwelling which must be protected, but also a site of familial relations. The frequent conflation of nation and family in the country is unpacked by Cuevas Molina, who demonstrates that although Costa Ricans are encouraged to conceive of the nation as their own family, the nuclear family is also prized above community concerns (1999: 5). While it could be argued that a paternalistic State should concern itself with protecting the family home for its citizens, in this documentary it becomes clear that it is each family’s individual duty to protect themselves as the State has failed to do so. Vega notes this in her interview when she contends that, as the State cannot protect its citizens, man must protect his family instead; she

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<sup>1</sup> The term *tico* is often used interchangeably with ‘Costa Rican’ to denote a person or thing from Costa Rica (Quesada Pacheco 2007:376).

believes that this is the reason why almost all homes in the capital are now surrounded by bars and barbed wire. This, according to Bhabha in his article 'The World and the Home', is an example of an unhomely home. He argues that domestic spaces can be transformed into unhomely dwellings through violence, upheaval, or precarity (Bhabha 1992), and the feeling of the unhomely due to the perceived threat of violence – and the very sight of bars around people's homes – is certainly made apparent in *Doble llave*.

The documentary furthers this idea of the unhomely home whereby the individual householder is charged with the protection of the family, as one interviewee also argues that an 'us' versus 'them' attitude regarding foreigners exists within Costa Rica. The protagonist who is scared to go outside notes that, growing up, everyone would hear whispered stories about the Nicaraguan migrants coming to the city, carrying guns and breaking into houses. He concludes that his fear of the exterior world therefore stemmed from another national value: 'los ticos no soportamos lo diferente, lo ajeno, lo extraño' [we *ticos* do not like anything different, distant, or foreign]. According to Bhabha, it is this othering of the foreign and the foreigner in everyday discourses which mirrors the ways in which the hegemonic nation uses ideology to push out those who do not fit its norms (1990). The 'official' version of Costa Rican history has, then, played into a conception of the ideal nation and, indeed, the ideal home, using what Biesanz et al term a 'unifying myth' (1999: 13). This myth perpetuates a feeling of homogeneity and promotes the values of peace, patriotism, and the importance of the nuclear family. However, in the reality of the twenty-first century, Jiménez shows us in this documentary that this idealised domestic space no longer exists (Chang Vargas and González Vásquez 1981: 12-13). Indeed, the accepted, and prized, version of the Costa Rican home as seen in this documentary is as an enclosed and individual dwelling for close family which protects those within, while actively aiming to keep out those who do not belong or who do not fit the ideals of belonging to the nation.



**IMAGE A** Bars and locked doors surround houses in San José *Doble llave*.

In this way the home in this documentary also becomes a prison in which its inhabitants do not feel safe despite its purpose to protect them, and the caged-in nature of the home is depicted by Jiménez both visually and in the narrative itself. The protagonist – a young man still affected by the process of bars being put up around his childhood home – states that when the first bars went up ‘afuera quedó todo’ [everything was left outside] including his school, his neighbourhood, his garden, his friends, and even sleep. He concludes: ‘al menos tengo acá mi cama y mi tele’ [at least here I have my bed and my TV], driving home the idea that he is in a prison cell with just a bed and TV for company, while the rest of the world lives on outside the confines of the bars. As the voiceover shares this, we see the man entering his house by unlocking three sets of barred doors and gates, before turning more locks to enter his bedroom, demonstrating the extent to which he is incarcerated. This reconception of the city home within Costa Rica again brings to mind Bhabha’s notion of an unhomely home as suffering the threat of violence or as inherently precarious (Bhabha 1992). Indeed, the documentary goes on to speak of a culture of fear and the level of mistrust which is palpable in Costa Rican society, while at the same time showing emotive pictures of school children pressed up against brightly painted bars that surround their school, looking onto the streets outside. These images of smiling children mixed with the elements of fear detailed by the interviewees creates a confused reaction in the viewer, prompting them to question firstly whether children should be forced behind bars, and secondly if even this measure is enough to protect them; ultimately it is these contrasting arguments that Jiménez wants to bring to the fore in this documentary.

