A Contra corriente
Una revista de estudios latinoamericanos
Vol. 21, Núm. 3 (Spring 2024): 45-65

# The Culture of Peace in Central America and its Neoliberal Bargains: On Jacinta Escudos's *A-B-Sudario*

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The 1990s were years of optimism and hope for Central America. With peace agreements finally secured in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, the region was leaving behind decades of civil war and political turmoil and was gaining much needed stability. Especially promising was the fact that democratic norms and freedoms were gaining widespread recognition and were being implemented with remarkable success. Truth commissions were being established, and declarations of human rights were being adopted. No longer a pawn of Cold War ideological conflicts, Central America was becoming a player in the global market and was finally poised to achieve the prosperity and development that had long eluded it. But more than just heralding an era of stability and growth, the arrival of peace seemed to call for a whole new way of being—for a radical transformation of Central American society. Carlos Tünnermann Bernheim, the Nicaraguan intellectual and diplomat, summed up the sentiment in the title of his 1996 book: *Cultura de paz: un nuevo paradigma para Centroamérica*. On its cover was a collage of cheerful, sunny images: children smiling; a rainbow emanating from the Central American isthmus, a sun shining brightly on a historical moment full of promise.

But such a promise would ultimately remain unfulfilled. The region's political and economic elites quickly commandeered the peace process and steered it in a way that would only augment their power (Wade 2016). Whatever gains had been made in the name of social welfare and healing were immediately subordinated to market interests. The results were discouraging. For all the increased recognition that marginalized and indigenous groups had gained, virtually no reparations ever materialized for the devastation they had suffered. And for all the forensic evidence that the truth commissions had brought to light, little was achieved in terms of social justice and reconciliation. Wartime antagonisms had ceased, but violence and crime remained pervasive. The peacebuilding process had reneged on its promises, and what it offered instead was a regime of market-friendly governance whose civil and cultural values looked cheerfully to the future while giving short shrift to the ugly, simmering realities of postwar life.

Written in Managua and San Salvador between 1993 and 1997, and finalized in 2000, Jacinta Escudos's novel *A-B-Sudario* is a product of a long gestation that took place during the heady years of the transition to peace.[1] Stylistically playful yet deeply unsettling, it is also the product of the contradictions of its time. The novel consists of the writings, letters, and diary fragments of Cayetana, a writer who is working on a novel while contending with a deep sense of malaise. The text is a kaleidoscope of Cayetana's memories, feelings, fantasies, and thoughts. Its fragmentary and erratic narrative shuttles between two whimsically named cities—Sanzívar and Karma Town—and the nameless beach town where Cayetana retreats to write her novel, the very text we read.[2] During the writing process, Cayetana forges a friendship with four imaginary men, through whom she explores various aspects of her inner life, from her sentimentalism and sexual passion to her rebelliousness and intellectualism (Grau-Lleveria 2012). On the surface, Cayetana seems cool and possessed, but deep down she is tormented by her inner demons. Beneath her façade of peace and composure, violence and anguish fester.

At first sight, the novel seems detached from any sociopolitical concern. It neither denounces the region's misbegotten peace process nor dwells on the legacy of the armed conflict. Its protagonist, a middle-class vegetarian who binges on cocaine

[1] The final page of *A-B-Sudario* lists the following locations and dates of composition: "Managua–San Salvador, 1993-1995, 1997. Langenbroich (Alemania), marzo-abril del 2000" (Escudos 2003, 269).

[2] In El Salvador, the name "Sanzívar" is often used colloquially to refer to San Salvador.

and retreats to a beach house to write a novel, is a radical departure from the subaltern *campesina* and the self-sacrificing *guerrillera* that were central to Central American *testimonio* and resistance literature. So insistent is *A-B-Sudario* in its departure from that tradition that the very few historical and geographical references it does contain are cast in the haze of Cayetana's fantasy and dread. In *A-B-Sudario*, whimsy prevails over ideology.

But to view *A-B-Sudario* this way is to view it from criteria established by the tradition of resistance literature that preceded it. *A-B-Sudario*'s engagement with historical reality is of a different sort. What it confronts is something much more obscure and elusive than the overt political conflicts that had shaped Central American society. Through its aesthetic of dissonance and fragmentation, *A-B-Sudario* gives expression to the incoherence of peacetime, an incoherence that the prevailing political culture has sought to whitewash through feel-good stories of peace and reconciliation. *A-B-Sudario*'s aesthetic is one that refuses to play into the illusion that narratives of closure and completion are possible under the existing conditions.

