



Vol. 11, No. 2, Winter 2014, 53-75

## **Telling Evasions: Postwar El Salvador in the Short Fiction of Claudia Hernández**

**Misha Kokotovic**

University of California—San Diego

The stories in Claudia Hernández's collection *Mediodía de frontera* (2002) give little indication of where and when they take place. They make no mention of El Salvador or even Central America, nor do they refer to historical events, such as the civil wars that afflicted the region in the 1970s and 1980s or the peace accords that ended them. Likewise, the social and economic conditions of the postwar 1990s, such as continued poverty and inequality at prewar levels, an explosion in violent crime, or the rapid growth of *maras*, or youth gangs, make no appearance in *Mediodía de frontera*, at least not overtly. Populated by both the dead and the living, by animals as well as humans, and strewn with mutilated bodies, these surreal, even absurdist, stories have more in common with Kafka or Cortázar than with the politically committed wartime literature of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup> And yet, as fantastic and enigmatic as Hernández's stories may be, as much as they may aspire to be read as universal literature rather than

---

<sup>1</sup> Hernández acknowledges a predilection for both Cortázar and Kafka in an interview with Ábrego.

national literature, they nonetheless remain rooted in Salvadoran and Central American social reality during a difficult period of transition.<sup>2</sup>

Claudia Hernández (b. 1975) is perhaps the foremost Salvadoran narrative fiction writer of her generation, which grew up during the war but was too young to have participated in it.<sup>3</sup> Hernández's work has been awarded the Juan Rulfo short story prize sponsored by Radio France Internationale in 1998 and the Anna Seghers literary prize in Germany in 2004, and there is a growing body of Central Americanist scholarship devoted to her stories.<sup>4</sup> However, most of this scholarship treats postwar Central American literature in general, using Hernández's stories as one example among others.<sup>5</sup> So far there are few studies focused exclusively on her work, which merits attention from a wider audience of Latin Americanists and literary scholars in general. Hernández's stories stand out from much postwar Central American fiction because they do not refer to the war and its consequences overtly, in more or less realist fashion, but rather allude to the conflict's enduring effects in the troubled and paradoxically violent peace of the 1990s obliquely, by subtly calling attention to their own silence on the subject. By making such evasion visible, the stories in *Mediodía de frontera* expose the unacknowledged

---

<sup>2</sup> The theme of transition is implicit in the title itself, which refers to both temporal (noon) and spatial (border) divides.

<sup>3</sup> As Yajaira Padilla noted at a conference on postwar literature held at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) in April 2009, Hernández explained that "she belongs to a new cohort of writers who grew up during the civil conflict, but for whom the war did not constitute a politically defining event, as was the case with previous generations of committed authors who emerged during the 1970s and 1980s" (Padilla, 164n).

<sup>4</sup> The growing bibliography on Hernández's short stories includes Candelario, Cortez, (155-162), Craft, Lara Martínez (379-388), Mackenbach, "Entre política, historia y ficción," Padilla "Of Diosas, Cochones, and Pluriempleadas" (102-106) and "Setting La diabla Free" (139-141), Rodríguez, (226-227). Of these works, only Craft's article focuses exclusively on Hernández.

<sup>5</sup> Mackenbach has questioned whether the term postwar Central American literature is adequate as a periodizing concept, given the diversity of the region's literature before, during, and after the wars of the 1970s and 1980s ("Después de los pos-ismos"). Cortez disavows any periodizing intention and instead uses the term postwar to refer to a sensibility present in much contemporary Central American literature (24). In this article I use the term postwar in reference to Hernández's short stories in two ways. First, simply to indicate that the stories in *Mediodía de frontera* were written in the 1990s, after the conclusion of the war in El Salvador, and that they refer, albeit obliquely, to the same period. Second, that *Mediodía de frontera* is characterized by the postwar sensibility Cortez has called an "aesthetic of cynicism," although I also argue that Hernández's stories deploy this cynicism in an ironic and critical fashion.

costs of El Salvador's pacification and call into question the project of national reconciliation without accountability for the crimes committed during the war.<sup>6</sup>

This literary strategy of drawing attention to the evasion of accountability for and even knowledge of wartime abuses has something in common with the process of "unknowing" anthropologist Ellen Moodie describes in her recent study of crime and the stories told about it in postwar El Salvador. Moodie observes that in the years after the 1992 peace accords that ended the war between the FMLN guerrillas and the state, the Salvadoran government engaged in what she calls critical code switching. During the war, violence had been perceived as the ideologically driven expression of political conflict. In the wake of the peace accords, the Salvadoran state, still controlled by right-wing elites, attempted to switch the code according to which violence was to be interpreted, such that it now appeared as merely the result of common crime. This attempt to depoliticize violence required Salvadorans to forget, or to use Moodie's term, to unknow, "that social inequality and structural violence in the late 1970s led to war and today still keep the majority of the population marginalized, impoverished, and criminalized" (173).

The state sought to interpret the postwar explosion in El Salvador's crime rate, the homicide rate in particular, not as the consequence of such social conditions, but "as the result of individual, willful, and perhaps even congenital, deviance" (173).<sup>7</sup> Though the state was neither entirely nor enduringly successful in this attempt, the effects of its critical code switching and promotion of unknowing show up in the stories Salvadorans

---

<sup>6</sup> In 1993, shortly after the UN Truth Commission for El Salvador issued its report, in which it held agents of the state responsible for 85% of the human rights violations committed during the war, the Salvadoran government passed an amnesty law that gave war criminals immunity from prosecution (Moodie, 5). For the full text of the Truth Commission Report, see *De la locura a la esperanza: La guerra de 12 años en El Salvador*.