**IMAGE B** School children look out at the world through coloured bars in *Doble llave*.

This inclusion of the points of view of Costa Ricans of different generations in *Doble llave* also points towards another of Jiménez's core themes: that these bars have not always existed because they were not previously needed. He therefore opens a dialogue around the rupture between traditional values and some realities of contemporary life, seen here through the lens of the family home and the city outside its doors. Dwayne Avery's contention in *Unhomely Cinema* that in today's world ways of life which encompass movement, urbanisation, migration, and the ever-increasing use of new technologies can be seen as uncanny and, therefore, unhomely, by many inhabitants, appears to hold true in the documentary. This dichotomy is set up from the beginning, as a quotation from one of Costa Rica's most famous poets, Jorge Debravo, is shown on screen, stating:

Tengo a mi patria  
Siempre en la mano  
Le digo que hay países anchos  
Donde no existen dioses metálicos  
Donde no hay primos  
Que solo hermanos  
[I have my homeland  
Always in hand  
I tell you that there are wide countries  
Where metallic gods do not exist  
Where there are no cousins  
Only brothers].

This poem conflates the images of nation and family, and the homeland here is portrayed as an identity which its citizens carry around with them. Moreover, Costa Rica is seen as a place of nature (without metal gods), peace (with its breadth), and family (where distant relations,

or even strangers, are considered brothers). This idealised view of society seen in the poem *Patria*, written in the 1960s, demonstrates a preoccupation in the nation with reifying the past, and yet the content of the documentary also undoes this view as strangers are seen as the enemy and metallic gods are visible as bars around each house. Indeed, the elderly sisters who are interviewed frequently underline the difference between modern San José and its past environment when speaking of the time when they grew up. They state that they used to feel ‘una tranquilidad tremenda... podía salir y no había miedo... era una comunidad... pura familia’ [a tremendous tranquility... you could go out without being afraid... it was a community... pure family]. This idyllic blurring of the lines between public and private – where all inhabitants of the nation were one’s family – actually appears to undo Bhabha’s concept of the unhomely, when he describes it as ‘the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world’ (Bhabha 1992: 141). The shock that he narrates which makes these Costa Ricans feel ill-at-ease within their homes is not the world or wider society more generally in the home, then, but the *modern* world in the home which brings with it challenges to traditional values and lifestyles. The documentary therefore narrates a fear of social and cultural change, at the same time exemplifying Avery’s contention that a home can become unhomely if the reason one does not leave it – as the protagonist refuses to do – is for fear of the influence of the outside world (2014:3).

Jiménez therefore uses this documentary to point out the contradictions espoused within Costa Rica, demonstrating that while the nation holds the value of peace at its core superficially, its citizens are actually overwhelmingly preoccupied with the insecurity of city life in San José. The use of music and camera angles compounds this point as the score jumps from melancholy pan pipe music and scenes of a bygone era in sepia to heavy metal with images of shanty towns, poverty, and, of course, bars. This visual juxtaposition of overt images of traditional tropes with those of contemporary life denotes the association of

tradition with positive values and peace, and the modern with noise, insecurity, and the aesthetic destruction of both the city and family life. When Jiménez takes the camera out to a family living in the countryside, however, the father of the family claims they live as people used to in San José – without bars, with freedom. The exclusive use of shots of children happily playing in the grass in this section is no coincidence: Jiménez wants to make the point that this glorified past was a time of innocence.

Moreover, whenever the viewer looks upon the bars in San José, the camera angle is low with the lens pointing upwards – creating a child’s point of view shot – thus making the feeling of imprisonment more emotive. The stark contrast between shots of rural, unshackled houses and those of the city shocks the viewer into seeing what the country could look like if the city had not expanded and society had not changed. This encounter with an unhomely version of the nation and the domestic space, however, actually demonstrates Costa Rica’s physical manifestation of Avery’s idea of the uncanny as a fear of societal change, rather than the modern world as inherently uncanny. The bars that we see therefore play their part in this vicious circle as they are at once a response to this unhomely feeling while also making the nation feel unhomely for residents and tourists alike. The issue, of course, is that no matter how unhomely the domestic or national space is, citizens often have little choice but to dwell there. This documentary therefore constructs the idealised Costa Rican home as a place of peace and safety, while depicting the extent to which these ideals have come undone in contemporary San José. While traditional modes of living and conceptions of the home appear to be praised on the surface, the viewer is left to question whether it is actually the fear of the unknown – of the modern world – which is causing this undercurrent of insecurity to take hold of society. It is in this way that the documentary demonstrates Bhabha’s concept of the unhomely as entering through the threat of violence and trauma, or through the clash of the home’s static nature – here seen as Costa Rica’s traditional and idealised concept of the

home – with a rapidly changing exterior world. Bhabha's notion, however, is seen to exist in the eye of the beholder – or the householder in this case – rather than suggesting that the Costa Rican home is inherently unhomey or actually under threat.