Additionally, through its conflict-ridden protagonist, *A-B-Sudario* posits a subjecthood that runs counter to the rosy vision of humanity promoted by the cultural politics of peace. At the heart of the peacebuilding process was the idea that a war-torn society could be engineered to be happy, that all it needed was democracy, an education in peace-friendly values, and entry into the new global culture of consumer capitalism. But such optimism closed its eyes to the fact that the psychological scars of war—the traumas, anxieties, and self-destructive behaviors—were still largely unhealed. It is against this ethos of easy optimism that *A-B-Sudario* positions itself. By offering us the testimony of a dark and conflicted self, it demonstrates an unflinching fidelity to the crisis of subjectivity at the heart of the postwar experience.[3]

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[3] It is interesting to note that Escudos has described her work as "literatura de la verdad". Escudos adapts this term from "littérature-vérité", a French mode of literature whose writers, she explains, "han abordado en su narrativa situaciones de tal realismo, que han vuelto a sacudir al aletargado lector francés de las últimas décadas para re-examinar su propia realidad y el entorno alrededor del cual giran problemas existenciales de transición de milenios" (Escudos 2005, 143). *A-B-Sudario* seeks something similar in the Central American context. Of her own work, she says, "Lejos de ser literatura femenina o literatura de género, lo que Escudos hace está definitivamente emparentado con esa literatura de la verdad que muestra hechos probables y posibles de acontecer y que pretende sobre todo una reflexión de la sociedad en su conjunto y no solamente una parte de ella" (143). *A-B-Sudario*, as we will see, is precisely that—an exploration of the contradictory nature of peacetime, but in a broader, more existential sense. It brings forth feelings of confusion and even exasperation as a way of keeping alive the truth of its historical moment.

*The Culture of Peace and the Self-Punishing Society*

Reveling in the mass public celebration of the Salvadoran peace accords, a woman who had just returned to El Salvador after a ten-year exile exclaimed: "Finally we have arrived—the promised land!" (Jones 2018, 178). Jubilant and triumphant, her remark captures the enthusiasm that permeated Central America as the period of armed conflicts was ending. Widely hailed as exemplary, the Salvadoran peace accords inspired an outpouring of optimism and were described by prominent political figures as "almost a miracle" and "a jewel in a crown of thorns" (Orr 2001, 153). Indeed, if two fiercely belligerent factions could come to terms and celebrate alongside each other in the streets of San Salvador, then anything was possible. The promised land, it seemed, was truly at hand.

Similarly, in Nicaragua, as the conflict between the Contras and the Sandinistas was coming to an end, the country's newly elected president, Violeta Chamorro, proclaimed "a new era of peace, democracy, and prosperity," and added, "it is beautiful that a Republic can rise without blood as a new sun of Justice and Freedom!" (Chávez 2015, 276). In Guatemala, the 1996 peace accords also inspired a great deal of fanfare, with lavish state ceremonies and massive popular celebrations. One observer, relishing the moment, remarked that the peace process seemed to signify "the opening of space for Guatemala's magic to emerge" (Jonas 2000, 6). The *Guatemala profunda* and the *Guatemala posible*—one rooted in indigenous spiritual heritage, the other in social reconciliation and justice—were finally merging and becoming a reality (6).[4] Throughout Central America it seemed as if the region's long and tumultuous history had finally given way to peace and democracy.

These enthusiasms were in large measure driven by government organizations and international foundations. Prominent among these was UNESCO's Culture of Peace Program, which sought to transform society at a global scale by promoting new forms of governance based on a combination of scientific and humanistic values. First launched in El Salvador in 1994 and subsequently expanded to Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Honduras, the Culture of Peace Program set out to incorporate Central America into a new global community of peace, democracy, and human rights. If a culture of violence was to be transformed into a culture of peace,

[4] On how Guatemala's peace process was unevenly received in urban and rural settings, see Burrell 2013. On the high hopes that the peace process inspired but which were also dashed by institutional dysfunction, political maneuvering, and widespread apathy, see Jonas 2000.

then Central American society as a whole would have to be transformed. People would have to be shaped into perfect citizens (*ciudadanos cabales*) and would have to engage in new forms of social interaction (DeLugan 2012, 29). To this end, UNESCO supported an array of NGOs and government ministries that focused on education, culture, social science, and communications. Through mass media campaigns, as well as through educational curricula and public seminars, these agencies disseminated the discourse of peace and promoted a new set of values—love, respect, kindness, cooperation, order, life, and health—that would undo the culture of violence that had caused so much destruction.[5]

In El Salvador, the political rhetoric from both sides of the conflict peddled the idea that in the civil war there were no winners or losers—that it was a war "sin vencedores ni vencidos" (Villalobos 2000). There was no need, therefore, to dwell on the past. El Salvador, like the rest of Central America, was moving onward and upward. Bill Clinton echoed this sentiment in a 1999 visit, when he stated that "no nation has traveled a greater distance to overcome deeper wounds in shorter time than El Salvador" (Clinton 2000, 336). Such was the optimism of the moment that a new civic duty—and indeed a new political orthodoxy—seemed to be taking hold. "Una de las características de este período", observed the Salvadoran writer Miguel Huezo Mixco, "es una idea bastante generalizada del deber de ser optimista. Frente a las actitudes refractarias de los eternos descontentos, ahora lo revolucionario, se dice, es la esperanza" (Huezo Mixco 1999, 14).

