

After the Revolution: Central American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism¹

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The 1990 presidential elections in Nicaragua, and the negotiated peace settlements of 1992 and 1996 in El Salvador and Guatemala, respectively, brought an end to more than a decade of armed conflict in Central America. In Nicaragua, the FSLN's loss of the presidency through free elections marked the end of the Sandinista revolution as well as of the U.S.-funded contra war against it. Though the FSLN remained an important political force in its new role as opposition party, it has been largely unsuccessful in defending the achievements of the revolution, already much eroded even in 1990 by a decade of war. In El Salvador and Guatemala, the peace agreements negotiated between authoritarian governments and revolutionary movements paved the way for the latter's participation in the political system, and both the Salvadoran FMLN and the Guatemalan URNG transformed themselves into political parties. However, both new parties initially found it difficult to advance their proposals against the global tide of neoliberalism that has swept the region since 1990.

The revolutionary armed struggles of the 1970s and 1980s succeeded in opening a space for the Left in Central American political systems, which had formerly been closed to it. This is no small achievement, for the wars in Central America were largely a product of exclusionary and corrupt political systems' repeated frustration of peaceful

¹ I thank Yajaira Padilla for research assistance with this article and for first bringing several of the works discussed in it to my attention. I am also indebted to her for our

attempts to address extreme poverty and inequality. However, the pacification of the isthmus in the 1990s and the Left's incorporation into Central American electoral politics have done little to improve the economic and social conditions that motivated armed struggle. Though revolutionary movements have won inclusion in the political process, to date their participation in electoral democracy has done little to bring about the changes for which the wars of the 1970s and 1980s were fought.

Indeed, the now democratic and parliamentary Central American Left has been unable to stop Central American governments' implementation of the free market, neoliberal economic and social policies promoted by the U.S. throughout the world. Unsurprisingly, such policies have done little to improve the region's longstanding problems of poverty and inequality, which remained as extreme in the 1990s as they had been in the 1970s.² In addition, the mutually reinforcing problems of Central America's growing prominence in the illegal drug trade, a rapid rise in increasingly violent street crime, and rampant political corruption have not, to put it mildly, helped to improve conditions for the majority of Central Americans.

These postwar trends have eroded the idealism and utopian hopes that drove the revolutionary movements of the 1970s and 1980s, leading to widespread distrust of political parties and institutions and a generalized disbelief in organized, collective

stimulating discussions about these works, which helped me to formulate many of the ideas presented here.

² The United Nations Development Program's State of the Region Project First Report Summary (1999) notes that in postwar Central America, "the economic and political achievements won are precarious and, in terms of social equity and environmental sustainability, negative for the region" (14). The report adds that "widespread poverty persists in the region" (18) and concludes that "social equity is a pending goal in Central America at the end of the twentieth century. The end of military conflicts, democratization of the political regimes, and modernization of economies has not managed to alleviate the historical social inequalities in the region" (32).

projects of social change. The 1989 collapse of the former Soviet Union, along with the self-serving opportunism of some prominent Central American ex-revolutionaries in the postwar period have only fueled such distrust and disbelief.

The political disenchantment of the postwar years has been registered with particular force in recent Central American narrative. While the 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of a politically committed literature that self-consciously sought to contribute to the struggle against dictatorship and oppression, more recent works from the 1990s and the beginning of this century express no overt political commitment. Rather, they are characterized by a disenchantment with, if not bitterness toward, the utopian political projects of the erstwhile revolutionary Left as well as those of the ruling neoliberal Right.

In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, politically committed literature took several forms. Ernesto Cardenal and Gioconda Belli in Nicaragua, Roque Dalton in El Salvador, and Otto René Castillo in Guatemala developed a new, vernacular, and often irreverent poetry with which to denounce injustice.³ Also prominent during the war years was the nonfiction genre of the testimonio, defined by John Beverley as “a novel or novella-length narrative, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the actual protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts.”⁴ Examples include the Nicaraguan guerrilla

³ Miguel Huezco Mixco refers to what he calls the “*estética extrema*” of wartime literature. This “*estética extrema*,” he notes, “Es para muchos, aunque no para todos, la tentativa de darle una significación social al arte. Pero para otros también es el rompimiento con el ‘buen gusto.’ Es el uso del lenguaje del panfleto de los activistas sociales, pero también de las expresiones callejeras. Es la de una insobornable defensa de los derechos humanos. Es la exaltación de la actividad proscrita. De la sexualidad, inclusive. Pero es, encima de todo, debo insistir, una tremenda expresión de libertad en medio de la coerción de un sistema, una sociedad y una moral detestables” (*La casa en llamas* 45-46).

⁴ John Beverley, “The Margin at the Center,” 12-13. Beverley also notes that “because in many cases the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer, the production of a testimonio generally involves tape recording and

testimonio of Omar Cabezas (1982); the Salvadoran testimonial collage *No me agarran viva* assembled by Claribel Alegría and Darwin Flakoll, as well as the prison testimonios of FMLN guerrillas Ana Guadalupe Martínez and Nidia Díaz; and the Guatemalan testimonio of Rigoberta Menchú (1983), perhaps the best known work in the genre. During the war years, narrative fiction tended to be overshadowed by testimonio and was often influenced by it, giving rise to the hybrid genre of the testimonial novel, exemplified by Manlio Argueta's *Un día en la vida* (1980) and *Cuscatlán, donde bate la mar del sur* (1986), which chronicled the rise of armed struggle in El Salvador.