<sup>7</sup> As Moodie notes, in 1995 the Salvadoran Attorney General's office reported "a murder rate of 138.9 per 100,000 population—more than the annual wartime violent death rate, the highest in the Americas and second only to South Africa in the world" (46). Cruz et al. confirm this 1995 figure and show only a slight decline in the murder rate in 1996 and 1997, to 117.4 and 111.2 per 100,000 population, respectively (22). Moodie cautions that Cruz ("Violence, Citizen Insecurity, and Elite Maneuvering," 152) has since questioned the accuracy of these figures, "but confirms that rates reached a minimum of 80 per 100,000 between 1994 and 1997" (Moodie 227).

told Moodie about crime in the 1990s, stories which describe postwar violence as “worse than the war” and “insist that the individual—not the collective, not the state—must separately manage the era’s new dangers” (173). Moodie argues that such stories “helped produce a powerful sense of not-knowing that abetted an individualized, depoliticized remaking of social relations” (174) crucial for the postwar Salvadoran state’s neoliberal project.

Unlike the oral accounts that Moodie collected in El Salvador, Hernández’s short stories do not address the postwar increase in violent crime so much as the legacy of wartime violence and the unacknowledged costs of El Salvador’s pacification, achieved without resolving the structural violence of poverty and inequality that led to the war. However, they do critique a similar process of unknowing. In many of the stories included in *Mediodía de frontera*, individuals are left to deal privately, on their own, with the legacy of wartime violence. The persistent effects of the disappearance and torture practiced by the Salvadoran state during the war are hidden within the domestic sphere and depoliticized by making them a private rather than public responsibility. In some stories, individuals’ attempts to internalize the costs of restoring peace without addressing the structural violence that led to war, lead to acts of self-mutilation and even suicide.

What Moodie calls unknowing may perhaps also be understood as one form of the cynicism that, according to Beatriz Cortez, characterizes postwar Central American fiction. This aesthetic of cynicism, Cortez argues, “dio lugar a la formación de una subjetividad precaria en medio de una sensibilidad de posguerra colmada de desencanto...una subjetividad que solamente se posibilita por medio...de su destrucción, de su desmembramiento, de su suicidio, literalmente hablando ” (25). Cynicism, as a not-knowing, depoliticizing reaction to the failed utopianism of the revolutionary projects of the war years, produces only a self-destructive subjectivity incapable of confronting the many problems and challenges faced by postwar Central American societies. For this reason, Cortez does not promote postwar Central American literature’s aesthetic of cynicism as an alternative to the revolutionary utopias of the 1970s and 1980s. Rather,

she is interested in the aesthetic of cynicism as a failed project, “una trampa que constituye la subjetividad por medio de la destrucción del ser a quien constituye como sujeto” (26). Hernández’s stories share this critical attitude and push beyond an aesthetic of cynicism by treating it ironically, showing its destructive effects on postwar subjects, thereby exposing cynicism as an inadequate, counterproductive response to postwar social conditions.

Much as in Kafka, the allegories in Hernández’s stories are rendered so literally that they disrupt the whole concept of allegory as the structure that connects two narratives, or sets of ideas. That structure in itself has something to do with unknowing: if one half of the allegory is dispensed with, if all that is left is the concrete part and not the abstraction it refers to, then half the structure of meaning that makes an allegory work is lost. That lost half has been forgotten, so to speak, or unknown, but visibly so in Hernández’s short stories, which enact such unknowing of the causes and agents of wartime violence ironically, exposing what is being forgotten by calling attention to the silence surrounding it.<sup>8</sup>

In this article I look first at four stories from *Mediodía de frontera* that address the postwar legacy of wartime violence: “Las molestias de tener un rinoceronte,” “Hechos de un buen ciudadano (parte I),” “Hechos de un buen ciudadano (parte II),” and “Manual del hijo muerto.” I then examine three additional stories that focus on the costs of El Salvador’s pacification and the restoration of a social order characterized by levels of poverty and social inequality little changed from those that prevailed before the war and contributed to the outbreak of armed conflict.

The narrator of the first story in the collection, “Las molestias de tener un rinoceronte,” is a young man who lost an arm in circumstances that are never explained. The evasion of the undoubtedly violent event that caused the loss of the narrator’s arm is signaled in the story’s opening line: “Que a uno le falta un brazo es incómodo cuando se tiene un rinoceronte” (9). That the lack of an arm is uncomfortable and inconvenient is self-evident. The superfluous reference to a rhinoceros in the second part of the sentence is a diversionary non sequitur that has the effect of distracting

---

<sup>8</sup> I thank Brian Gollnick for suggesting this comparison with Kafka.

attention from the more obvious question of how the arm was lost and the challenges the narrator faces without one. The circumstances in which one might lose an arm are uncommon and almost inevitably violent. Industrial or agricultural accidents come to mind, as do traffic accidents and armed conflicts. Given El Salvador's recent history of civil war and the number of wounded veterans who survived it, the narrator's loss of an arm can plausibly be linked to the violence of the armed conflict. However, rather than dwelling on the missing limb, the story focuses on the small rhinoceros, which nonetheless is closely associated with the loss because, as the narrator notes, the animal "salió de alguna parte el día que perdí el brazo y me siguió" (10). Interest in the violence involved in the loss of an arm is displaced by interest in the rhinoceros, which serves, in effect, as both a surrogate for the lack of an arm and a screen that hides that lack.<sup>9</sup>

This reading is confirmed by the narrator's explanation of why the little rhinoceros is irritating:

La gente de estas ciudades bonitas y pacíficas no está acostumbrada a ver a un tipo con un brazo de menos y un rinoceronte de más saltando a su alrededor. Uno se vuelve espectáculo en las ciudades aburridas como ésta y tiene que andar por las calles soportando que la gente lo mire, le sonría y hasta se acerque para platicar de lo lindo que está su rinoceronte. (9)

The reference to "ciudades bonitas y pacíficas" seems ironic, for although Salvadoran cities undoubtedly have their charms and attractions, they could hardly be described as peaceful during the 1990s, when the country had some of the highest murder rates in the world. Alternatively, the reference may also suggest that the narrator is a traveler or immigrant to cities, at some distance from where he lost his arm and acquired the rhinoceros. In either case, if the rhinoceros is annoying because it attracts

---

<sup>9</sup> The use of a rhinoceros also inevitably recalls Ionesco's iconic work of the theater of the absurd, in which the transformation of all the characters but one into rhinoceroses is often read as an allusion to the rise of fascism and Stalinism. The apparent reference to Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (1959) in "Las molestias de tener un rinoceronte" perhaps signals the aversion to ideologically driven literature and political movements that Hernández shares with most postwar Central American writers. The narrator's simultaneous repulsion from and attraction to the rhinoceros in her story could perhaps be interpreted as a representation of a conflicted, ambivalent postwar attitude toward the more ideologically charged period of the war. Though this reading is not incompatible with my own, it does not seem to me to be the main thrust of the story.

unwanted attention to the narrator and makes him a spectacle, it at least distracts attention from the missing arm. People ask about the rhinoceros, not the arm or how it was lost, allowing the narrator to maintain his silence on the subject. When asked about the rhinoceros, the narrator denies it's his, but also checks to be sure "que lo vean a él y no a mi brazo que no está" (9).

And yet, though he is able to avoid discussion of his missing arm and unwanted attention to it, he cannot pass unnoticed entirely. He stands out one way or another. Hence the simultaneous repulsion and attraction he feels for the rhinoceros. Though he is thankful for the company, and, one surmises, the cover the rhinoceros provides for his lack of an arm, he is tired of the attention it attracts. So he attempts to give the rhinoceros away to strangers who ask about it, but they refuse, insisting that it belongs to him despite his protestations to the contrary. He tries giving it to his grandparents, who return it almost immediately. He attempts to abandon it in "una región dominada por la noche" (10), which one might interpret as the unconscious, but the abandoned (or repressed) rhinoceros soon returns to reclaim its place by his side. In the final lines of the story, the narrator settles into a highly ambivalent relationship with the animal. He continues to deny that it belongs to him and still offers it to strangers, but fears that one day someone will accept and he'll be left alone. He claims the rhinoceros is free to do what it wants, but also says he won't allow it to leave:

Yo seguiré negando que me pertenece aunque, al llegar a casa, lo acaricie con los dedos que no tengo y lo deje dormir bajo mi sombra. Seguiré ofreciéndoselo a todo el que me pregunte por él. Porque no es mío. Puede irse cuando quiera. Con quien quiera. No es mío. No lo llamé. Vino solo. Sin que yo le dijera. Me escogió. A pesar de ser incompleto... No se va a ir. No se lo permito. Lo oculto con el brazo que no tengo. Nadie puede quitarle su rinoceronte a un hombre que ya perdió su brazo. Nadie. (11)

The narrator's dependence on the rhinoceros at the end of the story calls attention to the very lack the animal was meant to cover up. Indeed, the missing arm now hides the rhinoceros rather than the other way around. Instead of deflecting attention from the missing arm, the rhinoceros leads right back to it, and to the question of the violence responsible for its loss.

Other stories in *Mediodía de frontera* allude to the war somewhat less obliquely, though still by making conspicuous their evasion of the subject. In “Hechos de un buen ciudadano (parte I),” the narrator and good citizen of the title finds the cadaver of a young woman in his kitchen one day: “Había un cadáver cuando llegué. En la cocina. De mujer. Lacerado” (15). The woman has clearly been murdered and her body drained of blood. The good citizen, who evidently has some experience in these matters, is impressed by the quality of the work performed on her: “He visto muchos asesinados en la vida, pero nunca uno con un trabajo tan bueno como el que le habían practicado a la muchacha” (15). The systematic, almost clinical manner in which the young woman in the story was dispatched suggests that the allusion here is to the torture and disappearance practiced by the state during the war years rather than to El Salvador’s high levels of postwar violence. However, unlike in the 1970s and 1980s, when the mutilated bodies of the disappeared and tortured would reappear in public places as a warning to anyone considering opposition to the state, in this story the body turns up within the private sphere of the home and in one of its more intimate and least public spaces, the kitchen.

In keeping with this initial privatization of the effects of state-sponsored terror, the story assiduously and visibly avoids the question of responsibility or justice by having the good citizen place a classified ad in the newspaper, as if the body were merely someone’s lost property: “Busco dueño de cadáver de muchacha joven de carnes rollizas, rodillas saltonas, y con cara de llamarse Lívida. Fue abandonada en mi cocina, muy cerca de la refrigeradora” (16). Rather than notifying the police or inviting the media to report on the appearance of a murder victim in his kitchen, he chooses to announce his discovery in the least public section of the newspaper, the classified ads, a space dedicated to transactions between private parties. The good citizen in effect depoliticizes the crime by minimizing public awareness or discussion of it, treating it instead as a simple matter to be resolved in a private exchange between the finder and the owner of a lost object. Rather than attempting to determine who killed the young woman, a question about which he expresses no curiosity, the narrator and good citizen charitably tries to locate the party to whom the cadaver belongs.