And yet there was good reason to be skeptical, for behind all that lofty discourse lay a rather grim reality. Not only did corruption and poverty continue to persist, but violence remained pervasive. The rates of violent crime soared to such alarming levels that by 1995 the violent death rate in El Salvador had matched—and perhaps even surpassed—that of wartime (Moodie 2000, 46). The sense of public danger was such that by 1996, 67 percent of urban Guatemalans and 57 percent of Salvadorans could report that they or someone in their family had fallen victim to violent crime (Pérez 2003/2004, 637). Indeed, it seemed a cruel irony that after finally

[5] This discussion of UNESCO's Culture of Peace Program draws from DeLugan 2012, 21-43; Edwards et al. 2015; Oglesby 2007; Pavone 2008; and UNESCO 1997. A key resource of the Culture of Peace Program was the Instituto de Investigaciones y Acción Social Martin Luther King, which was founded in 1993 in Nicaragua and began publishing the journal *Cultura de Paz* in 1994. As of 2019, the journal *Cultura de Paz* has remained in publication. For an overview of the Instituto Martin Luther King and its contribution to the Culture of Peace, see Babb 2001, 218-21; and Tünnermann Bernheim 2013.

achieving peace, Guatemala and El Salvador would rank among the top three most violent countries in Latin America (Pérez 2003/2004, 637). It was almost as if decades of violence and terror had been so deeply internalized that even in peacetime Central American society could not help but continue tearing at itself. The Guatemalan sociologist Edelberto Torres-Rivas (2006) suggested as much when he described his country as "una sociedad que se castiga a sí misma".[6]

Exacerbating all this was a quiet but pervasive sense of spiritual desolation. The culture of peace viewed social progress and cohesion as synonymous with economic growth, not as something to be rooted in the values or ritualized meanings of a social collectivity. The UN's 1992 Human Development Report that served as the basis for culture of peace ideologues made this abundantly clear when it stated that: "Human development is concerned both with developing human capabilities *and* with using them productively. The former requires investments in people, the latter that people contribute to GNP growth and employment. Both sides of the equation are essential" (United Nations Development Program 1992, 2; Lacayo Parajón 1995, 9-10). Market productivity and consumption thus became integral to how postwar citizenship was imagined (Rivas 2014, 125-48; Quan 2005). Happiness was to be found in the world of goods, and freedom, in the various forms of buying and selling made possible by the global free market.

The result was a citizenry of loosely attached individuals for whom consumption served merely to ease rather than resolve any disaffection. Shopping malls, entertainment centers, and even informal markets became spaces where they could envision an escape from everyday violence and precarity and encounter something resembling community. The distinction between a market *economy* and a market *society* had thus been erased, leaving the peacebuilding process without a qualitative measure.[7] Peace and democracy had been achieved, to be sure, but merely as convention. A deeper transformation of "hearts and minds," to borrow the language of culture of peace ideologues, remained elusive.[8] Whatever had remained

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[6] For a discussion of Torres-Rivas's metaphor of the self-punishing society, see Molden 2016, 334-37.

[7] On neoliberalism's erasing of the distinction between a market economy and a market society, see Gledhill 2004, 340.

[8] On the need to revitalize "hearts and minds" to achieve peace, see, for example the 1989 address by Federico Mayor, who served as director general of UNESCO from 1987 to 1999 (Mayor 1989). It was during Mayor's tenure that the Culture of Peace Program was most vigorously promoted in Central America and in other regions involved in peacebuilding processes. For an analysis of Mayor's views regarding the culture of peace, see Pavone 2008, 137-40.

of the utopian imagination that had once inspired the revolutionary movements and could imbue social life with meaning and purpose was neutralized by a deeply secular culture of economic survival. The result was a society devoid of any sense of orientation or guiding mythos—a "democracy without dreams," as one scholar aptly put it (Chávez 2015, 267). Postwar life had undergone a subtle but profound disenchantment. It had been reduced to the drudgery of survival, and the only refuge to be found was in the new and glitzy culture of amusement and consumption.

*Dissonance and Fragmentation in* A-B-Sudario

The conditions in which Central American literature was produced in the 1990s were thus profoundly different from those of previous decades. On one level, the fact that the political crisis had subsided opened up the possibility of exploring themes that had been brushed aside by the demands of political commitment.[9] But something else had changed. Prior to the arrival of peace, the violence and turmoil that had consumed the region was understood to be a matter of ideological conflict: it was intelligible and could be assimilated into neat political narratives (left versus right; democracy versus authoritarianism; oligarchic domination versus popular insurrection) where one side would eventually overcome the other. But the postwar experience, as we have seen, was much more dissonant and confusing—a peace riddled with violence, a freedom beset with risk, a cheerful modernity shot through with disillusionment and disaffection. The contradictory forces that defined the postwar period were no longer "political." Instead, they were nebulous and perplexing and devoid of any clear historical meaning. It was as if the experience of postwar life could no longer be integrated into a coherent narrative.