### **The Multiscalar Home in *A ojos cerrados***

Whereas *Doble llave y cadena* deals with ideas of the twenty-first century domestic space in San José head on, Jiménez's first feature film, *A ojos cerrados* (2010), provides a subtle discussion of this issue. The film tells the story of twenty-something Delia who works at a high powered, high stress job in San José but lives in the countryside with her grandparents, Gabo and Maga. Contrasting the idyllic family life the three share in their rural home with the pressures of the urban lifestyle Delia is adopting, this clash of tradition with modern city living is brought to the fore when Maga suddenly dies, dragging Gabo and Delia into a pit of depression. When her will is read, however, Maga commands that her ashes be scattered in the Caribbean Sea, prompting Delia and Gabo to go on a journey of self and national discovery which uncovers various facets of the conception of the home. In this way the home is framed according to Avery's concept of a multi-scalar home; one that exists not just physically but also in terms of family bonds, demonstrating that it is something that changes and evolves over time.

The national ideal of home as both a refuge and a dwelling which contains the nuclear family is clearly articulated in the construction of the physical and imagined home in this film. In sharp contrast with the houses seen in *Doble llave y cadena*, the family home in *A ojos cerrados* exudes light, peace, and tranquillity. A white, wooden construction, it has a porch on which the elderly couple sit each day, drinking coffee and chatting. It is always filmed using wide angled shots which, along with the monochrome colour of the walls, accentuate the green of the grass that encircles the house, and the blue of the bright sky above. Rather

than bars, the house is surrounded by trees, as though protected by nature rather than man, and it is clear that far from feeling ill-at-ease while in the domestic space, the inhabitants feel at peace. Gabo and Maga sit all day, happily bickering, reading the newspapers, listening to the radio, and preparing locally-grown foods, such as beans, vegetables, and fruit. Indeed, the only time they appear to be uneasy is when forced to leave their home in order to run an errand. Delia also finds the home space a refuge from her job and the urban metropolis in which she works. While she must get up early and never has time for breakfast, when she comes home at night she is able to lie on the bed or the sofa as her grandmother calmly strokes her hair.

**IMAGE C** The peaceful family home in *A ojos cerrados*.

The contrast of the urban and the rural, and the different ways of life these environments evoke, is also shown through representations of the home in the film. Shots of the house are complimented by extra-diegetic sound from nature – the noise of small animals and insects – as well as traditional, soft music. These visions of the house as Gabo and Maga sit outside or as Delia leaves for work, contrast with the bird's eye, panoramic shots which take in the entire cityscape of San José. Although the mountains rise up in the background, the foreground shows a mix of metal and glass high rises surrounded by concrete and corrugated iron dwellings which are encased by bars. Not only is Delia's office a high-paced environment, but the constant ringing of the phone and the shouts of her boss add to the oppressive atmosphere created by the dark space where the only light comes from computer screens. Visually, then, this film stands the home at the centre of the debate between traditional and contemporary attitudes and lifestyles – represented by the rural home and the urban office respectively – but rather than overtly praising traditional ideals as in *Doble llave y cadena*, it would appear that in this film Jiménez takes a more nuanced approach.

**IMAGE D** Delia's office in *A ojos cerrados* is a dark, enclosed space representing the fast-paced modern world.

This depiction of the home space is quickly transformed from a place of warmth and light into a space of grief and mourning when Maga dies. Gabo no longer sits outside, and as such the shots of the façade and gardens also cease. The interior of the house is framed in shadow, and far from appearing homely with soft lighting and the chatter of the radio in the background, it now appears cluttered, dark, and silent. The home is no longer depicted as a place of refuge, but an unpleasant and unhomely space not because of the threat of violence as in *Doble llave y cadena*, but because of the loss of the nuclear family it once held within its walls. It is this notion of the unhomely home that Avery analyses, using Freud's notion of the uncanny, in the cinematic space. Indeed, the uncanny is an apt description of Gabo's experience in the film – the four walls which he had previously considered to be his home no longer constitute his idea of what a home should be, thereby alienating him from the house itself. This lends itself to Avery's contention that the home has many symbolic guises when used in film, and as such is a multi-scalar concept which can embody a household of people – as for Gabo here – a physical dwelling, a region, a nation, or the globe itself (2014: 13).