For its part, the state seeks only to dissociate itself from the young woman's murder. In response to his classified ad, the good citizen receives a phone call from a government official who inquires whether sanitary measures have been taken "para evitar contagios en el vecindario" (16-17). The official also requests that the narrator sign a form assuming all responsibility "si acaso se desencadenaba una epidemia de muertos en los alrededores" (17), thereby absolving the state of any liability in the matter and allowing it to evade even its public health obligations. The mysterious appearance in a citizen's kitchen of the body of a murdered young woman, evidence of a crime likely perpetrated by agents of the state, is explained away, through a process of unknowing, as merely a lost object in need of return to its rightful owner, or as the victim of an infectious disease that might become an epidemic, but is in no way the result of social conflict.

In response to the classified ad, a few individuals call the good citizen looking for missing family members, but none of their descriptions match the dead woman in the narrator's kitchen. After a week without additional calls, and with the cadaver beginning to produce an unpleasant odor, the good citizen considers turning it over to the public health office. But he thinks better of it, and instead calls back one of the individuals who had responded to the classified ad in search of the body of his murdered son. The good citizen proposes that they pass off the dead woman's cadaver as that of the man's son, because "así haríamos dos favores: le daríamos entierro a esa niña y calmaríamos a los parientes de él, que por fin dormirían tranquilos" (17). A minor problem arises when they discover that the body of the dead woman is smaller and lighter than that of the missing son, but the narrator obligingly donates a few heavy objects from his house to put in the coffin so that nobody will suspect. In the end, the evidence of wartime violence, the dead woman's body, is literally buried, under false pretenses, in a conscious and deliberate act of unknowing intended to calm nerves and ensure that everyone sleeps peacefully. Moreover, such unknowing, or duplicitous silence, about the victims of violence and accountability for it is ironically presented as the hallmark of good citizenship, for the story ends with the narrator noting that the man to whom he turns over the unclaimed cadaver, "Al final me pidió discreción.

Por supuesto se la juré, como cualquier buen ciudadano hubiera hecho” (18). Good citizenship, then, involves keeping quiet about state terror and about cover-ups of it intended to soothe consciences. And yet in telling the story of how he disposed of the murdered woman’s body, the narrator violates the other man’s trust and undermines his own reliability and claim to good citizenship.

“Hechos de un buen ciudadano (parte II),” a continuation of “Hechos de un buen ciudadano (parte I),” appears three stories later and takes unknowing a step further. Because of his classified ad regarding the dead woman that appeared in his kitchen, the narrator and good citizen starts receiving calls from others who have also found dead bodies in their homes and urgently need to know “cómo había solucionado el problema de tener un cadáver ajeno en casa” (39). He gladly offers his help and gives them his address in case they require more than advice over the telephone. Given his experience in the matter, many bring the cadavers that appeared in their homes to him for hands-on assistance, and he ends up with twenty dead bodies in his kitchen. Though all the cadavers were found naked, like the original one, “para transportarlos...sin levantar sospechas, los habían vestido con ropas de sus armarios” (39). Suspicion of what, one is left to wonder, for this passage and the story as a whole remain silent on the question, even as they call attention to it. Though classified ads about the cadavers can be placed in the newspaper, the dead themselves cannot appear in public, for this would disturb the generalized unknowing of the evidence of wartime violence.

The new ad the good citizen and the finders of the additional cadavers publish in the newspaper appears to be both a more social and a more visible undertaking. It is more social in that they write it together, and more visible in that it occupies an entire page of the newspaper. However, though the new ad is larger and collectively produced, in the end it still serves to facilitate a transaction between private parties, the return of the cadavers, rather than a public discussion of the source of these enigmatic dead and responsibility for their murder. The good citizen merely acts as a facilitator for the transfer of the dead from their finders to the family members who respond to the ad. Once again, the state plays no role, as the

good citizen helps the other finders of cadavers to fill out the forms that absolve the state of any responsibility and calls the public health office in advance of publishing the ad “como un gesto de amabilidad y cortesía” (40).

The story even mentions, in passing, those responsible for the twenty dead bodies, but only in the context of who should bear the costs of disposing of the cadavers. The finders offer the good citizen donations for this purpose, but he refuses, arguing that the costs “debían ser asumidos por los asesinos o por los familiares de los muertos, no por ellos, simples víctimas” (40). The victims, then, are not the dead, but rather those who, like the good citizen, innocently discovered cadavers in their homes. The killers’ only responsibility is to assume the costs of finding the living relatives of the dead. This brief and rather ironic mention of the killers and of their limited responsibility only serves to reinforce and call attention to the story’s overall silence on the question of accountability for war crimes.

In the end, thirteen of the twenty cadavers are claimed by family members. The good citizen consoles the finders of the seven unclaimed bodies by confessing to them his experience with the original cadaver (thus breaking his promise of discretion to the man who passed it off as that of his son) and offering to take care of the remaining dead. This he does in even more duplicitous fashion by butchering the cadavers and making a stew of them, which he donates to homeless shelters and retirement homes, without revealing the ingredients: “Les serví de la carne en abundancia. Todas las veces que desearon. Hasta los perros se llevaron lo suyo. Dicen que nunca tuvieron mejor cena en la vida. Incluso los perros me lo expresaron” (41-42). In this story, then, the evidence of wartime violence is either returned to the private sphere of the family home for burial, or disposed of clandestinely as meat, an object for consumption by marginal groups within society. For this act of generosity the narrator is hailed as a good citizen and honored at a public ceremony. He humbly accepts the honor, but protests that “no eran necesarias tantas atenciones para conmigo, que yo era simplemente un hombre normal, que había hecho lo mismo que cualquier ciudadano” (42). This, then, is the definition of normality and citizenship that the story ironically mocks: a state of

unknowing (deliberate on the part of some, unwitting on the part of others) that leads a society unwilling to acknowledge and address the causes and persistent consequences of wartime violence to cannibalize itself.

