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Martyrdom and the Poet: Sacrificial Imagery in Central America

By

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

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in

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in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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## Abstract

This project explores the phenomenology of martyrdom in Central America during the revolutionary period, examining the environment and circumstances that shaped the choices of a generation of poets both within and outside the boundaries of Marxist ideologies. The research presented relies heavily on oral interviews and ethnographic sources to understand how the ethos of the revolutionary movement interacted with the literature of this period. The writers that are the focus of this analysis, Otto René Castillo (1934-1967), Roque Dalton (1935-1975), and Luis de Li3n (1939-1984), represent this period symbolically in that their personal histories and literary work reflect the realities of artistic expression under Central American dictatorships. I argue that utopian desire present in Marxist economic theory also characterizes Christian practices that are based on a theology of incarnation, sacrifice, and resurrection, and both the political convictions and poetic imagination of these poets were informed by these practices. The Christian notions of martyrdom and Indigenous concepts of death and rebirth shaped the poetic imagination of these authors, and their political participation reflects the syncretic expression of these traditions. Simultaneously, the assassinations, torture, and disappearance of these poets and writers reproduced multiple hagiographic narratives that became models of resistance. These models are represented in the *logos*—revolutionary poetry—and in the *ethos*—revolutionary action. The interaction between this textual realm and political action produced a generation of poets that came to understand martyrdom as an element of literary praxis. Understanding this martyrdom as a fundamental characteristic of revolutionary subjectivity, allows us to see how notions of death are recast in the necropolitical structure of the postwar period.

## Acknowledgements

This dissertation, almost abandoned, has been a long and complicated road that veered from its course into dead-end alleys and onto untrodden trails. Tragedy often intersects with direction, weaving spiral paths that, while not the most efficient, perhaps open new and unexplored spaces. The hope for this project, is that in some shape or form, these spaces will appear in these pages. As I walked this crooked path through this project towards a tenuous destination, I was not alone. For all those who accompanied me on this journey and assisted me through the most difficult moments, I wish to express my deepest gratitude.

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that deep pain came with the sharing of these testimonies, and I hope that in relaying them I have honored these voices. I would also like to thank the incarcerated of La Granja Penal Cantel in Xelajú, who also cannot be named for their protection, for the willingness to share their stories. Finally, I must also recognize journalist Luis “Guicho” Álvarez Paz for his contribution to this project. Thank you for always supporting my research, and helping me connect and reach out to contacts. Without your help, this work would never have been completed.

I would like to dedicate this project to my deceased brother Jacob. You taught me to understand forgiveness and redemption, that a person is more than the sum of their actions. You showed me that in the most desolate hour and forsaken place, there is always humanity, love, and rebirth.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: UTOPIAN DESIRES .....	1
CHAPTER I: ATLCATL AND OTHER SUICIDAL INDIANS.....	22
Nation-Building in the Americas.....	24
Nativist Imagery .....	31
Symbolic Violence and Genocide in Central America.....	41
The Bird Who Cleans the World .....	57
CHAPTER II: THE SPECTACLE OF MARTYRDOM: OTTO RENÉ CASTILLO AND THE POETICS OF <i>COMPAÑERISMO</i> .....	63
The Instrument of Our Death: Fire and Transfiguration.....	69
Bread and Lyric: The Poetics and Politics of Otto René Castillo.....	76
Revolution as an Act of Love .....	95
<i>Murió Amando</i> : The Death of Monseñor Romero.....	105
Panoptic Disorder: Death Squads, Discipline, and Torture .....	111
The Utopian Moment: <i>Sierra de las Minas</i> .....	116
CHAPTER III: A DEATH FORETOLD: ROQUE DALTON & HIS HAGIOGRAPHIES.....	124
Mythical Society of Souls.....	126
When We Laugh with the Dead.....	140
Epic Poetry.....	147
Syncretic Marxism.....	157
Death and the Poet .....	166
The Death Shroud .....	178

CHAPTER IV: <i>AVE MUDA</i> : DECOLONIAL POETICS OF LUIS DE LIÓN IN <i>POEMAS DE VOLCÁN DE AGUA</i> AND <i>LOS ZOPILOTES</i> .....	187
At the Foot of Junajpu .....	191
<i>Los zopilotes</i> .....	206
“ <i>Ahorita regreso en media hora</i> ” .....	214
CHAPTER V: THE DEATH OF WALTER LUNA: INTERPRETING POSTWAR	
VIOLENCE.....	217
Guns and Crosses.....	219
<i>La jaula de oro</i> .....	224
An Immigrant Dream Deferred.....	233
Walter Luna’s Funeral .....	237
<i>Los pozos más negros</i> .....	241
<i>Solo Dios puede juzgarme</i> .....	250
Conclusion .....	264
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	267
APPENDIX A: <i>COMISIÓN PARA EL ESCLARECIMIENTO HISTÓRICO</i> CASE 772.....	286
APPENDIX B: <i>DIARIO MILITAR</i> #135 .....	287

***Note on translations:***

All translations are the author's unless otherwise stated.