This oppressive atmosphere which encompasses the physical home is embodied by Gabo's character who refuses to speak or even open his eyes for days, thus conferring the feeling of the unhomely to the audience. The home is also seen as multiscalar as it is associated with the nation, as witnessed by Maga's final wish for her ashes to be scattered in the Caribbean Sea. Moreover, as Delia and Gabo make the long car journey to the Caribbean province of Limón, eventually arriving at the beach near Puerto Viejo, they begin to feel more at home with each other even without the matriarchal presence that once held them together, thus conflating home and family with the country itself. It is this new relationship that also reveals Gabo's

ideals of home to Delia. In keeping his eyes shut to the world and in refusing to engage with anyone, he shows her that his home is now just a memory, rather than existing physically in the house in which he has spent most of his life. He is at home thinking back over the life he shared with his wife, again compounding the notion that the family makes up the home as much as the house itself. When the family leaves, the home becomes unhomely; its physical appearance may not have tangibly changed, but its atmosphere has, again showing the multiple ways in which a home can be manifest on screen.

Despite Delia's new appreciation for the core Costa Rican value of family through her loss and recognition, however, she maintains her positive view of the compatibility of modern life with the traditional world of Costa Rican values. Having argued that being trapped within the four walls of his mind and his home will have a negative effect on Gabo, the journey to the Caribbean which brings them together is proof of this point. It seems that while Gabo has been happy to live in his rural hideaway, the world has moved on, leaving him behind and feeling unable to cope. This idea of abandonment forms part of Bhabha's concept of the unhomely, which he contends can be a symptom of any generation's encounter with new realities which may unsettle them – perhaps in the form of technology, multiculturalism, or globalisation – and which therefore make the home space, the community space, and also the national space an unhomely presence (2014: 9). Through Delia, Jiménez makes the point that the traditional family home has expanded in the twenty-first century and can now include relatives in different cities or countries who are a phone call, email, or plane journey away. In this way the viewer sees that Gabo had taken on a negative marginality, which Bhabha argues is neither celebratory nor self-imposed, but which is a result of resisting modernism's drive towards homogeneity (1990: 4).



However, as Delia tries to introduce Gabo to the world of technology via email, he sees that new spaces of home are available to him in the modern world. This contact with technology and the uneasy feeling it brings Gabo typifies Bhabha's contention that the unhomely home is often a hybrid; it combines both 'home' – whatever this may mean to an individual – and the outside world, converting it into an unhomely space (1992: 148). This sense of the modern world as inherently unhomely and acting in antithesis to the traditional conception of the Costa Rica home is therefore at the very heart of this film. It would appear that Jiménez no longer wishes to view these concepts as binaries, however, as he seems to suggest a blending of the two is the only way for the home, its inhabitants, and the nation to make progress, thus forcing the nation to embrace the possibilities of hybridity as suggested by Bhabha (1994: 8).

### **The Home as a Prison in *El regreso***

In contrast to *A ojos cerrados*, Jiménez's second feature film, *El regreso* (2011), is set entirely in the city of San José. It was released to much acclaim in 2011, winning ten prizes at the Costa Rican Film Festival and the 'Best Film' award at the New York Latino Film Festival. It tells the story of Antonio (played by Jiménez himself), a Costa Rican who arrives back in San José having lived in New York for eight years. Reluctant to stay more than two days in the city, when his passport is stolen Antonio must confront the idea of what constitutes home. In *El regreso* the domestic space is of paramount importance as not only does Antonio feel trapped by his family but also by the physical space of the home and the bars surrounding the house itself. The home also represents a patriarchal prison for Antonio's sister, Amanda, one which she must fight to leave in order to take control of her life. The core themes of traditional values and modern life which revolve around the home are also problematized in *El regreso*, and here Jiménez uses his work to present a reconciliatory picture of the values he believes the nation must carry forward.