“Manual del hijo muerto” also deals with the disposal of the bodies of victims of state violence, but it dispenses with an intermediary or facilitator like the good citizen and narrator of “Hechos de un buen ciudadano.” Instead, the state returns the dismembered bodies of its victims directly to their families for reassembly and grieving within the confines of the private sphere of the home. As implied by the title, the story takes the form of a manual for handling the remains of a dead son or daughter returned to their family, or rather a section of such a manual, subtitled “Cuando el hijo está en forma de trozos” (119), that offers specific instructions for reassembling the parts of the dead son’s or daughter’s dismembered body. The warnings and tips inserted into the text in a different typeface, as well footnotes with helpful clarifications and supplementary instructions, add to the effect. In addition, the bureaucratically euphemistic language identifies the narrative voice as that of the state itself, or of a “non-governmental” organization closely affiliated with the state.

As the first line of the story notes, in darkly ironic fashion, “Causa especial emoción reconstruir el cuerpo del niño (24-25 años) que salió completo de la casa hace dos o seis días” (119). But one is advised to take precautions to avoid damaging the delicate body parts and to ensure that they belong to one’s own child. After offering some helpful suggestions to this end in the main text, a brief aside in a different typeface emphasizes that taking the recommended precautions “puede evitarle un desgaste innecesario en el caso de que le hayan entregado los pedazos de un hijo equivocado” and warns that one should not “firmar de recibido antes de estar completamente seguro(a) de que el contenido del paquete le pertenece en su totalidad. Recuerde que no se aceptan devoluciones” (119). As in “Hechos de un buen ciudadano,” the victims of state violence are treated by the narrative voice as objects, some assembly required.

The manual goes on to offer instructions for arranging the body parts in their original configuration and sewing them together. A footnote

refers parents too overcome with emotion to mentally reconstruct their child's original appearance to a basic diagram of the human body in Appendix B (which does not appear in the story), and instructs those whose children's bodies sustained injuries severe enough to have changed their structure to consult with their family doctor. Following these oblique allusions to torture, the manual refers more explicitly to what was likely done to the dismembered bodies, and to the existence of responsible parties, but warns against indulging in speculation about either. It notes that the hands and feet, if examined closely, may reveal what it euphemistically calls "escenas del padecimiento pre-muerte del hijo en cuestión," but recommends that "Para evitar hundirse en la tentación de elaborar hipótesis y encontrar culpables mediante las señales que dejan, cúbralos con guantes y medias de algodón oscuro" (120). A diversionary footnote here warns, irrelevantly and without explanation, against the use of synthetic fibers when selecting the gloves and socks with which to cover the hands and feet. The question of state violence and accountability for it is raised in passing only to be peremptorily dismissed as the story calls attention to what should not draw any attention and must be ignored. Parents of the dead are instructed to 'unknow' what they surely already know about how their children came to be dismembered, and to cover up the signs that might lead to or remind them of such knowledge. Instead of justice or accountability, the manual directs parents to channel their energy and emotions into mourning within the private sphere of family and friends: "Muéstrelo a familiares y amigos. Reparta fotografías de cuando vivía. Llore cada vez que alguien mencione su nombre" (121). In this obliquely ironic fashion, "Manual del hijo muerto" draws the reader's attention to what is left unsaid, the unspoken cause of what is described in the text.

The remaining three stories I discuss—"Lluvia en el trópico," "Carretera sin buey," and "Mediodía de frontera"—address resignation to the war's legacy and the cost of restoring peace without significantly altering the essential features of the pre-war status quo. "Lluvia en el trópico" takes place in an unnamed city in the tropics, where the population lives in houses with "muros gruesos y rejas" (89, 90), and many residents

do not know their neighbors, suggesting a degree of fear and insecurity. Despite the lack of any explicit reference to El Salvador or its recent history of conflict, the story may be read as an allegory of the war and its aftermath.

The narrator, who lives with his two brothers, is awakened one night by the sound of a heavy rain and the strong odor of excrement. At first he wonders if the smell is coming from his own bed, but soon determines that it is not. He and his brothers then suspect that it is the work of their neighbor, a woman with whom they have been at “war” over the noise her dogs make, but she soon calls to concede defeat, assuming that the smell was their retaliation against the incessant barking of her dogs. After waiting until dawn, they open the doors of their fortified home to discover that the source of the odor is everywhere, for it has rained dog shit and covered everything, “como una nevada, pero en café: una nevada de trópico” (90).

At first people find the smell intolerable, but by the end of the first day they begin to get used to it. Soon they even come to need the odor. As the shit begins to dry in the sun, the city’s inhabitants are thankful for the cars that crack the crust by driving on it, thereby releasing the smell, which had begun to diminish. The government, which has done nothing to remove the shit, nonetheless prohibits the circulation of cars, which, it claims, gets in the way of solving what comes to be officially designated as an “environmental disease.” Fortunately, the narrator notes, “siempre había un desobediente que sacaba su automóvil y dejaba escapar el olor sin el cual ya se nos dificultaba respirar” (91). When the government shuts down traffic completely, women come to the rescue: “Con los tacones de sus zapatitos, perforaban el suelo para que el olor escapara” (91-92). In response, the government confiscates all high-heeled shoes and any other implements that might be used to stir up the shit and release the odor. The government eventually gets around to cleaning up the mess, but by that point people have grown so accustomed to the smell that a brisk trade in dog shit arises and dog owners grow wealthy as everyone regularly buys a fresh supply to keep in the house. As the narrator concludes, “uno termina acostumbrándose a todo” (92).