*A-B-Sudario* speaks to this. Through the experience of its protagonist, the novel vivifies what it means to inhabit contradictory states from which no single or comforting meaning can be wrested. It plunges the reader into a world where pleasure and delight are bound up with agony and despair, and where the culture of

[9] Escudos's work has made its mark by bringing to the forefront the intimate lives of women and the violence of domestic life. Critics such as Yvette Aparicio (2019), Linda Craft (2004), Beatriz Cortez (2010), Yajaira M. Padilla (2010; 2012), and Julio Torres-Recinos (2002) have highlighted the importance of the private sphere in Escudos's work. These critics have studied the ways in which Escudos's female protagonists push back against the patriarchal establishment and its traditional understanding of female subjectivity and agency. On this point, Padilla explains that Escudos's protagonists "dare to imagine an alternative existence to the one upheld by neoliberalism and, in many instances, fight for access to the public sphere" (2012, 75).

consumption has as its flip side a dreary and desolate existence. *A-B-Sudario* offers no narrative assurances to the reader. It is relentless in its embrace of dissonance as an aesthetic principle. We encounter this from the outset, in the very title itself. As a contraction of "abecedario" and "sudario", the title suggests both a beginning and an end, the construction of a life but also the death of it. It is at once playful and grim, but also somewhat jarring in its unmelodious merging of those two words.

Such dissonance plays out rather ingeniously in the first chapter, which is set in the nightclub El Egipcio, where Cayetana and her four companions first meet. There, everything is glitz and spectacle, from the Egyptian décor and the archetypally surly bartender to the Hollywood-cliché bar scene of a wise-guy Homero meeting a hard-drinking, femme-fatale Cayetana. El Egipcio is a fantasy world of drinking, dancing, and merriment. It is as artificial as the images conjured in cinema: "usted se parece a James Cagney en *Public Enemy*", Cayetana tells Homero as they sit at the bar; in turn, he remarks that, together, "parecíamos Ingrid Bergman y Cary Grant" in the film *Notorious* (Escudos 2003, 17, 22).

But the fairy-tale glow of this world is thin, and what is hidden away cannot but shine through. The language itself attests to this:

> Música de danzón. Sombras entrelazadas, bailando. Humo acuchillado por una luz que lo atraviesa y que cruza el aire delatando un color gris azulado. Murmullos, risas, frases sueltas. Sonido de vasos que chocan, rostros que se miran pálidos en la luz mortecina, la noche, la hora, máscaras de payasos, sonrisas extrañas resucitando desde el fondo de una copa. Olores, perfumes revueltos con cigarro y sudor. (Escudos 2003, 11)

That the people dancing are mere "sombras" of themselves; that their faces seem pale "en la luz mortecina"; that the smoke enveloping them is "acuchillado" by a grayish blue light, a color which Cayetana associates with depravity and evil; that the glasses being toasted with "chocan"; and that the smells of perfume and sweat become "revueltos"—all this suggests a world that is just as much of amusement and revelry as it is of conflict, alienation, and death.[10] The truth of this world is revealed when the revelry ends and Homero, having failed to take Cayetana home with him, finds himself alone in the street, drunk and disoriented, "como un sobreviviente que camina desolado entre las ruinas humeantes de la recién bombardeada Nagasaki" (24). Here,

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[10] Cayetana associates the color blue with depravity and evil when she describes her drug binge: "*el color del demonio es azul, no rojo*" (90); and when she is contemplating suicide: "saldrá el humo azul del demonio" (Escudos 2003, 210), "¡lo veo, lo veo! ¡el diablo es azul!" (212).

in this glitzy world of consumption, the promise of happiness and pleasure can only be an illusory spectacle, an escape device from a barren and desolate world.

The bustling city of Sanzívar offers up a similar experience. On one hand, the city can be peaceful and inviting. It is a place where one can go out for a leisurely stroll, enjoy a banana split at a sidewalk cafe, and visit the amusement park "Plaza Alegre". It is a kind of dream world, a pseudo utopia of consumption and happiness. But it is also a dream world where each outing requires that Cayetana constantly look over her shoulder and be ready for violence to erupt. From one moment to the next her happy amusement can be undone by violence and crime. Lurking about the city are gangs of criminals—"los muchachos más malos del universo" (Escudos 2003, 154–59). As Cayetana explains, Sanzívar is a place where "todo ser vivo que camine/repte/se mueva por las calles…es blanco de la indiscutible ley que rige esos bulevares: o te mueres o te mato" (72).

One particular scene reveals the deeper implications of this contradiction. Cayetana describes how one of her idyllic outings with her friend Pablo Apóstol was disrupted by a crime in progress. Two gang members were being chased by the police and were carrying contact explosives that, with one false move, could have killed her, Pablo, and all the innocent families enjoying themselves in Plaza Alegre. Fortunately, the bombs did not go off. After a brief shoot-out with the police, the criminals fled the scene and disappeared into the theme park, leaving Cayetana and Pablo frightened and shaken but with an immense sense of joy: "y nosotros sonrientes, plenos, henchido el pecho, felices de estar vivos, de haber sobrevivido al peligro *one more time*" (Escudos 2003, 159). The fact that the criminal menace retreated into Plaza Alegre is significant, for it points to the falseness at the heart of what the theme park has to offer. It suggests that the market-oriented spectacle of "happiness" is intimately linked to the ugly realities of violent crime. To escape into the joys of consumption and amusement is to seek refuge in the wrongness that prevails. In a place such as Sanzívar, if true happiness is to be found anywhere, it can only be found in debased form, as survival, as a measure of the grief that exists.