## Introduction:

### Utopian Desires

*Amor condusse noi ad una morte.  
Love led us to one death.*  
—Dante Alighieri

May 10, 1975—Roque Dalton, Salvadoran poet and revolutionary, accused of being a bourgeois intellectual, CIA agent, and traitor to the revolution, was brutally assassinated by his fellow comrades in arms. Like one of the historical characters of his testimonial poems, he suffered a violent death and the anonymity of an unmarked grave. Imprisoned and then shot, his body was left half-buried under the volcanic earth in the desolate locale of El Playón. The vultures quickly uncovered his corpse and that of his *compañero*, Armando Arteaga. The inhabitants of El Playón reported finding the decaying bodies to the National Guard, who summarily relocated and then abandoned the corpses in a nearby dump where feral dogs feasted on the remains of perhaps the most distinguished poet in Salvadoran history.

The tragedy of Dalton's death is not only the savage nature of his demise, but that his assassination was planned and carried out by his own trusted *compañeros revolucionarios*. His death came to symbolize the dangers of sectarianism and the failures of the armed struggle. With the post-Berlin wall political rupture and subsequent rejection of Marxist economic and social theory in the following decades, Dalton became an icon of the tragic failed revolutionary. Characterized as the *poeta guerrillero* committed to the revolutionary cause (Lara 1), for the better part of thirty years Dalton and his contemporaries had been neatly classified and boxed into their own Marxist

paradigms. While Marxist theory profoundly shaped Dalton's generation of poets and intellectuals, the dismissal of the literature it produced as mere agit-prop of the revolutionary epoch fell prey to the same Marxist taxonomies that limited the era. As we have entered the post-ideological era of the twenty-first century, materialism and Marxist political theory present in these texts may seem outdated, irrelevant, and more importantly, a distant dream of a world that no longer exists. Simultaneously, the globalization of markets and neoliberal economics have shattered the dreams of an alternative order in the post-dictatorial period. As we see renewed interest in Dalton and other authors of this period, we may ask ourselves if the critical approaches to these authors reflect this political disillusionment as Central American countries confront an extended postwar crisis defined by economic destabilization, rural-to-urban migration, narco-violence, and tenuous civil states.

While the revolutionary movements presented an ideological break from the past, the concepts of self-sacrifice present in the lyric and the prose of this period, are firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian literary and religious traditions. These traditions of martyrdom and resistance deeply influenced Dalton's generation of poets and writers, many of whom put their lives at risk in the hopes of transforming their world. This generation, born in the 1930s and 1940s, came of age in the 1950s and 1960s and is generally identified as the *Generación Comprometida*. This group was associated with the *Círculo Literario Universitario* founded by Roque Dalton and the exiled Guatemalan poet Otto René Castillo in 1954 at the University of El Salvador. These writers are renowned for their narrative innovations, conversational poetry, and use of the vernacular. Poetry was seen as a tool with which to transform society, and thus, these artists are recognized not only

for the social critique present in their work but also for their involvement in social movements.<sup>1</sup> Prompted by a utopian vision of a Marxist notion of a classless society, the poets who participated in social movements and/or the armed struggle envisioned an egalitarian future where, “[i]n place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms [...] an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx 84). Marxist principles became the ideological vehicle through which the revolutionary movements of Central America articulated their utopian desires.

This project presents an examination of this environment, the ethos and the circumstances that shaped and determined the choices of Dalton’s generation both within and outside the boundaries of Marxist ideologies. It focuses on Guatemalan poet Otto René Castillo (1934-1967), Roque Dalton (1935-1975), and Guatemalan poet and novelist Luis de Lión (1939-1984), three artists who were assassinated and disappeared during the revolutionary period. The three writers engaged in clandestine political work and were increasingly politicized through experiences of persecution and reprisals for their writing. Castillo eventually joined the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR) until he was captured in 1967. Dalton was a member of the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) when he was put on trial and assassinated. Finally, Luis de Lión, a primary school teacher, university professor, writer, and member of the Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajador (PGT), but not an armed militant or part of the guerrilla forces, was kidnapped and disappeared by the Guatemalan National Police in 1985. Each of these

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<sup>1</sup> Noted poets and novelists from this era are Dalton (1935-1975) and Castillo (1936-1967) include Manlio Argueta (1935-), Roberto Armijo (1937-1997), José Roberto Cea (1939-), Claribel Alegría (1924-), Alfonso Quijada Urías (1940-2008), Tirso Canales (1930-), Rafael Góchez Sosa (1927-1986), Álvaro Menéndez Leal (1931-2000), Ítalo López Vallecillos (1932-1986), Mercedes Durand (1933-1999), Irma Lanzas (1933), Waldo Chávez Velasco (1933-2005), Eugenio Martínez Orantes (1932-2005), and Mauricio de la Selva (1930-).

writers, in their personal histories and literary works, represent the realities of creative and artistic expression under the Central American dictatorships that operated indiscriminately and outside the rule of law in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Utopian desire present in the work of these writers is embedded in Marxist economic theory and also characterizes Christian practices that are based on the theology of incarnation, sacrifice, and resurrection. Christianity, as a social practice, rests on the blood of martyrs, be that the crucified Christ, the first apostles, or the thousands killed in the first centuries during the spread of the religion. The path of Jesus Christ is the model that early Christians sought to emulate as evidenced in the New Testament: “This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15: 12-13). Giving up one’s life as Christ did was considered the ultimate act of love in the early church. Simultaneously, self-sacrifice presented a challenge to the social order and to the political order as represented by the Roman Empire, for the early Christians offered an alternative order based on love, faith, and fellowship.