If the shit storm may be interpreted as the war and the social inequalities and conflicts that fueled it, then the need people feel for the smell of excrement even after it has been cleaned up suggests both the sort of nostalgia for the war years that leads many of Moodie's interviewees to describe the postwar period as "worse than the war" and a sense that unresolved issues remain. The shit of the war has been cleaned up (through the peace accords), at least in visible public spaces, but the smell lingers and is actively maintained within the private sphere of the home thanks to transactions between private parties in the newly created market in dog excrement. By presenting the war as a natural phenomenon, albeit a freakish one, "Lluvia en el trópico" alludes to the state-sponsored process of unknowing the social conditions that produced the conflict. The official designation of the shit storm as an "environmental disease" and the monopoly the state claims on dealing with it as such only reinforce this interpretation. But the population's active perpetuation of the smell implies that the unease stirred up by the war is socially produced and reproduced, and that the removal of the original shit has not resolved the conditions into which it fell, obliquely alluded to by the insecurity, distrust, and conflict prevailing before the shit storm.

The remaining two stories are even more enigmatic and difficult to connect to the war in El Salvador and its aftermath, but there are parallels nonetheless between text and socio-historical context. These parallels have less to do with the process of unknowing Moodie describes than they do with the unacknowledged costs of pacification. In "Carretera sin buey," the narrator and his companions stop their car and get out to admire "Un buey algo flaco, pero hermoso que miraba la eternidad desde una curva de la carretera" (21). To their great surprise, what appeared to be an ox turns out to be a man. The man had run over an ox at this curve in the road and now stands in the same spot in order to take its place and restore what he had destroyed. Though his mother had repeatedly urged him to return home, and though he had left his place by the side of the road many times, it was never for long, for every time he passed by the spot he felt the absence of the ox: "Miraba el vacío del animal y no podía continuar tranquilo" (22).

So he committed himself to staying by the curve in the road and making every effort to look exactly like an ox. But because passersby kept seeing a man rather than an ox, he despaired of ever perfecting the resemblance: “Lloraba de frustración por no poder reponer al buey consigo mismo. Sentía que su esfuerzo no daba resultado, que su voluntad no había sido suficiente” (22). The narrator and his companions are the first to mistake him for an ox, and this is a great relief and source of joy for the man, who gladly accepts their advice on how to complete the resemblance: dull the look in his eyes, take off his clothing, put on a set of horns, and most important of all, castrate himself: “La cuarta indicación era esencial: tenía que castarse. Si no lo hacía, jamás se miraría como un buey” (23). The man complies without hesitation, and though the castration proves difficult for lack of a knife, the narrator and his companions helpfully provide a broken bottle. The result is satisfying to all, but the narrator explains that before driving off he and his companions “No nos cansamos de recordarle que debía restarle luminosidad a su mirada si quería parecer un verdadero buey” (23). As they drive away, however, they observe that though he has made his resemblance to an ox more convincing, the look in his eyes has only grown brighter, and it will take time for him to dull it sufficiently.

“Carretera sin buey,” then, describes the disruption of a status quo represented by a placid beast of burden with its gaze fixed on eternity as well as the considerable cost of restoring that status quo. In this the man who disrupted the existing order is aided by advisers, the narrator and his companions, who arrive by car to offer detailed instructions on how to improve his efforts at restitution.<sup>10</sup> This, it turns out, requires his emasculation by self-mutilation, an allusion, perhaps, to the end of the masculine revolutionary heroics that characterized the disruption of El Salvador’s status quo in the 1970s and 1980s, first by social movements and subsequently by armed guerrilla groups.<sup>11</sup> That disruption was ultimately

---

<sup>10</sup> Cortez describes the narrator and his companions as “aquellos que habitan un centro de legibilidad cultural, silenciando aún más a su objeto de observación, el cual se encuentra al margen y está en proceso de ser definido por ellos” (155).

<sup>11</sup> The castration scene in “Carretera sin buey” is not unique in recent Central American fiction. See, for example, the gruesome description of the torture and castration of a captured guerrilla in Horacio Castellanos Moya’s novel



neutralized, thanks in large part to massive U.S. intervention, but not without a restructuring of the Salvadoran state and economy. As William Robinson has shown, even before the war ended, U.S. advisers had begun to promote globalizing, free market changes in El Salvador. The war in effect catalyzed a neoliberal form of capitalist modernization in El Salvador through a direct U.S. intervention that might not have occurred otherwise.<sup>12</sup>

However, for all the change it brought, this transformation of the Salvadoran state and economy nonetheless left social hierarchies intact and the new, neoliberal economic model of the post war years would require considerable sacrifices from the poor majority. Rather like the man-ox of Hernández's story, the poor majority would be called upon to pay for restoring a peace they had disrupted a generation earlier. They would be instructed in how to do so by government technocrats and international advisers, who would insist that Salvadorans leave conflict behind and transform themselves into placid and docile workers, that they lower their expectations and dull the light in eyes that had once envisioned much more than what a postwar market democracy had to offer. Though it makes no direct reference to El Salvador's recent history of conflict, the painful restoration of the status quo related in "Carretera sin buey" resonates with that history and may be read as an expression of disappointment with the high cost of a peace that left pre-war inequalities largely unaltered.