Cayetana's own sense of selfhood is no less discordant. When in public, Cayetana feels happy and composed: "se siente alta en estatura, importante, bellísima y magnífica" (Escudos 2003, 28). To her companions, she is "la Cayetana," a badass who can hold her own among men. But all of that is a front: "ES MENTIRA," she writes, "siempre tenemos un secreto sucio guardado en alguna parte. ese aspecto sucio, oscuro de nosotros mismos…ése que nos ataca cuando estamos a solas, ése

que salta como una bestia para destruirnos cuando no nos mira nadie" (111; 76–77). When she is alone writing her novel, this perverse and irrational force begins to act out, driving her to self-destruction. She describes it as "*una bestia terrible que quiere destruir, hacer daño, desbaratar, matar, causar confusión, tomarlo todo sin pensar en las consecuencias, desgarrar, desenmascarar*" (77, italics in original). Seeking to silence her inner "bestia", Cayetana binges on cocaine, drinks herself into stupors, and tries to kill herself in desperately violent ways: she shoots herself multiple times with a revolver; she hacks away at herself with a machete; she ingests various poisonous chemicals; and she even douses herself with gasoline and burns herself alive (188). But nothing works; the *bestia* will not die.

Try as she might, Cayetana cannot escape this dark and destructive force, for it is integral to the freedom that gives meaning to her life. As a writer, Cayetana relishes the freedom to conjure up fantasy worlds and explore her thoughts and emotions. Writing is everything to her: "no escribir es morir", she says (Escudos 2003, 192). It is her "Caballito voladooor…que te lleva a cualquier parte…lo importante es dejarlo correr" (176). And yet, as Pablo Apóstol explains, "la Caye sufre sus libros, los pare en procesos traumáticos y dolorosos" (98). For Cayetana, writing involves delving into herself, into her "secreto sucio" (77), and allowing that inner truth to express itself, even if it leads to painful and destructive behavior. Writing is anti-therapeutic for her. It involves more of an acting out than a working through of her inner turmoil. Cayetana's imaginative freedom may be giddy and boundless, but it is soaked through with violence and suffering. It is of a world gone amiss, where relishing freedom is tantamount to self-punishment.

*The New Humanism and its Neoliberal Bargains*

The culture of peace was predicated on the belief that human beings were endowed with coherent egos and infinite powers of self-control. Trauma, terror, and paranoia were seen as superficial phenomena—easily resolvable, not something deep or intractable. As long as people could be integrated into a modern economic market and given a peace-oriented education, then all would be well. Altruistic forces, it was said, resided within human nature and would move mankind along an evolutionary path toward a utopian, peaceful existence. The possibilities for betterment were

therefore unlimited.[11] As one key promoter of this vision—the Salvadoran intellectual David Escobar Galindo—explained, the culture of peace "respond[e] al dinamismo humano más esencial, ese que tiende de manera irresistible hacia la realización del hombre, como ser en estado de permanente perfectibilidad" (Escobar Galindo 1994, 21). And as Federico Mayor, UNESCO's director from 1987 to 1999, put it, peace was "a mode of behaviour dictated by the heart" and must therefore begin in the hearts and minds of men (Mayor 1989, 1).

Though laudable for its stated intents, this "new humanism," as it came to be known, could only offer cosmetic solutions to the deeply fractured condition of postwar society. At its core was the idea that Central American society, if properly educated, would automatically embrace and put into practice the principles of peace (Pavone 2008, 174-75; Prera Flores 1998). But this claim was based on an abstract conception of man, in which his impulses and desires are never in conflict but are always receptive to peace and well-being. It did not allow for the kind of mental disturbances and traumas that decades of violence can lodge deep into an individual's sense of self. Essentially, what the new humanism sought was to emulate the logic of postwar amnesty laws, such that if a politically divided society can be reconciled by wiping away the ugliness of the past and can start anew with a clean slate, then so too can the human psyche. All it needs is the right kind of culture and education.

Though the culture of peace certainly brought great benefits to Central America, it also played into the "neoliberal bargains" that have blighted much of postwar life. One of these bargains was that in order for neoliberalism to function, the citizens of Central America would have to be transformed into free and enterprising subjects. To this end, the individual would have to be viewed as possessing a coherent and unified ego capable of navigating the free market. Any residual traumas, anxieties, or destructive impulses would otherwise be too disruptive. For, as Michel Foucault noted, economic productivity depends on the emotional self-management and happiness of citizens: "the happiness of individuals is a requirement for the survival and development of the state. It is a condition, it is an instrument, and not a simple consequence. People's happiness becomes an element of state strength" (1988, 158).[12]

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[11] On the philosophical foundations of UNESCO's culture of peace, within which the notions of humanism and evolution merged, see Blue 2001, 186.