In this sense, “utopia” as used here is similar to Gustavo Gutiérrez’ notion: “utopia necessarily means a condemnation of the existing order. Its deficiencies are to a large extent the reason for the emergence of utopia” (201). Christ’s teachings came to be interpreted as a challenge to the structures of power and domination enforced by the Roman Empire. Rather than *veni, vidi, vici*, or seeking to conquer through violence and force, Paleo-Christianity sought to conquer through love and fellowship, that is, through the daily practice of sacrifice symbolized in the death and resurrection of Christ. Opposing a structural order that extracts and exploits resources, and hoards goods,

Christian teaching challenged the Roman hegemony by offering an alternative message of “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 22:39).

Again, following Gutiérrez’ vision of utopia in this discussion is an apocalyptic notion, “a proclamation, an annunciation of what is not yet, but will be; it is the forecast of a different order of things, a new society. It is the field of creative imagination which proposes the alternative values to those rejected” (Gutiérrez 202). Christ declares this alternative order at his trial before Pontius Pilate, “What I was born for and what I came into this world for, is to bear witness to the truth. Whoever belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” (John 18:37). Pilate then asks, “What is the truth?” (John 18:37). The question is left unanswered as it is embodied in the creative imagination of utopia, or the belief in the possibility of an alternative social order. Or as St. Paul points out in Ephesians, the truth lies in love—a social order based on love and fellowship—*veritas in caritate*, “living the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). So strong was St. Paul’s conviction to this *truth*, he met a violent death as did Christ’s apostles and thousands of Christians under the Roman Empire in the first three centuries of the Common Era.

Utopian thought present in Marxist ideologies was rearticulated with the same messianic fervor of early Christian sacrifice. The Sandinista movement of the sixties and seventies echoed Augusto Sandino’s call for *patria libre o morir. Revolución o muerte*—revolution or death—is the slogan that the young *guerrilleros* used to adorn the graffiti-covered walls of San Salvador. Simultaneously religious leaders repeated and reinforced the notion of self-sacrifice for the liberation of one’s people. Monseñor Romero, the Salvadoran archbishop assassinated in 1980, stated in his last interview, “I must say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death but in the resurrection. If they [the military] kill

me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador [...]. Martyrdom is a grace from God that I do not believe I have earned. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then may my blood be the seed of liberty, and a sign of the hope that will soon become a reality ” (Eds. Sobrino and Martín Baró 51). As Anna Peterson points out in her ethnographic study of political martyrdom in El Salvador this “utopian vision may be the most important of the various ways martyr narratives contribute to social change” (*Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion* 151).

Marxist utopian thought, that revolution and social movements can create an egalitarian and liberated society, inspired and motivated young intellectuals, like Roque Dalton, to join the revolutionary cause. The appeal of eternal life, while not in the kingdom of God, but here on earth, articulated in the Marxist dialectic, drew thousands of young men and women to participate in the revolutionary movements of the sixties and seventies. While socio-political factors, military repression, and the realities of poverty cannot be left out of this equation, the appeal and the desire for eternal life through revolutionary sacrifice was continually voiced in the literature of the era. The iconic images of revolutionary martyrs, Augusto Sandino, Farabundo Martí, Leonel Rugama, and of course Che Guevara, were esteemed as model narratives or hagiographies of the revolutionary. While participation in the revolution meant the possibility of death, this self-sacrifice also meant resurrection in the Christian sense of rebirth and renewal—but within the struggle for political liberation. To willing political activists and *guerrilleros*, “the seed that martyrs leave will ultimately give fruit most clearly in the ‘total liberation,’ the triumph of their cause,” as “death for faith does not just guarantee eternal life for the martyr but also contributes to the renewal of society” (Peterson 148).

Religious teaching profoundly influenced Dalton's generation and preceded introduction to Marxist ideologies. Dalton, like many of his comrades, received a Jesuit education. Since their arrival to Mexico in 1572, the Jesuits served the distinct mission of establishing educational institutions for the urban elite (Rama 16-17). Intellectuals of Dalton's generation were all educated in institutions steeped in Catholic tradition. The profound impact of the Society of Jesus in the Americas is summed up in Fidel Castro's observation of their effect on his early development: "The Jesuits clearly influenced me with their strict organization, their discipline and their values. They contributed to my development and influenced my sense of justice" (Betto 140).