With its simultaneous reference to both temporal and spatial liminality, the title of the story "Mediodía de frontera" (and of the collection as a whole) alludes to the theme of transition. That the story recounts a woman's suicide, a self-inflicted transition between life and death, only reinforces the theme and suggests some degree of relevance to El Salvador's transition from war to peace. Prior to hanging herself in a public restroom at a border crossing shortly before noon one day, a woman cuts out her tongue because "los ahorcados no se ven mal porque cuelguen del techo, sino porque la lengua cuelga de ellos. Es la lengua lo que causa horror... Y ella no quiere horrorizar a nadie. Sólo quiere ahorcarse" (114). Her reasons

---

*Insensatez* (107-111) and my reading of it in Kokotovic, "Testimonio Once Removed," 554-555.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson, *Transnational Conflicts*, 87-102.

for hanging herself are never revealed as the story focuses instead on her desire to not horrify those who find her hanged body.

The skinny, hungry male dog who walks into the restroom right after the woman has cut out her tongue accepts her explanation for why she has mutilated herself and neither inquires into her reasons for committing suicide nor attempts to dissuade her: “No se arriesga él a interceder para que, luego, ella lleve una vida de desgracia y le culpe a él por haberle cambiado los planes. Ni siquiera quiere saber por qué lo hace” (114). The woman is grateful for the dog’s restraint and the respect he shows for her wishes. When she hears his empty stomach growl, she cuts her tongue into little pieces and offers it to him. The dog is at first embarrassed by the offer, but hunger wins out and he ultimately accepts. After finishing the tongue, he accompanies her in her remaining preparations for suicide. She changes out of the clothes bloodied by her severed tongue, washes up, puts on a clean outfit, and glues her mouth shut so that “cuando se muera, no pueda verse el hueco sin lengua. Se la sella con forma de sonrisa. Quiere ser una ahorcada feliz” (115). Finally, the woman pets the dog and hugs it as if it were her own, then hangs herself. The dog cries when she dies and stays with her body until it is found and taken away. Afterward he returns to the restroom to lick what blood is left, for he is still hungry.

As Ana Patricia Rodríguez notes, the dog in “Mediodía de frontera” recalls the cadejo dogs of Salvadoran legend, which “mediate the passage of humans from one world to the next” (226). In some literary versions, for example Manlio Argueta’s *Un día en la vida* (1980), there is both a malevolent version of the cadejo and a benevolent one that protects humans from harm (16). The dog in Hernández’s story certainly shows no ill will toward the woman, but it is also incapable of protecting her from harm. In part this is because the dog has problems of his own: he’s hungry and wishes to avoid future recrimination from the woman or problems with the police, suggesting perhaps that the old oral traditions have lost some of their force. But it may also be because the harm has already been done, and the woman is beyond help. That harm, I would suggest, has to do with the status of women and gender relations after the war. During the war, women assumed non-traditional roles such as those of political activist, organizer,

guerrilla combatant, and even rose to positions of command and authority within social movements and guerrilla organizations. This hardly resulted in full gender equality since women generally took on these new roles in addition to their traditional responsibilities, but it did create at least the potential for change in gender relations. However, after the war women came under pressure to return to their traditional roles.<sup>13</sup>

In her concern for others and with her appearance, even after death, and in her compassion for the hungry dog, the woman in “Mediodía de frontera” does not seem to have made much of a break with traditional gender roles, or has fallen back into them. And though cutting out her tongue is explained as a self-abnegating effort to spare others the full horror of her suicide by giving her hanged body a less frightening aspect, it is difficult not to interpret it also as a silencing of women in the transition to peace and postwar “normalization” of gender relations.<sup>14</sup> All the more so since sealing her mouth shut undermines the explanation given for cutting off her tongue. If the object is to spare others the sight of her swollen tongue hanging from her hanged body, then sealing her mouth shut makes cutting off the tongue redundant. It is also worth noting that, in stereotypically nurturing fashion, the woman feeds her severed and still warm tongue, the instrument of speech, to a male dog associated with oral tradition. Indeed, the manner in which she kills herself would appear to be a form of submission to the re-imposition of a traditional gender order, for in death she meets several patriarchal expectations of women by renouncing her power of speech, dressing attractively, and gluing her now speechless mouth into the form of a smile before killing herself because, as

---

<sup>13</sup> See Kampwirth (75-111), Luciak (39-49) and Shayne (46-66 ). As Kampwirth observes, “It was one thing for women to form organizations in the eighties, under the auspices of the guerrillas, to support the general struggle for social equality. It was quite another when those same women tried to extend general values of social equality to their own personal lives. Many of their former comrades-in-arms responded very badly when they resisted the return to the traditional gender inequality that had characterized life before the war” (75). Luciak likewise notes that “Women were allowed a ‘counter-traditional role’ as long as it was in the interests of the struggle. After the war, when their new identities threatened traditional gender relations, an attempt was made to relegate them to the private sphere and disempower them” (49).

<sup>14</sup> For a more explicit fictional treatment of this, see Jacinta Escudos’s excellent short story “La noche de los escritorios asesinos” in her collection *Cuentos sucios*.

she explains, she wants to leave a happy corpse. Yet the falsity of that pasted-on smile, and the irony of the stated desire not just to appear, but to *be* a happy corpse, to achieve a happiness in death that evidently eluded her in life, suggest a critique of the traditional values to which the woman only appears to submit in the moment of her self-inflicted death.