Despite the varied forms they assumed, literary works during the war tended toward a more or less overt critique of authoritarian, hierarchical Central American societies ruled by ultra-conservative elites. Such works often expressed a faith in the possibility, if not the inevitability, of defeating such elites through solidarity among and collective action by the poor and excluded, often in the form of armed struggle. Because the war was fought primarily in the countryside, many wartime works were set in rural areas, which were seen as the source of an authentic national identity opposed to the alienated identity of national elites dependent on the U.S. for both their continued rule and their cultural tastes.⁵ Central American women's assumption of non-traditional roles (e.g. political organizer, guerrilla combatant) during these years of social upheaval is also a prominent theme in several wartime works, particularly testimonios, many of which

then transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is an intellectual, often a journalist or a writer" (15).

⁵ There are of course exceptions to this rural focus of wartime literature, such as the early urban novels *Pobrecito poeta que era yo* (1976) and *Caperucita en la zona roja* (1977), by Roque Dalton and Manlio Argueta, respectively.

were produced by women.⁶ Indeed, an unprecedented number of women writers rose to prominence during the war years.

The tendency in postwar Central American literature is quite different. The 1990s have witnessed a return to narrative fiction, while poetry has declined in importance and testimonio has been virtually forgotten.⁷ Recent Central American narrative fiction is characterized by what Beatriz Cortez calls an “estética del cinismo,” which she defines as “una estética marcada por la pérdida de la fe en los valores morales y en los proyectos sociales de carácter utópico.”⁸ Rather than addressing collective problems and social struggles or exalting the heroic sacrifices made in the present in order to bring about a better, more egalitarian future for all, postwar works focus on individual desires, passions, and struggles for survival in violent, postwar societies with only a grim future. These works register what Honduran-Salvadoran novelist Horacio Castellanos Moya describes as the “cultura de la sobrevivencia, del presente inmediato, del mañana incierto y poco probable” of contemporary Central America.⁹ Postwar fiction is also overwhelmingly an urban literature focused on the war’s aftermath as it is lived in the region’s capitals: Managua, Guatemala City, and San Salvador. In addition, women have had to struggle to defend the cultural and political spaces they had opened for themselves during the crisis years of the war, and this struggle is a prominent theme in some postwar works, particularly those by women authors.¹⁰

⁶ Lynda Marín, “Speaking Out Together,” 52-55.

⁷ Rafael Lara Martínez, *La tormenta entre las manos*, 294-295.

⁸ Beatriz Cortez, “Estética del cinismo: la ficción centroamericana de posguerra,” 2.

⁹ Horacio Castellanos Moya, *Recuento de incertidumbres*, 45.

¹⁰ On the failure of the Central American peace accords to address gender inequality and on women’s struggle for representation within the parties descended from revolutionary movements in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, see Ilja Luciak, *Después de la revolución*, 103-163 and 306-393.

Nonetheless, despite the immediately apparent contrasts between them, the break between wartime literature and postwar narrative fiction is not as sharp as it might seem, for along with the differences, there are also points of contact and continuities. As Beatriz Cortez notes, though postwar fiction lacks the idealism of wartime literature, it shares with it the critical project of denouncing “la inexactitud de las versiones oficiales de la identidad centroamericana.”¹¹ Postwar works may express disillusionment with the socialist utopias of earlier decades, but that does not mean that they embrace the technocratic, neoliberal utopia of the 1990s.

Indeed, it would be inaccurate to characterize these works as an apolitical retreat into the personal, for while they do not articulate an alternative to the neoliberal present, they nonetheless constitute a forceful critique of it from the perspective of that foundational figure of neoliberal theory: the sovereign individual. While the individual’s expression of his/her desires through the free market is the very basis of neoliberalism, postwar Central American narrative fiction represents the individual under conditions of actually existing neoliberalism as anything but sovereign. Rather, in these works the freedom of the individual is severely constrained by the violence and decay of nations still ruled by corrupt elites, in which it is virtually impossible even to know what is going on, much less to freely act upon such knowledge.

In what follows I provide evidence for this critique in several Central American postwar novels and short stories: from Nicaragua, the novel *Managua, salsa city* (2000) by the Guatemalan-born writer Franz Galich; from Guatemala, the novel *Que me maten si...* (1996) by Rodrigo Rey Rosa; and from El Salvador, the novels *La diabla en el espejo*

¹¹ Beatriz Cortez, “Estética del cinismo: la ficción centroamericana de posguerra,” (1).

(2000) and *El arma en el hombre* (2001) by the Honduran-Salvadoran writer Horacio Castellanos Moya and the short story “La noche de los escritores asesinos” (1997) by Jacinta Escudos.

Postwar Managua by Night

Perhaps the most striking feature of Galich’s *Managua, salsa city* is the popular, oral style in which both the narrator and the characters express themselves.¹² The Managua street slang used throughout the narrative leaves little doubt about the perspective from which the story is told: that of the subordinated, of those discarded by both sides in Nicaragua’s ideological conflict of the 1980s after it was over, the ones shut out of what few benefits the end of the war brought.

For both the narrator and the principal protagonists, all of them from a nocturnal urban underworld, Managua is a kind of hell from which there appears to be no escape. As the narrator puts it, Managua is the Devil’s spoils in a long running battle with God, a battle the former has repeatedly won, even when it seemed, as it did during the Sandinistas’ ultimately successful struggle against the Somoza dictatorship, that things might go the other way:

Pero lo peor de todo es que después del terremoto [of 1972, which marked the beginning of the end of the Somoza regime] se creyó que Dios podía ganar y finalmente volvió a perder y así seguirá pasando hasta el final de los siglos, donde Dios tal vez logre vencer al Diablo, pero para mientras,

¹² For a more detailed analysis of orality in *Managua, salsa city*, see Elizabeth Ugarte, “El lenguaje y la realidad social de *Managua, salsa city*,” a paper delivered at the Segunda Conferencia Internacional de Literatura Centroamericana, California State University, Northridge, October 2001.

aquí en el infierno, digo Managua, todo sigue igual: los cipotes piderreales y huelepega, los cochones y las putas, los chivos y los políticos, los ladrones y los policías (que son lo mismo que los políticos, sean sandináis o liberáis o conservaduráis, cristianáis o cualquiermierdáis, jueputas socios del Diablo porque son la misma chochada). (2)

From its opening pages, *Managua, salsa city* makes no secret of its disillusionment with the neoliberal aftermath of the Sandinista revolution, a disillusionment from which the postwar FSLN is not exempt.