At the same time, extended periods of military dictatorship and censorship in Central America limited access to literary and theoretical materials, while religious scriptures and texts were readily available. As Dalton recounts, his introduction to Marxism occurred outside of El Salvador, in Chile. In an interview with Radio Habana Cuba in 1966,<sup>2</sup> Dalton explains, "Durante los primeros veinte años de mi vida [...] yo fui un ferviente y sincero católico. [...] La educación religiosa indudablemente determinó durante mucho tiempo mi manera de pensar, mi manera de ser, mi manera de comprender el mundo" ("During the first twenty years of my life [...] I was a fervent and sincere Catholic. [...] Undoubtedly, for a long time, religious education determined my way of thinking, my way of being, my way of understanding the world"; "La vida escogida" in *Recopilación de textos sobre Roque Dalton* 36). In this interview, he continues, relating his experience as a young student at the Jesuit University in Santiago. He had been sent to interview renowned Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, who, calling Dalton an imbecile,

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<sup>2</sup>Editor, Horacio García Verzi, asserts June 1966 as the date of this interview. However, in the interview Dalton states that he is 28, suggesting that the interview was realized at an earlier date.

promptly ejected him from the interview after asking his political affiliation and if he had read Marxist theory. Incurring the ire of Rivera, Dalton replied that he had never read Marx (“La vida escogida” 38). Veracity of the story aside, the metaphoric imagery is true to form. Marxist ideologies succeeded religious education. Dalton’s literary and political imagination was formed first on the streets of El Salvador, in the oral history of his people, and later in the halls of his Jesuit secondary school.

Approaching Dalton’s literary work and that of the *Generación Comprometida* as a syncretic expression of oral culture, Christian traditions, the Catholic imaginary, and Marxist theory allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the poetics of the era. But beyond the nuances of analysis, understanding revolutionary fervor as an expression of utopian desire, like that of early Christianity, brings forth the questions at the very core of this study: What is the phenomenology of martyrdom? Why die for a cause? Why does a generation of intellectuals offer up their lives for the promise of a liberated future? What is the ethos that produces a generation of martyrs? Why did young men and women in Central America choose a path of martyrdom that parallels that of the early Christians under Roman imperial rule? And what makes a martyr?

The root of these questions lies in the philological origin of the word itself. The Greek meaning of the word *martus* is witness, a person “who testifies to a fact of which he has knowledge from personal observation” (Hassett par. 1). The term appears in Christian literature as used by the apostles, who were witnesses to the public life of Christ and his teachings (Hassett par. 1). The apostles were also “witness to his resurrection” (Acts 1:22), to his death at the cross, and his rebirth symbolized in the celebration of the Eucharist. The notion of the martyr as a witness is fundamental to its emergence in the



Christian world and cannot be separated from its later shift in meaning. The apostles were witnesses in the physical sense to the “sufferings of Christ” (1 Peter 5:1). As witnesses, the apostles were willing to die to attest to Christ’s life. In this sense, being a witness to the faith necessarily meant attesting to an account of the past manifest in an imagined utopia at odds with the existing social order.

As followers of Christ, the apostles were not ordinary witnesses who simply gave testimony in a court of law (Hassett par. 2). Rather, they were political subjects who, through the enunciation of their experiences, put their physical beings at great risk. Witnesses of Christ faced the possibility of severe punishment, as “failure to worship the gods of the State was equivalent to treason” (Hassett par. 5). Thus, during the lifetime of the apostles, the term *martus*, shifted to describe a “witness who at any time might be called upon to deny what he testified to, under penalty of death” (Hassett par. 10). The Christian profession of faith became a threat to the Roman political order by presenting a counter-hegemonic social structure manifest in a utopian brotherhood of love and sacrifice. *Christiani non sint*—“Let there be no Christians”—became an order of the Roman Empire, and Christians were subject to violent and brutal deaths for refusing to recant and participate in the state religion. As Tacitus records, “Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned—not so much for incendiarism as for their anti-social tendencies. Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals’ skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight” (354).

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, written in the second century of the Common Era shows the shift in meaning of martyr, for here it refers specifically to “people who were executed because they remained obedient to their Christian faith and identity and refused to make concessions to the Roman authorities” (van Henten and Avemarie 2). In this sense, martyrdom came to be identified specifically with the Christian faith.

Simultaneously, self-sacrifice for certain Christian sects, like the Montanists, came to mean embracing death. As Tertullian, third-century patristic writer and ardent Montanist summarizes, “Do not desire to depart this life in beds, in miscarriages, in soft fevers, but martyrdoms, that He who suffered for you may be glorified” (“De anima,” 1v. qtd. in “Montanists” Chapman par. 5). In this vision, self-sacrifice becomes a moment of individual religious expression and an act devoid of a shared utopian vision linked to an alternative social order. The willingness to meet death led to a nebulous distinction between martyrdom and suicide. And the tenuous notion of martyrdom was expressed in the practices of extreme schismatic sects like the Circumcellions, who under the battle-cry *Deo Laudes*, “frequently sought death, counting suicide as martyrdom [...] flinging themselves from precipices; more rarely they sprang into the water or fire [...] [or] sought death at the hands of others, either by paying men to kill them, by threatening to kill a passer-by if he would not kill them” (“Donatists” Chapman par. 13).