What makes Claudia Hernandez's short stories so compelling is the way that they represent postwar Salvadoran social reality as both mundane and fantastic. Characters are described, in a deadpan tone, doing fantastic things in the most mundane ways, as if there were nothing unusual about having a small rhinoceros, or finding a cadaver in one's kitchen, or reassembling the body parts of a dead child, or waking up to a rain of shit, or castrating oneself to make up for running over an ox, or cutting out one's tongue before committing suicide by hanging. The representation of the fantastic, or the grotesque, as if it were mundane, raises questions about what passes for ordinary and unexceptional in El Salvador's postwar social order. It makes strange the taken for granted and suggests that the version of postwar social reality Salvadorans have been led to accept may not be the only one, while hinting at what has had to be unknown in order to gain that acceptance.

Moodie, drawing on Žižek, defines unknowing as the act of "converting something largely known, if not acknowledged, into something circumstantially *unknown*, masquerading as a condition of *not being known*, so that it can be replaced" (173).<sup>15</sup> That is, people know how things are, but act as if they did not, letting what they know go unacknowledged in the current circumstances. It matters that the unknowing is circumstantial, and not the permanent state of not being known it imitates, for this leaves open the possibility that the ideological fantasy of unknowing can be undone, that the knowledge underlying the fantasy can be reactivated when, as Moodie puts it "circumstances open up the possibility for change, for people to see in new ways" (174). By enacting their own process of unknowing ironically, by calling attention to their own silence about what is known, Hernández's short stories, too, help make it possible to see El

---

<sup>15</sup> Moodie draws from the Second Edition of Žižek's *The Sublime Ideology*, 17-30.

Salvador's postwar social reality in new ways, and to recognize ideological fantasy as fantasy.

### Works Cited

- Ábrego, Geovanny. "El cuento es una experiencia mágica." Entrevista con Claudia Hernández, escritora. *Camisa de fuerza*, 26 de julio 2006. <http://geovannyabrego.blogspot.com/2008/07/entrevista-con-claudia-hernandez.html> Accessed January 4, 2014
- Argueta, Manlio. *Un día en la vida*. San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1987. Print.
- Candelario, Sheila. "Violencia, globalización y literatura: O el dilema del eterno retorno en El Salvador." *Istmo* 8 (2004). <http://istmo.denison.edu/no8/articulos/violencia.html> Accessed January 4, 2014
- Castellanos Moya, Horacio. *Insensatez*. México, D.F.: Tusquets, 2004. Print.
- La Comisión de la Verdad para El Salvador. *De la locura a la esperanza: La guerra de 12 años en El Salvador*. <http://www.derechoshumanos.net/lesahumanidad/informes/elsalvador/informe-de-la-locura-a-la-esperanza.htm> Accessed January 4, 2014
- Cortez, Beatriz. *Estética del cinismo: Pasión y desencanto en la literatura centroamericana de posguerra*. Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2010. Print.
- Craft, Linda J. "Viajes fantásticos: Cuentos de [in]migración e imaginación de Claudia Hernández." *Revista Iberoamericana* 242 (2013): 181-194.
- Cruz, José Miguel. "Violence, Citizen Insecurity, and Elite Maneuvering." In *Public Security and Police Reform in the Americas*. Eds. John Bailey and Lucia Dammert. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006. Print.
- Cruz, José Miguel, Alvaro Trigueros Arguello y Francisco González. *El crimen violento en El Salvador: Factores sociales y económicos asociados*. San Salvador: IUDOP, 2000. Print.
- Escudos, Jacinta. *Cuentos sucios*. San Salvador: DPI, CONCULTURA, 1997. Print.
- Hernández, Claudia. *Mediodía de frontera*. San Salvador: DPI, CONCULTURA 2002. Print.

- Kampwirth, Karen. *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004. Print.
- . *Women and Guerrilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Cuba*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002. Print.
- Kokotovic, Misha. "Testimonio Once Removed: Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*." *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 43 (2009): 545-562. Print.
- Lara Martínez, Rafael. "Mujer y nación: Narrativa salvadoreña contemporánea (Escudos, González Huguet y Hernández). In *(Per)Versiones de la modernidad. Literaturas, identidades y desplazamientos*. Eds. Beatriz Cortez, Alexandra Ortiz Wallner y Verónica Ríos Quesada. Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2012.
- Luciak, Ilja A. *After the Revolution: Gender and Democracy in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. Print.
- Mackenbach, Werner. "Entre política, historia y ficción. Tendencias en la narrativa centroamericana a finales del siglo XX." *Istmo* 15 (2007) <http://istmo.denison.edu/n15/articulos/mackenbach.html>  
Accessed January 4, 2014
- . "Después de los pos-ismos: ¿desde qué categorías pensamos las literaturas centroamericanas contemporáneas?" *Istmo* 8 (2004) [http://istmo.denison.edu/no8/articulos/pos\\_ismos.html](http://istmo.denison.edu/no8/articulos/pos_ismos.html) Accessed January 4, 2014
- Moodie, Ellen. *El Salvador in the Aftermath of Peace: Crime, Uncertainty, and the Transition to Democracy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. Print.
- Padilla, Yajaira M. *Changing Women, Changing Nation: Female Agency, Nationhood, and Identity in Trans-Salvadoran Narratives*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012. Print.
- . "Of Diosas, Cochones, and Pluriempleadas: (En)gendering Central American Identities in Contemporary Short Stories by Women" *Letras Femeninas* 35.2 (2009): 91-111. Print.
- . "Setting La diablo Free: Women, Violence, and the Struggle for Representation in Postwar El Salvador" *Latin American Perspectives* 35.5 (2008): 133-145. Print.
- Robinson, William. *Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change, and Globalization*. London and New York: Verso, 2003. Print.
- Rodríguez, Ana Patricia. *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009. Print.

Shayne, Julie D. *The Revolution Question: Feminisms in El Salvador, Chile, and Cuba*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology: The Essential Žižek*. Second Edition. London: Verso, 2008.