[12] This is not to say that all sectors of Central American society simply acceded to these changes. Neoliberal reforms—many of which went against the terms of the peace accords—were often met with opposition by grassroots organizations, unions, and student

In El Salvador, this was reflected in the political discourse of "concertación", which was established in the peace accords as an ideal for the restructuring of social and economic life and was premised on the belief that beneath all the conflicting ideologies lay a common national identity that could integrate, in a just and fair manner, all the different sectors of Salvadoran society.[13] Although little was done politically to achieve such a restructuring, the language of "concertación" was nevertheless widely disseminated and marked a political-cultural shift. If dissent, opposition, and conflict were once deemed to be necessary in the struggle against dictatorships and oligarchic rule, now, in peacetime, those measures were deemed to be reckless and unwise and would have to be set aside in the name of consensus, harmony, and understanding. To go against this was cause for censure. As one observer noted, stirring up controversy or focusing on the negative aspects of postwar life, even when there was good reason to do so, would get one branded in any number of ways: "anacrónico, radical, obsoleto, descontextualizado, extremista o confrontativo" (Góchez 1994, 33). Alongside the duty of optimism thus emerged a new "obligación ética" (33). A bargain had clearly been struck. As long as the myth of the sound, peaceable personality was upheld, then Central America under neoliberalism would develop in its likeness, as a harmonious and self-regulating whole where every part is held together by the flow of capital.[14]

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movements (Vilas 2000, 224). Nevertheless, the culture of peace was adopted by state actors as an ideological discourse aimed at promoting economic development as opposed to social reparations. For accounts of how social reparations were derailed in the peacebuilding process in El Salvador, see Wade 2016, 54-65; and Orellana Calderón 2015.

[13] The Foro de Concertación Económica y Social was established in the Salvadoran peace accords. Its purpose was to bring together government officials and business leaders to coordinate socioeconomic reforms that were not addressed in the peace accords. The Foro, however, collapsed due to the vagueness of its purpose and a lack of political will (Wade 2016, 44, 52, 116). The ideological assumption behind the Foro de Concertación—the idea that there is a fundamental common interest across Salvadoran society—is spelled out by Francisco Lacayo Parajón, UNESCO's representative in El Salvador and coordinator of the Culture of Peace Program (1993-1998):

> La concertación a la que nos referimos presupone que las diferentes partes en conflicto, a partir de cada uno de sus principios y en coherencia con ellos, reconocen en el proyecto nacional sus propios intereses y los de los otros sectores, así como los intereses comunes que legitiman el proceso. Una cultura de paz no hace desaparecer los naturales conflictos y diferencias que existen en toda sociedad, sino que concerta los intereses comunes fundamentales que impiden la desintegración de la sociedad y permiten construir un futuro justo y equitativo, garantizando a todos sus miembros reconocerse como partes vivas, interrelacionadas e interdependientes, dentro de una identidad nacional. (Lacayo Parajón 1995, 3)

[14] For a study on the homology between the emotional self-management promoted by neoliberal discourse, and the representation of capitalism as "a self-contained, self-regulating, happy, and harmonious interconnectivity between all internal parts connected by the vital flow of capital," see Reber 2016, 12. Another widely disseminated term related to this

The other bargain was this: that the state would offer up the "truth" about the past on the tacit condition that the violence and atrocities perpetrated during the armed conflicts would be qualified as momentary breakdowns of social relations, mere moments of madness that stand in contrast to the postwar order of peace, tolerance, and democracy (Grandin 2005, 48). Particularly telling was the very title of the report by the Salvadoran Truth Commission, *De la locura a la esperanza* (1993). Even the notion of "recuperación de la memoria histórica" was itself suggestive of a cognitive lapse, as if Central American society had fallen into turmoil because it lost touch with its own historical truth, a truth which it was now able to recover and work through from a position of stability and sound judgment. This was convenient for elite and middle-class sensibilities because it meant that the violence, trauma, and suffering of wartime was the opposite of the current order, not its *basis* (Grandin 2005, 64; Oglesby 2007, 91-92). Postwar life was thus rendered less threatening. At the same time, though, it was also drained of all the social and psychological complexities that made everyday life in peacetime so confusing and distressing.

*Defiance, Conflict, and Subjectivity in* A-B-Sudario

*A-B-Sudario* posits a subjectivity that flies in the face of the coherent, self-managed subject and the neoliberal bargains that sustain it. It is the testimony of an embattled self that is endlessly tormented by irrational desires. The Honduran intellectual Roberto Castillo rightly described it as "una novela de la voz, de una voz profunda y desafiante, desgarrada y desgarradora, conflictiva y creadora a través de su propio conflicto". He further noted: "es una escritura escindida cuya consciente división es desafío y búsqueda desesperada" (Castillo 2003). Summed up here are the modes of subjectivity which *A-B-Sudario* attests to—conflict, division, rupture, and defiance—and which it seeks to emancipate in a society held spellbound by the specious demand for "concertación".