Early Christians sought to further clarify the distinction between suicide and martyrdom by reasserting the philological origin. Third-century Greek theologian, Clement of Alexandria, returns to the origin of the word, stating that, “[m]artyrdom or bearing witness, is a confession of faith in God” (qtd. in Bowersock 67). Bearing witness in Clement’s vision means attesting to an alternative social vision. If death occurs in

absence of this vision, it cannot be a martyr's death. For Clement, Christians who provoke their own death cannot secure martyrdom (Bowersock 69). As he writes in the *Stromata*:

He who presents himself before the judgment seat becomes guilty of his own death. And such is also the case with him who does not avoid persecution, but out of daring presents himself for capture. Such a one [...] becomes an accomplice in the crime of the persecutor. And if he also uses provocation, he is wholly guilty, challenging the wild beast." (Book IV Chapter 10; trans. Wilson par. 34)

Clement then addresses the problematic relationship between self-sacrifice and suicide, attempting to "detach martyrdom from suicide, with which he has plainly acknowledged it was connected in his own day" (Bowersock 69). By returning to the "original sense of bearing witness," he reasserts the necessary social component of martyrdom (Bowersock 69). In this sense, Clement distinguishes martyrdom from the Circumcellion and Phrygian ecstatic individual desire to die for religious expression. For Clement, martyrdom must be connected to bearing witness to the *logos* or the word, to Christ's vision, and to the vision of a world that elevates love, unity, and Samaritan action.

In his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, early fourth-century Church historian Eusebius, draws a parallel between the Phrygians (Montanists) and the suicide of Judas: "Montanus and Maximilla indeed, are said to have died another death than this [...] the report is, that both of them hung themselves [...] and thus they died and terminated their life like the traitor Judas" (172). Eusebius directly equates this rushing towards death, provoking death, or taking one's own life as an act of betrayal and heresy. Reasonably "the confusion of these categories provoked such vehement debate among the early Christians

who saw mounting enthusiasm for voluntary martyrdom that Saint Augustine and other theologians ultimately moved to denounce suicide as incompatible with martyrdom” (Bowersock 63).

Indeed, it was not “until Augustine,” in the fifth century “that the Church had a clear, forceful, and definitive injunction against suicide” (Bowersock 73). In his treatise *Against Gaudentius*, Saint Augustine issues his definitive declaration against *ad mortem festinatio*—or rushing towards death (Droge and Tabor 172). Or as he reasons in *The City of God*:

[N]o man ought to inflict on himself voluntary death, for this is to escape the ills of time by plunging into those of eternity; that no man ought to do so on account of another man’s sins, for this were to escape a guilt which could not pollute him, by incurring great guilt of his own; that no man ought to do so on account of his own past sins, for he has all the more need of this life that these sins may be healed by repentance; that no man should put an end to this life to obtain that better life we look for after death, for those who die by their own hand have no better life after death. (31-32)

By distinguishing martyrdom from suicide, Augustine links martyrdom to a necessary social component. When self-immolation becomes a vehicle by which to “escape the ills” of the world, it is devoid of the necessary element of martyrdom. Martyrdom, according to Augustine, is not an individual act, but one directly tied to commitment to and communion with one’s community. He condemns those who are “seized and made to suffer, endur[ing] this suffering only for themselves; not for their brethren” (“Letter 428 2” par. 3). Rather “those who are involved in suffering because of

their resolving not to abandon others, whose Christian welfare depended on them, are unquestionably ‘laying down their lives for the brethren’” (par. 3). In the Augustinian construct, seeking death is heresy as Christian sacrifice is a model by which to live not to die.

The Christian message, as articulated in the gospels, is one of an all-encompassing love: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5: 43-44). These Christian teachings issued under the control of the Roman Empire directly challenged Roman hegemony by offering an alternative construct; one that eschewed power and violence and sought solidarity with the vanquished: “blessed are the meek” (Mark 5:5). There is an inherent social message in the Christian utopian vision that demands social action with martyrdom being a manifestation of this action. Thus, for Augustine, martyrdom is an affirmation of life and of humanity. Or as Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, “The life and preachings of Jesus postulate the unceasing search for a new kind of person in a qualitatively different society [...] preaching the universal love of the Father goes inevitably against all injustice, privilege, oppression, or narrow nationalism” (211). Likewise, Clement of Alexandria asserts, “We call martyrdom perfection not because man comes to the end of his life as others, but because he has exhibited a perfect work of love” (*Stromata* Book IV Chapter 4).

The Augustinian declaration echoes Clement’s decree: “*martyres veros no facit pena sed causa*—punishment does not make true martyrs but the reason for the punishment” (Droge and Tabor 170). As I will show, this debate that emerged in early Christianity continues to the present day. Nor is this debate strictly limited to the

Christian world. The notion of seeking out of martyrdom or *talab al-shahada*, was a practice also discussed and “unequivocally condemned in classical scholarship” of the Islamic tradition (Brown 113). So when does self-sacrifice become intentional suicide? And is it possible to distinguish between these two notions? Perhaps there is no definitive answer; however, linking martyrdom to its philological origin of the act of bearing witness offers a distinction that gives the word an inherent social meaning. This philological origin is shared in the Islamic tradition—*shahid*—the Arabic word for martyr, also functions as the word for witness (Lewinstein 78).