Indeed, Nicaraguan neoliberalism comes in for a scathing critique as the novel examines the tragically violent outcome of the unbridled pursuit of narrow individual interests. The narrative begins at sunset as darkness envelops Managua, a darkness clearly associated with corruption and decay: “Managua se oscurece y las tinieblas ganan la capital, ¡y cómo no!, si las luminaries no sirven del todo y las pocas que sirven o se las roban los mismos ladrones de la Empresa Eléctrica o se las roban los del gobierno para iluminar la Carretera Norte cuando vienen personajes importantes, para que no piensen que estamos en la total desgracia” (1). At night, the narrator explains, the city is transformed into a demonic underworld.

Two of postwar Managua’s many discarded inhabitants encounter each other in the moral, if not the literal, darkness of a seedy nightclub: Pancho Rana, a demobilized Sandinista Army Special Forces officer, and the prostitute Tamara, alias La Guajira. Pancho Rana works for a wealthy couple as a chauffeur and caretaker of their property when they are out of the country. Having taken advantage of his employers’ trip to Miami to rob them of everything he could, he has gone out on the town one last time

before they return and he has to flee. La Guajira, having discovered a profitable complement to prostitution, is the head of a criminal gang of former contra fighters who prey on the wealthy men she attracts in bars and nightclubs. She mistakes Pancho Rana for such a wealthy mark, while he misidentifies her as merely a prostitute, without suspecting that she is the bait in a potentially lethal trap being laid for him.

As the night wears on, they consume large quantities of alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine while crisscrossing a Managua populated by corrupt police, drug dealers, thieves, and prostitutes. By the time Pancho Rana decides he can trust La Guajira enough to take her back to the mansion he is ostensibly protecting during his employers' absence, each of them has begun to perceive, under the influence of their respective mistaken impressions, the possibility of a more lasting relationship with the other. La Guajira starts to wonder if Pancho Rana might not make a better provider than robbery victim, and even imagines herself as the future woman of the house she mistakenly believes is his: "La Guajira no salía de su asombro, sabía de la existencia de estas casas, pero nunca pensó que algún día fuera a estar en una. . . . Muy posiblemente podría llegar a ser la señora de la casa" (62). This leads her to contemplate how she might rid herself of her partners in crime, one of whom, to complicate matters, lusts after her. Pancho Rana, for his part, "sentía que con esa mujer se la podía pasar bien sus buenos años" (63). He considers revealing his true condition to La Guajira, thinking that despite this she would be willing to flee with him and start a new life elsewhere with his employers' money.

Their fantasies about a conventional, even bourgeois, relationship are interrupted by the arrival at the mansion of La Guajira's gang, and of a pair of strangers who spotted Pancho Rana and La Guajira in a restaurant and followed them with the intention of

killing him and raping her. What ensues is a spectacular firefight survived only by La Guajira and one of the two strangers, who fearfully sat out the shootout and arrives on the scene only at the very end to escape with La Guajira and the goods stolen by Pancho Rana.

That this final shootout alludes to the contra war is made quite clear both by the identity of the participants and by Pancho Rana's combat flashbacks during the gunfight. It is, moreover, a particularly grotesque replay of the contra war, this time devoid of even the pretense of fighting for a higher cause (the defense of the revolution, the struggle against alleged Sandinista tyranny). Rather, this fight is motivated by naked self-interest informed, or rather misinformed, by false appearances. Pancho Rana mistakes La Guajira's gang for ordinary burglars, while they persist in their misidentification of him as the wealthy owner of the property, and the stranger who wanders into the firefight in pursuit of La Guajira has no idea of what he has just walked into. All are motivated by a desire for money and/or La Guajira, but they struggle for them blindly. In contrast to wartime literature, particularly *testimonio*, which posed clear ethical choices and invited the reader's identification with its heroic protagonist(s), here the reader is left wondering with whom, if anyone, to side.

La Guajira, at any rate, is central to the story, and may be interpreted as representing the nation over which Sandinistas and contras, as well as ex-Sandinistas and ex-contras, fought and continue to fight. Woman, or rather the female body, as nation is of course a rather old nationalist trope. However, Galich gives the trope a twist in *Managua, salsa city* by endowing La Guajira with at least a modicum of agency. She is not merely a passive object of male desire, the unrestrained expression of which leads to

disaster, but rather the leader of a group of men who depend on her for their livelihood, such as it is. Moreover, she acts on her own desires by ditching her partners in crime in favor of Pancho Rana.

Granted, she remains dependent on men—first her accomplices, then Pancho Rana, then the stranger who rescues her—but throughout she maintains a margin of autonomy under highly adverse conditions. For example, while the stranger thinks that, as the only survivor of the carnage at the mansion, he now possesses both her and Pancho Rana's loot, La Guajira has other ideas: "Tal vez con este si me salga la cuenta, pues se mira buenote, y hasta baboso, pero por cualquier mate, llevo parte de la herencia que me dejó mi amorcito, Pancho Rana, porque no le di todas las joyas del bolcito, no sea y se me quiera ir arriba el loco éste" (91).

Indeed, Galich casts La Guajira as the novel's principal survivor, and in the violent and corrupt social order in which she lives, survival is the best that can be hoped for. As the sun rises over Managua, bringing an end to a savage and terrifying night, the only important thing is to have lived to see another day: "Dios volvía a ponerle la llama a Managua y le amarraba las manos al Diablo. . . . La luz ganaba las calles. El bullicio y la acción se instalaban de nuevo como signo de vida, y eso era lo importante: estar vivos" (92). It is not an especially hopeful ending, but the dawning of a new day does suggest that the long suffering Nicaraguan nation represented by La Guajira will endure the ravages of the neoliberal present as it has endured those of the past, leaving open at least the possibility of a better future that it is still too soon to dare imagining.