Cayetana describes herself as possessing "ese yo dividido de los esquizofrénicos" (Escudos 2003, 111). Though joyful and appreciative of life, she is also besieged by the memories of a troubled childhood. Her bold and adventurous spirit is often undermined by the fear and paranoia of living in a hostile environment.

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was "integración", which stemmed from the political and economic initiatives of the early 1990s that sought to promote international cooperation and economic development throughout the isthmus. For the politics of "integración" in Central America, see Sánchez Sánchez. For the cultural aspect of the politics of "integración", see Cuevas Molina 2006, 23-63.

Within her, there is both an existential despair—"ese vacío que de pronto da algo así como un salto mortal dentro de nuestro pecho"—and a strong sense of purpose—"estoy tan clara de lo que quiero y de lo que soy, tan segura de para dónde voy y por qué, que causa miedo" (118; 110). Though she often feels helpless and emotionally numb—"me siento rara. fuera de mí misma, ajena. me veo haciendo gestos, diciendo cosas en automático, sin emoción alguna"—she is also capable of reaching a higher, almost mystical plane of experience, as if she were "en un grado más alto de la realidad, un pequeño escalón más arriba que los demás" (121; 93).

Contradictory impulses pull at Cayetana's sense of self. They are her dirty secret: "no se dicen pero se sabe que existen. …te pasan y no puedes expresarlas ni decirlas ni escribirlas. apenas las sientes, las vives, te desgarran, te aniquilan o las vences o convives con ellas para siempre. son las cosas de la vida" (Escudos 2003, 79). Cayetana's inner life is so turbulent that it leaves her without any stable sense of identity: "*todos los días el mismo espejo y una yo diferente*" (46, italics in original). Not even her body is safe from this: "siento que en mi cuerpo hay una lucha entre las dos. entre la bondadosa y la bestia. …mi cuerpo es un cruento campo de batalla" (78). When recalling one of her drug binges, she describes how her arms would shake and flail uncontrollably: "los dos brazos se movían, descoordinados, como un masivo y gigante tick nervioso. …trataba de comunicarme con mi propio cerebro, de decirle que le ordenara a mis brazos parar. pero ellos seguían moviéndose" (264). If neoliberalism posits a society in which all its constituent parts are harmoniously connected and regulated through the flow of capital, here we get the testimony of a subject whose constituent parts—identity, psyche, and body—are thrown into disarray by the flow of drugs.

Whereas the new humanism posits a vision of subjecthood in which emotional conflicts lie at the surface and are easily resolvable, in *A-B-Sudario* those conflicts not only run deep but are mysterious and intractable. The inner demons that torment Cayetana are like a Freudian death drive: they are forever a part of her and are impervious to her will. "Los demonios," she says, "al igual que el infierno, son eternos" (Escudos 2003, 127). Rather than try to work through or even repress those inner demons, Cayetana gives free reign to them, "no para hacernos sufrir," she explains, "sino para dejar florecer esa semilla de veneno que todos llevamos sembrada en el corazón" (78). As a writer, Cayetana must face that darkness within her, even if it destroys her. This is a task utterly at odds with the technocratic ethos of its time, which held that in order to protect the dignity of the individual, postwar society must

"acabar con la idea pesimista de un determinismo humano que lo lleve a su propia destrucción" (Drouhaud 1994, 25–26).

Lionel Trilling once described the death drive as "a hard, irreducible, stubborn core of biological urgency, and biological necessity" (1965, 115). It is that mysterious and anarchic element that lies at the root of man—hence its "biological" character—and drives him to recklessness and self-destruction. Though seemingly a pessimistic notion, the death drive, in Trilling's reckoning, ultimately serves as a counterforce to the hubris of social engineering projects, for it attests to the fact that there is always something outside the expert's control, something which is deep within man that reserves the right to resist and defy the prevailing values and beliefs of his society. Whether the death drive truly exists as something innate in man or is merely a symbol of his violent and destructive fate is beside the point. What matters, according to Trilling, is that the concept "suggests that there is a residue of human quality beyond the reach of cultural control, and that this residue of human quality, elemental as it may be, serves to bring culture itself under criticism and keeps it from being absolute" (113).

In similar fashion, the "bestia" that tears at Cayetana is also what saves her from the coercions and seductions of her society. Although this "bestia" frustrates and muddles Cayetana's writing process and makes for a book that is "absolutamente embrollado, desordenado y caótico", the result is a novel that defies the prevailing literary conventions and expectations of critics: "me acusarán de cursi, de desperdiciar mi talento" (Escudos 2003, 247). Regardless, Cayetana insists, "estoy escribiendo como a mí me gusta, muy amén de las reglas y los manuales" (247). At every turn, "los demonios" intrude upon Cayetana's thoughts and memories. They distract her and undermine her confidence as a writer, thrusting her into an endless, tortured cycle of writing and rewriting.[15] Essentially, they deny Cayetana the possibility of integrating her imagination and memory into something coherent. For her, there is no stable position from which to recover and work through memory. *A-B-Sudario* is a product of this. At its core, it is an "homenaje a la mala memoria" (180). And as such, it is also an affront to the postwar obsession with memory work.[16]

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[15] For an analysis of the interplay between Cayetana's death wish and her need for survival through writing, see Craft 2005.