Bearing witness in Christian theology cannot be an individual act, but must be part of a social movement. Bearing witness to the *logos* or the word is to observe and follow Christ’s suffering but also his model of human fellowship and love, one that seeks a world that elevates love and Samaritan action. However, this notion of being a true witness to these principles is not a strictly Christian concept. Mahatma Gandhi offered a similar utopian vision, relying on the ancient Jain principle of nonviolence or *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa*, much like the message of love in the gospels, spurs the social imagination for egalitarian freedom. Gandhi saw himself as a martyr to *satya*, which means “truth,” “true being” or “being true” (Hudson 132). This *satya* or truth was embodied in the power of *ahimsa*, the principle of nonviolence that offers an imagined world beyond the colonizing and dominating forces of the *Raj*. Gandhi believed this principle of *ahimsa* to be active and transformative (Hudson 132). This vision of a peaceful and pluralistic society built a social movement that directly challenged the British imperial forces in India. Although the martyr’s resistance might be of a religious or spiritual nature, “the state will inevitably view it in political terms. To secular authority, all dissent is political. To

suggest that anyone but Caesar decides what must be rendered to the state is sedition” (Gioia 323).

This study does not attempt to offer a universal notion of martyrdom and relies heavily on the Judeo-Christian tradition of martyrdom, as this is the tradition that profoundly shaped the Latin American landscape. Simultaneously, Marxist thought emerges from this tradition, and its expression in Central America intersects with Liberation Theology. It is, nonetheless, thought-provoking that there exists a shared notion of sacrifice across cultural traditions, embodied in imagining a better future and a willingness to sacrifice oneself in order to achieve it. This desire often emerges in response to oppressive state structures, and in its very imagining, challenges hegemonic forces such as the *Raj* in India or the Roman Empire. That such a desire spans across centuries and cultures offers insight into the willingness for young men and women to offer up their lives for a cause beyond themselves, not for a desire to die but for a yearning, a hunger to inhabit an imagined world without coercive powers, in which peace and justice reigns. Martyrdom, in this sense, does not seek a glorious afterlife; rather, the glory is found in the path towards martyrdom, the calvary—the *via crucis*. Like Albert Camus’ Sisyphus who rolls the boulder to the precipice, it is the “struggle itself towards the heights [that] is enough to fill a man’s heart” (“Myth of Sisyphus” 23).

This precipice is the symbolic climb—or *el calvario*—it is the “perfect work of love” that the martyr seeks. For the martyr, “man’s greatness consists in the very fact of wanting to be better than he is,” or desiring a more perfect social order (Carpentier 179). This is precisely the dilemma of Alejo Carpentier’s protagonist in his canonical novel on the Haitian revolution, *El reino de este mundo*. In the text Carpentier attempts to re-

historicize Latin American's colonial past by fusing his characters' pre-Columbian and Yoruba cosmologies with Catholic imagery and Marxist concepts of revolutionary struggle. The protagonist, former slave Ti Noël, realizes that he has abandoned the struggle of his predecessor the great Macandal.<sup>3</sup> Rather than using the shape-shifting techniques taught to him by Macandal to challenge the Haitian postcolonial social structure, he withdraws from human contact. At the close of the novel, he realizes that he has betrayed Macandal's legacy and must return to the Haitian people because, like Macandal, the martyr is "bowed down by suffering and duties, beautiful in the midst of his misery, capable of loving in the face of afflictions and trials [...] finds his greatness, his fullest measure, only in the Kingdom of This World" (Carpentier 179).

Martyrdom, even in the Gospels, is an inherently social and political act that serves a purpose not for the afterlife but for the *kingdom of this world*. Understanding martyrdom as an act that challenges hegemonic powers by offering an imagined utopia allows for insight into the making of a martyr. As stated above, this study does not seek to develop a universal notion of martyrdom. Rather it attempts to offer a working definition that permits us to grasp the functioning and phenomenology of martyrdom as it manifests in the modern world. Understanding this manifestation opens new spaces for literary analysis in Central American texts. We can see how the ethos of the revolutionary movement interacted with the textual realm in this period.

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<sup>3</sup> Macandal is both a historical and mythologized figure in the eighteenth-century Haitian uprising. He was born in Africa, then enslaved and brought to Haiti. He was a practitioner of Vondun, a syncretic Yoruban-Caribbean religious tradition. He is credited with initiating the earlier uprising that occurs forty years before the Haitian Revolution for independence from France. He organized mass poisonings of slave owners by recruiting and building contacts with the enslaved communities. While there is not a definitive history of Macandal, he has been mythologized in the Latin American novel, as well as in the Haitian oral tradition. He was credited with using in powers of transfiguration to elude capture by the colonial authorities. Upon his death at the stake, he is said to have escaped by transforming into a mosquito.



Returning to the original question, “What makes a martyr?,” we must consider its philological origin: *martus* in Paleo-Christianity to its current expression in the contemporary era in order to develop a working definition of a martyr. The notion that a martyr chooses “to defend truth unto death but does not choose death” challenges “the accusation that the martyr embraces suicide” (Harlan 121). The martyr’s heroism and “death serves and is affected by a compelling cause” (121). This cause in the contemporary era is most often directly tied to political movements. Our authors, Castillo, Dalton, and de Li3n, who are understood in the popular imaginary as devotees to the revolutionary cause, put forth their bodies to challenge the social order.