To Hear/Know Evil in Guatemala

Set in the year after the signing of the 1996 peace accords that ended four decades of war, Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *Que me maten si...* is a kind of mystery novel. However, it breaks with the conventions of the genre by never fully revealing the details of the crimes around which the narrative revolves. Indeed, both of the work's would-be detectives are murdered before they can get to the bottom of the mystery, much less bring any criminals to justice.

The narrative's first unconventional detective is a frail, 85 year old English novelist and travel writer named Lucien Leigh, who is described by his wife as a man with "un olfato casi infalible para descubrir las causas nobles" (49). The cause in this case is a small group of Guatemalan activists' attempts to expose military involvement in the trafficking of both drugs and children, two serious problems in postwar Guatemala. Leigh's contribution to the effort to expose such official criminality takes the form of his hearing aids, which are listening devices in more than one sense. In addition to their usual function, his hearing aids are also bugging devices that transmit to Leigh's portable radio conversations he is interested in hearing and recording.

For example, under the pretext of visiting the Guatemalan highland community of Chajul in order to see the site of a massacre described in Rigoberta Menchú's testimonio, Leigh drops one of his hearing aids into the bed of a military truck that is later used to transport heroin or cocaine to the coast. The sounds transmitted by the device and recorded by Leigh allow the Guatemalan activists to determine the route taken by the truck. In a similar fashion, on a subsequent trip to Guatemala a year later Leigh plants

one of his hearing aids in the office of a Guatemalan orphanage he suspects of serving as a cover for a child trafficking or prostitution ring.

The role of Lucien Leigh and his hearing aids in *Que me maten si...* suggests that Guatemala requires outside help in order to confront the disturbing legacies of its recent past. Leigh quite literally enables some Guatemalans—Emilia, a young woman from a wealthy family; her sometime lover Oscar, a journalist with ties to the URNG guerrillas; and his friend Arturo—to hear what is going on in their country and to attempt to do something about it. However, Leigh is neither the novel's principal protagonist nor its only unconventional detective. The narrative's other would be detective and main protagonist is Emilia, one of the stronger and more interesting female characters in recent Central American fiction and one with more than a passing resemblance to the Guatemalan anthropologist Myrna Mack, murdered in 1990 as a result of her research into human rights abuses.

Leigh describes Emilia as a “ser improbable” who, “en medio de la especie de bruma moral en que vivía la clase adinerada, había logrado ver el aspecto oscuro y cruel de su entorno, y había decidido permanecer allí, con la esperanza de ayudar a cambiarlo” (11). Along with Leigh, Oscar, Arturo, and Ernesto, a former Army officer who quit the military in disgust and falls in love with her at the university they both attend, Emilia tries to do something about the grim reality of her country as it emerges from war.

That an at least minimally collective effort to secure a modicum of social justice should be so central to the plot of *Que me maten si...* would seem to indicate that this work lacks the cynicism and despair characteristic of postwar Central American fiction. However, this is but a superficial impression, for while its protagonists do appear to

retain some degree of idealism, *Que me maten si...* at every turn frustrates any expectations readers might have of a heroic outcome to the novel, or even of a less than tragic one.

The characters most closely associated with the URNG, for example, turn out to be deeply flawed. Though they may still be dedicated to a just cause, Oscar's and Arturo's cocaine and marijuana habit makes highly ironic their ultimately failed effort to expose the Army's drug trafficking. They are a far cry from the heroic guerrillas who populated wartime testimonios and other works. Moreover, the romance that develops in the first half of the novel between Emilia and Ernesto, a reference to the possibility of military reform and national reconciliation in the wake of the peace accords, is cut brutally short by a jealous and drug-addled Oscar's senseless and apparently accidental killing of Ernesto. In addition, Lucien Leigh dies under suspicious circumstances off the Atlantic coast of Guatemala while investigating the orphanage he suspects of involvement in child trafficking and/or prostitution. Finally, while looking into Leigh's death, Emilia herself is brutally murdered by Pedro Morán, a former army comrade of Ernesto's and the mastermind of both the drug and the child trafficking rings.

Pedro Morán, who had once admonished Ernesto that "En este país, para gente como vos y yo, el único lugar donde enriquecerse es la institución [i.e. the military]. O la droga" (16), escapes all efforts to expose his crimes. Indeed, by ironically presenting Morán's crimes as entrepreneurial business ventures, the novel mocks the neoliberal dogma of the free market as the only source of liberty and prosperity. It turns out that business as usual has changed little for the Guatemalan military since the end of the war, though Morán laments even what little has changed. As he prepares to dump Emilia's

guttured, weighted-down body into the sea, he bemoans having to do himself the dirty work others once did for him: “Con las nuevas reglas del juego ya no podías confiar en nadie. . . Existían peligros inherentes a la facultad y al oficio de dar órdenes” (147). While this suggests that the absolute impunity the military enjoyed in wartime may be ending, it also implies that new means have been found to make sure that whatever changes the rules of the game undergo in postwar Guatemala, the fundamental structures of power will remain untouched.

Speaking to the Present in El Salvador

Like Rey Rosa’s *Que me maten si...*, Horacio Castellanos Moya’s novels *La diablo en el espejo* (2000) and *El arma en el hombre* (2001) are a kind of frustrated mystery novel, for they both revolve around crimes that are never fully elucidated. At the same time, *La diablo en el espejo* and *El arma en el hombre* are narrated in the first person and in an oral, conversational style reminiscent of testimonio. Indeed, the narrative form of both novels is clearly a reference to the testimonial genre. However, that reference seems intended to mark both works’ distance from testimonio, for while they bear a surface resemblance to the wartime nonfiction genre, they also differ from it in several respects.