[16] In an article published in 1995, Escudos remarked the following about the literary obsession with the wartime past:

> Los escritores salvadoreños se han desbocado obsesivamente, diría yo, a hablarnos sobre diferentes aspectos de la guerra…Me pregunto hasta qué punto es sano este

Writing may be traumatic and painful for Cayetana, but it enables her to explore the darkness and turmoil within her and thereby resist the social masquerade that threatens to drain her of depth and complexity and reduce her to a shell of herself, to just another mask in the "baile de máscaras que llaman 'vida'" (Escudos 2003, 113). If writing is a form of escape for her, it is an escape not from reality but from the bad faith of living as if everything were fine when it's not. It involves confronting things as they are and refusing any happily-ever-afters that will diminish the truth of her suffering.[17]

*A-B-Sudario* harbors the idea that if the dark and destructive element in man can be given a name, it does not have the final say. The suffering it causes Cayetana may be devastating, but it is ultimately her imagination that gives it aesthetic form. And therein lies her achievement as a writer. The fact that she completes her novel and gives voice to her suffering bespeaks an unstated commitment to the possibility that things can always be otherwise. For it is only by giving voice to suffering that the official culture of peace is revealed to be a false consolation, and we are reminded that true redemption has yet to be achieved.

*A-B-Sudario* is thus a stark refusal of the cultural politics of its time. Whereas in the culture of peace man is believed to possess a coherent, unified personality, in *A-B-Sudario* we encounter a self that is conflicted, destructive, and unruly. Whereas in the culture of peace man is believed to possess "human resources" that can be optimized through education and democratic governance, in *A-B-Sudario* we find a self whose instincts and impulses are utterly resistant to human control. Whereas in the culture of peace violence is the product of a lapse, a momentary crisis, in *A-B-*

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> exceso de literatura sobre la guerra. *Okey*: quedará un testimonio valioso sobre el periodo, hilvanado por todos los que aportan…Sin embargo, corremos el peligro, dentro del exceso, de crear lugares comunes y tonos repetitivos. Por no hablar más de alguna revitalización del panfleto político que, sabemos, está en franca desavenencia con la creación literaria… Es necesario un rompimiento con los temas tratados en la narrativa salvadoreña, sobre todo con lo referente a la guerra en la cual, parece, nos quedamos trabados. Hace falta variedad, experimentación, exploración de temas fuera del localismo o la realidad social que, insisto, tiene agotado al lector y que podría ser una de las causas de su desinterés por la lectura o cultura en general. (Escudos 1995, 44–45)

It is also significant that *A-B-Sudario*'s original manuscript title was *Memorias del año de la Cayetana* (Craft 2006, 132). In 2019, the novel was republished under this original title by Catafixia Editorial (Guatemala) and Editorial Los Sin Pisto (El Salvador).

[17] On her refusal to include happy endings in her work, Escudos has stated: "Mi interés personal como escritor…es plantear la vida como es, no darle como decimos en buen salvadoreño, no hay que darle paja a la gente, no hay que engañar a la gente. ¿Por qué voy a engañar a la gente diciéndole que una va a vivir *happily ever after*?" (Craft 2006, 127).

*Sudario* it is like the death drive, deeply embedded in the psyche. Escudos's novel refuses to abide the peacebuilding ethos that would turn a blind eye to the traumas, terrors, and hostilities that continue to fester and wreak so much havoc. Ultimately, it serves as a powerful reminder that "the belief that technocratic domination can come without blood and without compromise is the true fatal conceit of the late twentieth century" (Centeno and Silva 1998, 12).

*Conclusion*

In an article published in 1995, just three years after the signing of the Salvadoran peace accords and as Escudos was writing *A-B-Sudario*, Miguel Huezo Mixco wondered:

> ¿Por qué en un clima de "apertura" y libertades, incomparablemente superior al de los últimos 15 o 20 años, no surgen propuestas artísticas subversivas, esto es, propuestas capaces de contradecir el "nuevo orden" y proponer otras libertades y derechos como genuinos y válidos, otra moral, otros caminos para ensanchar la imaginación y la vida? ¿Se nos acabó el gas de la rebeldía? (Huezo Mixco 1999, 12)

As we have seen, *A-B-Sudario* answers Huezo Mixco's concern. Through its radical artistic experimentation, Escudos's novel brings forth a mode of experience that stands opposed to the shallow optimism of the prevailing political culture. To the official culture of peace, *A-B-Sudario* is the negative, cynical Other that exposes the coercions of optimism and the truth of human suffering. In a society where individuals are cut off from experiencing themselves, where unhealed wounds are papered over by market-friendly values, and where the messiness of the human experience is suppressed by abstract conceptions of man, Cayetana's writing becomes imbued with the force of protest. For not only does it debunk the easy faith that neoliberalism places in social progress, but it also calls into question the easy optimism on which the culture of peace is premised. It undermines the premature celebration of peace and thus stands as proof that the subversive impulse in art has not been abandoned in peacetime Central America.

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