In Avery's discussion of the unhomely he considers 'geographic promiscuity' as a cause of unease, terming it 'a contemporary condition wherein rapid mobility and transience has transformed the home from a local and embedded place to a network of sites that are traversed in time' (2014: 2). As Antonio has been on the move and lived outside Costa Rica for nearly a decade, Natalia Rodríguez Mata states that *El regreso* opens up 'el debate entre qué es Costa Rica y quién tiene derecho de sonar con volver' [the debate about what Costa Rica is and who has the right to dream of returning] (2011), thereby demonstrating the idea of home as a potentially transient concept. It would certainly seem that Antonio approaches his return from the period of self-enforced exile with trepidation and the feeling that he is not quite at home in either San José or in the house in which he spent his childhood. Indeed, the feeling of the uncanny when he steps across the threshold of the family home in San José is mirrored in his expressions, words, and the strange contrasts present in the visual image of the home itself.

Upon arriving home Antonio stands still, unable to return his sister's embrace as she holds him and strokes his hair all the while yelling 'qué lindo, qué lindo' [how lovely, how lovely] at him, demonstrating his unease and eventually causing him to snap: '¡no puedo con este país, no puedo con esta casa!' [I can't deal with this country, I can't deal with this house!]. Later, when confessing his disquiet to his new love interest, Sofía, he continues 'es una pesadilla para mí estar acá... me ahoga mi papá, me ahoga mi hermana, me ahoga esta casa' [it is a nightmare for me to be here... me father is suffocating me, my sister is suffocating me, this house is suffocating me]. Antonio thereby demonstrates that his disquiet is caused by both the unhomely feeling of the house itself and the people within it, and perhaps also with his home country itself. This uneasy feeling is also depicted visually as the two distinct layers of the house – the downstairs portion which belongs to Amanda, and the upstairs which belongs to the father – are extremely different from one another. The cheerful yellow of the

walls, the constantly blaring radio, the mess of magazines, religious icons, and children's toys that adorn Amanda's section are not present in the cool-blue, sparse, hospital-like interior inhabited by the father upstairs. As the camera lingers on the bottom of the staircase showing Antonio in profile ascending the steps, the difference between the two worlds – and the uncomfortable feeling of these two inhabiting the same house – is marked.

**IMAGE E** Antonio sits on the porch surrounded by the bars of the family home in *El regreso*.

The home in *El regreso* therefore becomes a space of suffocation and imprisonment for Antonio and his family members, a place from which they spend the entire film trying – but only in some cases succeeding – to escape. The theme of entrapment, then, is seen several times in the film, none more clearly than when Antonio carries his father's wheelchair onto the porch after dinner. As they talk, the shadows of the bars which surround the house cover them in stripes, as though they are sitting in a prison cell. In this scene, his father also tells Antonio in no uncertain terms that he is trapped as much by the house itself as by his family residing in it:

vos seguís corriendo, huyendo de esta casa, de esta ciudad hecha mierda, de los buses, el humo, de los asaltos y creés que te puedes olvidar de una hermana que lloraba más de la cuenta, de un niño que aún no conoces... pero estamos atados. Encadenados para siempre.

You keep running, fleeing this house, this shitty city, the buses, the assaults and you think you can forget about a sister who cried uncontrollably, a child you don't even know... but we are tied. Chained forever.

Unfortunately, these chains that bind him to the family home are not protective foundations, but painful shackles. Not only does the house suffocate him, but it holds within it his father and the harmful relationship that they have too, and while Antonio keeps returning to the house and his father, he does not find himself feeling at home there. This recalls Avery's contention that 'the figure of the disrupted and precarious home' is used 'to depict a contemporary world where dislocation and homesickness are ever present' (2014: 3). This feeling of homesickness for Antonio is constantly counterpointed and undermined by his feeling of dislocation – from the city of San José, from his family, and from the home to which he has felt obligated to return.