In the first place, they are works of fiction. The first person narrators of the novels are fictional characters rather than actual individuals. They are creations of the author, who speaks through them with a freedom and control that the intellectual compiler or editor of a testimonio lacks, however great his or her influence on the final,

printed version of the testimonial subject's narrative.¹³ What Castellanos Moya conveys through his narrator-protagonists is the difficulty of determining the truth in a society as corrupt and opaque as postwar El Salvador. Unlike testimonial narrator-protagonists, who confidently asserted the reliability of their perspective, the truth of their accounts, and the transparency of the social analysis such accounts underwrote, Castellanos Moya's fictional narrator-protagonists are less than reliable because they fail to fully comprehend, much less explain to the reader, the workings (or dysfunction) of their society.

In addition, *La diablo en el espejo* and *El arma en el hombre* make no pretense of conveying the voice of an exploited and oppressed subaltern. Castellanos Moya's narrator-protagonists are members or defenders of the right wing elite rather than peasants associated with leftist social movements or guerrilla forces. The narrator of *La diablo en el espejo*, for example, is a right wing, upper class woman, while that of *El arma en el hombre*, though of humble origin, is a former member of one of the Salvadoran Army's elite, U.S.-trained counterinsurgency battalions and participated in one of the war's most publicized atrocities, the murder of the Jesuit leaders of the University of Central America (UCA) in 1989. In sharp contrast to most Central American testimonios of the war years, the narrators of both novels do not pretend to speak for anyone but themselves. They seek not the common good, but rather their own self-interest.

In this sense, they are the ideal subjects of neoliberalism. However, the free pursuit of individual self-interest, even by members of the elite, fails under the dependent

¹³ For a discussion of the influence of the editor/compiler on the final, printed version of a testimonio, see Elzbieta Sklodowska, *Testimonio hispanoamericano*, "Testimonio mediatizado:)Ventriloquia o heteroglosia? (Barnet/Montejo; Burgos/Menchú)," and "Spanish American Testimonial Novel: Some Afterthoughts."

neoliberalism of a fragmented, chaotic Salvadoran society undergoing a rapid process of decomposition. Indeed, both novels represent Salvadoran social institutions—the family, political parties, financial organizations, the judicial system—as dysfunctional and on the verge of collapse. Even the sovereign individual turns out to be more of a fantasy than a reality as the narrator-protagonists of both novels end up breaking apart under the challenge of attempting to understand and survive in a violent and unstable social order, or disorder.

La diablo en el espejo is set in the exclusive, incestuous world of the Salvadoran elite and takes place some time after the signing of the peace accords that ended the war and facilitated the reincorporation of FMLN guerrillas into civilian life. The brutal murder of Olga María, the female narrator's close friend and a member of one of El Salvador's most prominent families, shatters the elite's smug self-confidence and sends the narrator on a search for the perpetrators and the motives of this apparently senseless killing. Though the narrator, Laura Rivera, never discovers the reasons behind her friend's death, along the way she uncovers a great deal of rot at the heart of the elite and of Salvadoran society in general.

Laura initially describes her murdered friend as a model wife and mother, arrogantly dismissing the police investigator's questions regarding Olga María's potential enemies and possible marital infidelities as clues to the murder. However, despite Laura's indignation at the very suggestion of any impropriety in her friend's life, the police investigator's suspicions turn out to be largely true. As Laura herself gradually reveals, Olga María had recently engaged in several affairs, some of them facilitated by Laura herself. Moreover, in the course of the police investigation, other sordid details of

the victim's life emerge of which not even Laura, her closest friend, was aware, including the affair Olga María had with Laura's ex-husband before they were divorced.

It turns out that the murder victim is not the only one with a secret life that belies the appearance of bourgeois propriety. One of her lovers, El Yuca, the likely presidential candidate of the ruling right wing party, is a cocaine addict whose drug habit repeatedly prevents the consummation of his encounters with Olga María, suggesting the official party's addiction to a criminal economy and impotence to deal with the nation's needs. In addition, the fraudulent investment schemes of another of her lovers, Laura's ex-husband Alberto, bankrupt the financial institution he headed, in which much of the elite had put its money. Alberto and his business partners are arrested, but the exact nature of the fraud is never publicly revealed, generating suspicions that the disappeared money was funneled into El Yuca's presidential campaign or used to pay off a debt that Alberto and his associates had with the Cali drug cartel. In the new, speculative economy of neoliberalism, not only do promises of phenomenal returns on investment fail to materialize, they also divert much of the elite's wealth into criminal endeavors.

Like the family, the ruling political party, and the country's most important economic institutions, the judicial system, too, turns out to be a fraud. After arresting Olga María's killer, a former Salvadoran Army Special Forces soldier known as Robocop, the authorities allow him to escape from prison before he can be made to tell who paid him to kill her and why. Such revelations about the true nature of her society provoke in Laura a loss of faith and plunge her into uncertainty: "Yo ya no le puedo creer nada a nadie" (137). Her mental state deteriorates rapidly such that after Robocop

escapes from prison she convinces herself that he is coming to kill her, and her terror leads to a nervous breakdown that lands her in a psychiatric clinic, heavily sedated.

Laura recounts all of this to an unidentified interlocutor whom, from the novel's opening lines, she addresses only as *niña*: "No es posible que una tragedia semejante haya sucedido, niña" (11). Only in the very last pages of the novel does the reader discover the identity of this interlocutor, who turns out to be Laura herself. As she notes about her mother, "dice que estoy grave de los nervios, que no me encuentro bien de la cabeza, que desde que Olga María murió permanezco alterada, que me la paso hablando sola, que siempre salgo sin compañía como si no supiera que ando con vos" (182).