The martyr’s courage, as seen in Jewish as well as Christian sources dating to the *Maccabees*, is the willingness to accept death and “in an extremely hostile situation [the martyr] prefers a violent death to compliance with the demand of the (usually pagan) authorities” (van Henten and Avemarie 3). This “resistance to tyrannical authority” brings forth “painful suffering before unjust judges” (Bowersock 5). While in early Christianity these punishments were meted out in arenas at the hands of Roman gladiators, in the contemporary era, the state does not publicly sanction torture. Judicial systems deliver sentences, but the torture is nevertheless sanctioned by official authorities and occurs in the unofficial realm. However, the judicial process is often fundamental in the making of the martyr. Obviously, the trial of Jesus of Nazareth before Pontius Pilates figures prominently in the Christian imaginary. More importantly, the political act, essential to martyrdom plays out in the trial. Challenging the hegemonic structures, the martyr becomes guilty of sedition, because the sheer imagining of an alternative order threatens the state. At the same time, the more oppressive the state, the more likely the

imagining of an alternative order takes shape. It is not by accident that martyrdom occurs in waves. Whether it is the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire, the *Raj* in India, the Jim Crow South, or the Central American dictatorships of Somoza, Martínez, Estrada Cabrera, and Ubico, a similar phenomenon emerges. Masses of men and women willingly offer their physical bodies as living testaments of dissent.

These willing martyrs are labeled as anti-social (Tacitus) subversives and traitors to the state. For this reason, “the link between the martyr and the traitor has always been close because they possess two essential characteristics in common: neither needs the support or the affirmation of society [...] both are failures in the eyes of officialdom” (Smith 6). The martyr speaks against power, confronting the state with an alternative order. While the martyr may stand alone in the Roman arena or on trial, the martyr only becomes a martyr because they belong to a greater social movement that both contradicts the dominant power structure and conceives of an alternative order. Therefore, “people only become martyrs because others make them so” (van Henten and Avemarie 7). Despite the religious overtones, martyrdom is “a public and political spectacle [...] it strikes at the spiritual sinew of society, placing in question the collective integrity and legitimacy of the dominant group” (Smith 10). The hegemonic structure creates a social order that martyrs seek to challenge. The making of a martyr, then, is a collective force that is embodied in the resistance against the social order, the spectacle of death, and finally, in the collective memorial of the martyr act.

In seeking to define the martyr, the question then emerges as to how this tradition of self-sacrifice translates into the Central American context. Genocide, dictatorship, and war plagued the isthmus in the twentieth century. El Salvador saw the genocide of

thousands of Indigenous people in 1932, and in Guatemala from 1981 to 1983, some 625 Indigenous villages were erased from the map (CEH). We certainly see an exponential example of the parallels to Roman imperial violence recast in the contemporary capitalist era. The oppressive state structure viewed any dissent as sedition and subversion, and poets and writers with their musing and imaginations were seen as direct threats to the regimes. The targeting of poets and writers simultaneously reproduced multiple hagiographic narratives that became models of resistance. These models are represented in the *logos*—revolutionary poetry—and in the *ethos*—revolutionary action, and examining the interconnection between these two realms allows for a radical rereading of literary production in the revolutionary period.

The hagiographic narratives produced during the revolutionary period are intrinsically linked to the participation of artists in political movements. The dialogic relationship between the text and action are a central focus of this project. I employ both textual analysis and ethnographic research to examine the literature of this period. The first chapter surveys the history of military repression and marginalization of Indigenous<sup>4</sup> people and the peasant classes in Central America beginning in the colonial period. The chapter draws a contrast between Central American symbols of self-sacrifice and resurrection with nation-state iconography, examining how the state misappropriates and deforms Indigenous symbols in order to exert control over the populace. The second through fourth chapters focus specifically on the three writers examined in this study.

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<sup>4</sup> I focus particularly on Maya traditions as the dominant social and cultural group in the Central American isthmus as evidenced by Maya calendric system, the writing system and the ceremonial centers at Tikal, Yaxhilán, Palenque, Uxmal, Copán and Quiriguá. It must be noted that there is a diversity of Indigenous cultural traditions on the isthmus and the Maya are not one homogenous ethnic group. However, I rely heavily on oral and literary traditions cultivated in the Maya classical, post-classical, and contemporary eras as the Maya are the dominant cultural force in the region. Both the Nahua and Lenca peoples continue to identify with the Classical Maya as part of a shared patrimony.

Chapter Two presents a comparative analysis of the imaging and imagining of martyrdom in Central America. Examining the spectacle of martyrdom through the death of Otto René, Guatemalan *poeta guerrillero* captured, tortured, and disappeared in 1967, I argue that the image of the tortured and righteous Marxist revolutionary is both a reflection of and in dialogue with Christian imagery. The third chapter explores the life and death of Roque Dalton who serves as a symbolic representation of the revolutionary enterprise. His background, education, and literary formation on the streets of El Salvador and in the halls of Externado San José demonstrate his transformation from a Jesuit schoolboy to a *poeta guerrillero*. Exploring Dalton's individual experience offers us a vision of a historical moment, his life being emblematic of a social phenomenon.

The fourth chapter pays particular attention to the poetry and prose of Indigenous Guatemalan writer Luis de Lión. His texts dialogue with both Christian imagery and Indigenous cosmologies, reconsidering the notions of martyrdom and sacrifice within both of these traditions. His death at the hands of the military regime, like that of Dalton and Castillo, serves as a meta-narrative to the artistic creation and expression of the revolutionary period. The final chapter and conclusion explores the aftermath of the revolutionary period, the shifting ethos with respect to revolutionary movements, and the transformation of notions of self-sacrifice and death in the neo-liberal era.