Similarly to *Doble llave y cadena*, the home as a prison and a space of violence, where the bars harm rather than protect, is also seen in *El regreso*. When asked '¿cómo encontrás San José?' [how do you find San José?] Antonio replies 'hecha una mierda' [shitty], and later goes on to find it impossible to leave the layers of bars around house, screaming '¿cómo putas salgo de aquí?' [how the hell do I get out of here?]. He then asks Sofía '¿por qué hay tantas rejas? Todas esas casas parecen jaulas' [why are there so many bars? All these houses look like cages]. While the home is seen as a symbol of the nation in this film, then, the increased presence of security threats as well as international mobility in the twenty-first century gives the nation an unhomely quality for those returning from outside like Antonio. Avery describes the 'contemporary unhomely' as a disconnection, a dislocation, and a disorientation for those returning to their home nation or the childhood domestic space – both of which Antonio does in this film (2014: 3). The narrative thread of the unhomely home as a prison is carried throughout the film through the visual aspect of the bars – they are present in every shot of the house's exterior – which adds an air of instability to the traditional concept of the family home. Indeed, along with the assault on Antonio it is clear to see that Costa Rican society, and even the home itself, is not seen to be the peaceful space it declares itself

to be. This has led one critic to state that ‘esta película, es necesario decirlo, nos muestra claramente el subdesarrollo en el que habitamos, pero, fundamentalmente, nos brinda la posibilidad de cambiarlo’ [this film, it has to be said, clearly shows us the underdevelopment in which we live, but, crucially, it gives us the possibility to change it] (Pérez 2011). The home therefore acts as a destabilizing force in this film, representing the level of social disquiet felt by Jiménez and many inhabitants of the capital around the issue of violence in society as well as suffocating family values.

It is this last point that becomes particularly poignant for Amanda, Antonio’s sister, as the traditional role of the downtrodden female, relegated to the realm of the domestic, is clearly at play in *El regreso*. María Lourdes Cortés contends that the traditional family unit in Costa Rica is depicted in the national imaginary as standing at the centre of the Costa Rican nation:

‘El discurso de lo nacional costarricense se construyó a partir de la imagen de una familia, metáfora de nuestra sociedad... La patria era vista como la gran madre de todos los miembros de esta sociedad, convertidos, a su vez, en moradores felices de esta familia patriarcal’

[the Costa Rican national discourse was constructed around the image of the family, a metaphor of our society... the homeland was seen as the great mother of all members of society, who were then made into happy residents of this patriarchal family]

(Cortés 1999: 81).

As Cortés argues, the acceptance of the image of the nation as a family home and the value of home as of paramount importance to society is complicated by the gendered notions of what constitutes home, both nationally and within domestic spaces. Roxana Hidalgo picks up on this contradiction, noting that in the imagined community of homogenous Costa Ricans, God, the Catholic Church, national heroes, politicians, and stable families are upheld as the male

foundations of the country (2004). This, she argues, has led to the vilification of women and the justification of their place in the private and domestic domain with no access to the public world (Hidalgo 2004: 22), which is most clearly seen in this film.

**IMAGE G** Amanda struggles to escape the bars which surround the home in *El regreso*.

Indeed, Amanda and Antonio's father maintains his role as the domineering patriarch, forcing his children to be silent around him, shouting at them when they disobey him, and exercising his control over the household. This relationship affects Amanda particularly badly: having been left by her husband who has run off with a model, she has returned to her father's house with her son but has unwittingly become a prisoner to traditional gender roles. Her existence as limited to the domestic space is exacerbated as, during the first 58 minutes of the film, she does not cross the threshold of the outer bars of the house. Moreover, in every scene in which she appears, she is shown to be doing domestic tasks – tidying, vacuuming, washing dishes, and preparing food – while the male characters have the freedom to leave the house and are seen in public, unconcerned with household matters. Amanda therefore inhabits the space of otherness – the domestic space – as narrated by Hidalgo, and within the film the juxtaposition between the woman as both weak and other but also as the creator and keeper of the family home, provides an interesting contradiction. While the family home for Antonio is an unhomey space due to his increased mobility and time spent away from it, for Amanda it also represents a place of entrapment, this time in society's outdated, patriarchal norms.