Laura, that is, tells the story of Olga María's murder and its fallout to a part of herself that she perceives as another person. The disintegration of Salvadoran society she narrates is paralleled by her own breakdown or fracture into multiple personalities, raising the question of whether the events narrated are to be understood as real or as products of her unstable mind.

Castellanos Moya's subsequent novel, *El arma en el hombre*, suggests that these events are indeed to be understood as real rather than as figments of Laura's disturbed imagination, for several of them are confirmed in this parallel narrative that overlaps with *La diablo en el espejo*. *El arma en el hombre* is narrated by Robocop, Olga María's killer in the earlier novel, who tells the story of how he went from a Special Forces soldier to a thug for hire (a small step, as it turns out). As he explains in the novel's opening lines:

Los del pelotón me decían Robocop. Pertenece al batallón Acahuapa, a la tropa de asalto, pero cuando la guerra terminó, me desmovilizaron.

Entonces quedé en el aire: mis únicas pertenencias eran dos fusiles AK-47, un M-16, una docena de cargadores, ocho granadas fragmentarias, mi pistola nueve milímetros y un cheque equivalente a mi salario de tres meses, que me entregaron como indemnización. (9)

His severance pay quickly spent, Robocop puts his talents and his private arsenal to use by stealing luxury cars with a friend from the Acahuapa battalion. The two are soon recruited by their former commanding officer, Major Linares, to carry out privately funded “special operations” such as the assassination of an FMLN commander turned parliamentary deputy after the peace accords.

El arma en el hombre intersects with *La diablo en el espejo* when, in another “special operation” for Linares, Robocop kills Olga María for reasons that are never explained, either to him or the reader. As in *La diablo en el espejo*, Robocop is arrested, but escapes from prison with the collusion of authorities presumably bribed by Linares, whose men pick up the fugitive at the prison gate and shortly try to kill him in order to silence him for good. Robocop survives this attempt on his life, and in his escape lands at a heroin poppy plantation owned by a drug lord with official connections. He goes to work there along with other veterans of the Central American wars of the 1980s, but is seriously injured when the plantation is raided by U.S. troops.

Robocop passes out from his injuries and awakens in a prison hospital in San Isidro, Texas to discover that “una esquirla me había volado parte de la frente” (130). Like Laura, but literally rather than figuratively, he too has lost part of his head to the bewildering chaos of postwar Salvadoran society. Both narrator protagonists go to pieces and lose control of their lives in their contrasting attempts to understand and survive in a

confusing and opaque society lacking any discernible rules of conduct, much less the rule of law, one in which nothing and nobody can be trusted. Both novels depict a postwar social and economic order that makes a mockery of the individual freedoms trumpeted by the U.S. promoters of neoliberalism.

To this *El arma en el hombre* adds an additional irony. Having barely survived the consequences of U.S. policies in the region—of which he is himself a product, for one should not forget that he was turned into a killer by a Salvadoran Army financed and trained by the U.S.—Robocop is offered the chance to be made whole again. The offer comes from a Chicano DEA agent who gives him a choice between being sent back to El Salvador to rot in prison or providing U.S. authorities with information on the Central American drug trade, in exchange for which “ellos me reconstruirían (nueva cara, nueva identidad) y me convertirían en agente para operaciones especiales a disposición en Centroamérica” (131). The conversion would hardly require much since Robocop has been an agent of U.S. policy his entire adult life. The offer of reconstruction, for its part, rings hollow, since the U.S. has failed to make good on promises to rebuild what its policies helped to destroy in Central America. Instead it has imposed on the region neoliberal economic and social policies that have only exacerbated the poverty and inequality that led to war in the first place, thereby facilitating continued violence, now in the criminal form exemplified by Robocop. What Robocop, and Central America, are offered, in effect, is more of the same.

La diablo en el espejo and *El arma en el hombre* lack the idealism of testimonio and fail to propose any alternative to the dismal status quo they describe. Nonetheless, they develop a powerful critique of postwar Salvadoran society from the perspective of

two of the presumed beneficiaries of the new order, which is shown to be inhospitable even to them and hostile to the exercise of the individual freedoms on which it is supposedly based.

Challenging the Postwar Gender Order

One aspect of postwar Central American society Castellanos Moya's novels and most other contemporary Central American works of narrative fiction do not critique is the continued subordination of women in the postwar period. This may be because most postwar works are by male authors.¹⁴ Although established women writers have continued to publish, relatively few new ones have emerged. Most works by male authors tend not to address gender issues, at least not overtly, and often cast women characters in traditional roles. Some even appear to endorse the expulsion of women from the non-traditional spaces they had opened up for themselves during the war years. This is certainly one possible reading of *La diablo en el espejo*, for example.

Disturbingly, Castellanos Moya represents the disintegration of Salvadoran society at least in part through his female characters' partial break with traditional gender roles. Laura Rivera, the narrator, is an independent and sexually liberated divorced woman. Her friend Olga María is only superficially a model wife and mother. She is also an entrepreneur, having opened her own fashion boutique, and matches her husband's marital infidelities with her own, refusing to submit to the traditional double standard. While one might see these as modestly positive developments—enabled, it is true, by both women's class privilege—Olga María and Laura end up badly as a result.

The former is murdered, possibly as a consequence of her affairs, while latter has a nervous breakdown and ends up institutionalized, quite literally confined to the clinic by her father.¹⁵ It is hard not to read these outcomes as punishment for the two women's transgressions.

Jacinta Escudos's "La noche de los escritores asesinos" provides a sharp contrast.¹⁶ Through a complex narrative structure of a story within a story, it responds to Castellanos Moya's appropriation of a female narrative voice in *La diablo en el espejo* with Escudos's appropriation of the voice of a male narrator who, like Castellanos Moya, has appropriated the voice of the story's female protagonist for his own purposes. "La noche de los escritores asesinos" takes place in a crime-ridden, postwar San Salvador where its two principal characters, Boris and Rossana, engage each other in what Jean Franco has called a struggle for interpretive power, specifically, the right to write and tell one's own story.¹⁷

During the war the two had been lovers and members of an FMLN guerrilla unit. However, Rossana had left both Boris and the FMLN shortly before the end of the war and had gone on to become a writer of some renown. Crushed by Rossana's rejection of

¹⁴ Lara Martínez, for example, laments the lack of women among the authors of the bumper crop of novels published in El Salvador in 1996 (*La tormenta entre las manos*, 246).