Although the domestic space forms the heart of the Costa Rican imagined nation, then, its keepers and instigators – women – are not accorded the privileges of their role within it. This means that while the idea of the nation as home has been maintained, domestic spaces within Costa Rica have – perhaps behind closed doors – often become spaces of oppression. Indeed, it has been noted that Costa Rica not only has a history of accepting domestic violence as a

part of life, but in some cases of encouraging it too. In 1997 the historian Isle Abshagen Leitinger noted that ‘in a society that is famous for its love of peace and tranquillity, the perturbing record of violence against women is becoming painfully visible’ (1997: xiii). In 2004 it was estimated that violence against women and children occurred in 58% of households (INAMU 2016). Although Amanda does not suffer physical violence in the film, she is only permitted to cross the threshold of the bars when forced to do so by her brother, in order to go out on a date with a potential new suitor. The idea that Amanda can only be saved from her domestic imprisonment by a man – for whom she is later seen reproducing her domestic role, cooking and cleaning for him as well as her son – demonstrates the various ways in which the home can be a place of oppression and epistemic violence for women.

Just as in Jiménez’s other productions, then, the home is at the core of the debate around the issues of established values and norms, and the twenty-first century attitudes and beliefs which contradict these. According to Avery, when the home is taken away, the shared habits and cultural connectivities which are used to make sense of the world also often become invalid (2014: 3), and it can be seen that in *El regreso* Antonio has to try to recover some of these in order to survive in the traditional mould of Costa Rican life to which he is no longer accustomed. Indeed, Jiménez paints a contradictory image of life in San José where in some cases the modernising project has ground to a halt, but in others it has flourished. This has led Pérez to argue that *El regreso* is all about Costa Rican culture and daily life (2011), and it is clear that Jiménez demonstrates the hybrid possibilities open to the city if it lets go of oppressive traditions, while holding on to others which make it unique. As Pérez contends, this film ‘está mostrando algunas cosas que necesitábamos ver en la pantalla grande’ [is showing some things we needed to see on the big screen] (2011). Indeed, in terms of the notion of home, it would appear that the national in this film becomes the site of tradition, while the global is a sign of modern life, demonstrating that living – physically or virtually –

between cultures is the new norm. Bhabha suggests that this unhomely affectation is forced upon an individual when the familiar blends with the unfamiliar (1992: 148), in this case through Antonio's return to his home nation and childhood home after his period of self-imposed exile. Moreover, the film disavows the continuing patriarchal stance which exists behind closed doors – or bars – demonstrating the evolution of gendered values in the city. In undermining patriarchy and the traditional image of a peaceful Costa Rica on the one hand, then, the film also demonstrates the different ways in which home can be conceptualised as a nation, a prison, and a society in transition on the other.

### **Conclusion**

It has been seen that the Costa Rican home is of historical importance to the national imaginary, having been conceptualised as both the foundation of the independent nation and conflated with the nation itself as a family unit. The sense of patriotism and brotherliness has been emphasized over the course of Costa Rican history, and is found to be bound up in the idea of the home. The domestic space has, however, also been a place where oppression and violence are housed, undercutting this traditional idyll. Women have been relegated to the inner space and given no room in public life, and domestic abuse from within and assaults and burglaries from without are well-documented phenomena within modern-day San José. This unhomely feeling has had both physical and societal implications, and in all three of Jiménez's films analysed it is clear that the bars around the houses and the atmosphere of mistrust and unease is, in the director's opinion, a consequence of the fear of the fast-paced, contemporary world. What all these works have in common, then, is their problematising of the concepts of traditional values and modern, city life as non-binaries, attempting to show the nation that not all past values are redundant – as seen in the positive values ascribed to community life in the countryside scenes in *Doble llave y cadena* or the happy, unbarred



home in *A ojos cerrados*. At the same time, Jiménez's works also maintain a need for the progression of liberal ideas – women participating in life outside the home in *El regreso* and the use of modern technologies in home and family life in both this film and *A ojos cerrados*. The uncomfortable distinction between the praising and upholding of traditional national values and their incompatibility with the realities of the modern world – the globalisation of business and trade, the fluidity of borders in the virtual space, and increased mobility and migration – is a common issue faced across the globe. In these films, it is seen that the place of the home and the nation itself as home to its inhabitants in twenty-first century Costa Rica is a contested, evolving, and hybrid space. According to Jiménez, then, a delicate balance must be struck in order to curtail the unhomey ideas associated with the modern world, as in order to feel at home one must accept the home as a space open to change.

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