¹⁵ "Quisiera poder salir ya, para hacer la gran bulla. Aunque quizá nadie querrá apoyarme, ni siquiera El Yuca, ya ves que los políticos tienen otros intereses. Y mi papá tampoco me dejará." (*La diablo en el espejo* 181).

¹⁶ My discussion of "La noche de los escritores asesinos" is indebted to Yajaira Padilla's analysis of this short story in her as yet unpublished conference paper, "Liberating Women's Voices in Jacinta Escudos's 'La noche de los escritores asesinos.'"

¹⁷ Franco observes that under the rubric of "la lucha por el poder interpretativo" she is discussing "un problema ético, problema que enfrenta toda obra escrita desde una posición diferente que la del hablante, una diferencia que puede ser de clase, de etnia o de género sexual y que en el pasado ha hecho de los subalternos material prima o personajes

him and forever obsessed by her, Boris, too, leaves the FMLN some months later and attempts to become a writer, but, unlike Rossana, without much success. As he recognizes, “A mí me cuesta tanto escribir un párrafo, casi nada de lo que he escrito en la vida me gusta. Siento que debo sentarme y repetir una y otra vez las mismas líneas hasta que sale algo bueno. Pero ella. . . . Rossana se sentaba y en un dos por tres tenía escrito algo que no necesitaba pulirse demasiado. Y era algo muy bueno” (98).

“La noche de los escritores asesinos” recounts the former couple’s reencounter after several years during which both had lived outside of El Salvador. Rossana had dedicated these years to writing, publishing, and building her literary reputation, while Boris had merely posed as a writer as a means of getting a series of women to support him. Rossana returns to El Salvador as a successful writer, while Boris returns only after discovering that she had already published two novels while he had written nothing worth publishing: “La noticia me conmocionó hasta los huesos. Guardé la entrevista y la leí y releí una y otra vez. No, no había leído sus libros, pero tenía que pensar en regresar al país, ponerme serio con mis papeles, escribir, publicar, hablar con los poetas y los intelectuales, con mis amigos los periodistas, ganarle el espacio, arrebatárselo” (102). He returns only to sabotage Rossana’s writing career and expel her from the space she had opened for herself in a male-dominated cultural sphere.

To a large extent he succeeds, not because of the quality of his own writing, which he admits is inferior, but rather thanks to his cynical exploitation of (predominantly male) intellectual networks upon his return:

de relatos que no son suyos” (“*Si me permiten hablar: La lucha por el poder interpretativo*” 114).

Hacerse famoso es lo más sencillo del mundo en un país como éste: hablas mucho, revuelves algunos contactos, dices cosas provocativas y todos te escuchan y aunque estén de acuerdo o no, tu nombre empieza a sonar, empieza a ser escuchado. . . . Es tan fácil ser escritor en este país, publicas un libro y te sientas a echar fama de intelectual. Lo demás viene por vida social, por copas y cigarros en las mesas de los bares. (103-104).

However, Boris's obsession with Rossana initially leads him not to silence her but rather to attempt to get closer to her by using his newly acquired position as the editor of the cultural supplement of a San Salvador newspaper to publish her work. It is only after she rejects his advances that Boris sets out to destroy Rossana, first by refusing to publish any more of her work, then by forcing his way into her house and killing her during an attempted rape. Though tried for the murder, he is acquitted after pleading self-defense.

"La noche de los escritores asesinos" would seem to be merely a descriptive account of the sometimes violent imposition of traditional gender roles in postwar El Salvador. However, as the attentive reader soon realizes, this is merely Boris's version of the story, narrated in the first person with occasional interpolated, italicized paragraphs that at first appear to be extracts from Rossana's diary, thoughts, and conversations, but which turn out to have been produced by Boris. Indeed, the short story Boris has written, partly in his own voice, partly in Rossana's, makes up the bulk of "La noche de los escritores asesinos"

Boris's short story does not constitute the entirety of Escudos's text, however. Rather, it is framed by sections of third person narration at the beginning and end of "La noche de los escritores asesinos," sections that contradict key elements of Boris's story

and reveal it to be a work of fiction within Escudos's work of fiction. The beginning of Escudos's short story, for example, describes Boris's solitary effort to write what starts out as a letter to Rossana: "Ayer fue jueves o viernes, no lo recuerda. Enciende el cigarillo, lo pone sobre el cenicero. Repara en el borde blanquísimo de la página que asoma por el rodillo de la Triumph mecánica. No sabe cómo comenzar la carta, cómo hablarle" (85).

The letter unexpectedly turns into a short story, which Boris apparently writes in one sitting. When he is finished writing it, and the reader is finished reading it, the third person narration resumes with a description of Boris's exhaustion as well as his satisfaction with what he has produced: "Cigarillos, café. Necesita algo para mantenerse despierto. Se le antoja un aguardiente que le revitalice la sangre. Quiere re-leer todo lo escrito. No sabe qué hará con ello, pero es buen material, piensa, un buen comienzo" (122). It is at this point that his story is soon revealed to be only a partial, in both senses of the word, account of his relationship with the ostensibly recently deceased Rossana, for as he goes out to buy more cigarettes, he encounters her in his doorway, very much alive.

Boris had indeed shot her, as in his short story, but he had not killed her. Just released from the hospital, Rossana now turns the tables on Boris and shoots him, explaining before she finishes him off that "La única manera de sacarte de mi camino para siempre, la única manera de terminar con todo este ridículo cuento es ésta" (123). Escudos's story does end here, but is not the only one to which Rossana refers. The "ridiculous story" to which she really wants to put an end is Boris's, the one in which he arrogated to himself the authority not only to recount their tortured relationship and its

violent outcome, but to do so at least partly in her voice. His story is ridiculous, that is, not only because of its content, which ultimately justifies his conduct, but also because of its form, by means of which he speaks for her.

What Rossana accomplishes by killing off Boris is to reclaim her own voice and the right to tell her version of the story. This complex structure of nested narratives—Rossana’s diary entries within a story by Boris within a story by Escudos—in effect reverses the male appropriation of a feminine narrative voice, evident in *La diabla en el espejo*, through Escudos’s appropriation of Boris’s masculine narrative voice. In doing so, “La noche de los escritores asesinos” rejects the endorsement of a traditional gender order implicit in Castellanos’s novel, replacing it with a fierce denunciation. The very form of Escudos’s story suggests that only by destroying the postwar, patriarchal (re)appropriation of their voices, by killing Boris, will women be heard in contemporary El Salvador.

Toward an Uncertain Future

What is striking in all of these works is the common theme of criminality. This should be no surprise, however, for the violence of the war years was a product of unjust social, economic, and political structures which the elections and peace agreements in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador have failed to modify significantly. While the wars ended, the violence did not. It simply took on new forms. As Castellanos Moya notes of El Salvador, “sin una transformación de las estructuras sociales y políticas, sin una redistribución del ingreso, la guerra encontrará nuevas manifestaciones.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Horacio Castellanos Moya, *Recuento de incertidumbres*, 51. Of course, as Carlos Vilas points out, it is also conceivable that the violence could once again express itself in

The works examined here provide a vivid representation of the new manifestations of violence in postwar Central America, along with the corruption and injustice that help to drive it. Although they do not propose alternatives and even appear to despair of there being any, their rejection of the official neoliberal story of market forces bringing freedom and prosperity to all in itself implies the need for alternatives. Though these postwar Central American narratives may not be overtly political, at least not in the sense that wartime works had been, they clearly point to the need for social, economic, and political change.

More than a decade ago John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman argued in *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions* that literature, even avowedly apolitical literature, played a central role in the emergence of Central American revolutionary movements in the early 1960s, for

these movements . . . have generally involved a union of popular sectors (peasantry, wage workers, rural and urban poor) with a radicalized intelligentsia, drawn partly from formally educated members of these sectors but also from the petty bourgeoisie and bourgeois or oligarchic strata; and . . . literature, precisely because it is marked as an elite cultural practice closely related to forms of political and bureaucratic power, has been an important means of radicalization of such an intelligentsia. (xi)

They note, for example, that in spite of its general lack of overt political commitment, the poetry of Ruben Darío served as a key element of FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca's

the old form of civil war: "As long as the enormous disparities that divide Central American societies today are not reduced, democratic consolidation will remain at risk, and the threat of renewed violence will remain latent even if development does advance" (*Between Earthquakes and Volcanoes*, 186).

elaboration of a Sandinista national liberation ideology in the late 1950s.¹⁹ Though Central America retains its economically dependent status today, it does so in such a radically different geopolitical and cultural context (the end of the Cold War, the cultural dominance of an increasingly global mass media) that it is hard to imagine postwar Central American narrative assuming the political significance Beverley and Zimmerman claim for prewar literature. Nevertheless, whether they end up radicalizing a new generation of intellectuals or not, there is little doubt that the works examined here register a widespread discontent with the neoliberal present and a desire for a different future.

Indeed, a new radicalization, of popular sectors if not of intellectuals, seems to be underway in at least part of Central America. In El Salvador, after disappointing electoral performances in the mid 1990s, the FMLN has capitalized on popular opposition to the right wing ARENA government's neoliberal policies and appears poised to win the March, 2004 presidential elections. The U.S. government's response to this possibility is not encouraging, as evidenced by outgoing Ambassador Rose M. Likin's June 4, 2003 comments regarding the undesirability of an FMLN government precisely because of the party's criticisms of neoliberalism.²⁰ A hostile U.S. reaction to

¹⁹ *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*, 30-36. In the Althusserian scheme employed by Beverley and Zimmerman, economic factors are determinant in the last instance in the sense that they determine which other factors (political, cultural) are determinant at any given moment. The nature of Central America's economic dependency, they suggest, put culture, and literature in particular, in a determinant role in the years leading up to the outbreak of civil war.

²⁰ See "Embajadora de E.U.A. advierte contra FMLN" *La Prensa Gráfica*, 4 de junio de 2003, (<http://www.laprensagrafica.com/ArchivoLPG/20030604/nacion/nacion5.asp>). Though she insisted that she was not trying to interfere in El Salvador's internal politics, Ambassador Likins nonetheless noted that "Algunos de los señalamientos, acciones y discursos del Frente [the FMLN] nos causan preocupación." Specifically, she expressed concern regarding the FMLN's relations with Cuba, China, and Vietnam, and complained

an FMLN victory in El Salvador's next presidential elections could well turn the violence in Salvadoran society back into the more familiar channels of armed civil conflict. The outcome of the elections and the consequences of a possible FMLN victory are, of course, impossible to predict with any certainty. What is clear, however, is that at least one strain of contemporary Central American narrative fiction both expresses and contributes to the growing sense that the neoliberal present is increasingly untenable.

about the party's plans to "echar atrás las privatizaciones, cuando hay empresas estadounidenses que han invertido en desarrollar sectores claves de la vida nacional [y] podrían ver en peligro su inversión" ("Peligraría inversión americana [entrevista/ Rose M. Likins]" La Prensa Gráfica, 4 de junio de 2003, <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/ArchivoLPG/20030604/nacion/nacion4.asp>).

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