The political convictions and poetic imagination of these poets were formed by four major elements: Spanish lyric and literary traditions, the Christian imaginary of martyrdom, Indigenous cosmologies, and the social-political realities of Central America. In turn, their three narratives, alongside their literary works, reinforced the already existing popular dissent of the revolutionary epoch. By examining these poets in terms of

their transformation of Christian and Indigenous cosmologies, this study intends to demonstrate that the Marxist revolution in Central America is not a historical anomaly, but an extension of enduring historical social, literary, and religious traditions that are fundamentally syncretic. The popular armed struggle and revolutionary sacrifice for this generation expressed both Christian and Indigenous traditions of martyrdom alongside Marxist ideologies.

Understanding how the Marxist revolutionary movement grew from aspirations for liberty and equality influenced by Christian ideas of self-sacrifice and martyrdom simultaneously challenges the limitations of the positivist paradigms that have generally been adopted to historicize this movement and its literary production. Reaching beyond the positivist approach of the historical discipline allows us to introduce questions of ontology and epistemology that form and inform revolutionary movements and their leaders. By imagining these movements from this broader social, cultural, and philosophical viewpoint, we no longer see the failure of the revolution as an inevitable march of history. Rather, we see that what fueled the sacrifice of a generation was the imagination of an alternative order. By speaking to this imagined alternative order as a field of dreams, as an unattainable utopia, perhaps we can cast the *failed revolution* in a new light. Rather than reduce this social commitment or condemn those who gave their lives for a cause, perhaps we can see them as martyrs who collectively structured an imaginary future of human equality. Perhaps their revolution failed, but the dream of the alternative order has not.

## Chapter I:

### Atlatl and Other Suicidal Indians

*Two little Injuns foolin' with a gun  
One shot t'other and then there was one;  
One little Injun livin' all alone,  
He got married and then there were none.*  
—Septimus Winner 1868

*His intention was only to restore order and cooperation among the Mayan-Ixil.*  
—Danilo Rodríguez, defense lawyer for General Ríos Montt at his genocide trial

*This is the skull of our own grandfather  
our own father.  
My descendants will hear  
my grandsons will hear  
this remembrance of me  
by my children  
my sons  
as long as there are days  
as long as there is light.*  
—Rabinal Achi

When we examine the concept of martyrdom within the socio-political context of the Americas, it is necessary to decipher the images promulgated by the nation-state and the structures of power within the state: the creole/ladino elite, the landowning classes, and the military. The appropriation of “fetishized” images by the state, specifically of figures who died in the Spanish invasion, is not by our earlier definition an example of modeled martyrdom. Martyrdom stands against existing socio-political orders and belongs to a social movement that seeks to challenge the status quo. In contrast, the use of images of fetishized Indians become symbols by which the state yields its power and military strength.

This distinction must be outlined at the beginning of this study as both Latin American intellectuals and the Latin American state have intentionally adopted Indigenous imagery. This

process of appropriation and disassociation from an ancient pre-Columbian past is not unique to the emerging Latin American nation-states, but rather an endemic element of the American continent, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Because the state, particularly the military-state, often appropriates language and iconography associated with self-sacrifice, it is necessary to take into account this imagery when attempting to differentiate state practices of social control from cultural practices of martyrdom. This chapter presents a thorough examination of the appropriation of nativist iconography for the purposes of political and social control of the Indigenous populace. The following chapters dialogue with this context in order to identify the practices of martyrdom as reflected in the political and textual realm of our authors.

As I have argued, the notion of death/sacrifice and rebirth/resurrection is not limited to the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Meso-American Indigenous cosmologies continue to shape and transform the Central American imaginative landscape. These cosmologies, as expressed in oral traditions and primary foundational myths, reach beyond the Western, Christian, and Marxist paradigms that shaped the ethos of the revolutionary period. Cultural reproduction and literary expression continue to be in dialogue with Maya and Indigenous myths and cosmologies. The interpretation, expression, and imagery of martyrdom precede the introduction of Christian notions of sacrifice and transfiguration because they emanate from Mesoamerican traditions, Indigenous cosmologies— from the depths of the Maya underworld, Xib' alb'a— a site ruled by One Death and Seven Death, understood as the place of ordeals and transformations through which all people must travel to regenerate and engender the next series of trials (Carrasco 170).

These living and practiced Indigenous traditions need to be distinguished from nativist national iconography. Indigenous traditions are a natural continuation of long-established cultural practices. On the other hand, nativist iconography, primarily symbolic and emblematic,

is found in imagery distorted and appropriated by the state often to oppress the very people whose iconography it has adopted. While nativist national iconography appropriates imagery and symbolism of Indigenous figures, the imagining and articulation surrounding the iconography does not emerge from practiced oral and written traditions. In the Americas, the formation of the nation-state invariably deploys nativist imagery. Indeed, the educated elite, as European intellectual descendants, articulated the imagined space of the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Latin-American nation, while imposing European ontological, theological, and philosophical structures on the populace in these nations. While we may see the adaptation of Indigenous symbols in these states, the use of this iconography cannot be equated to the adaptation or practice of Indigenous cosmologies, traditions, or social structures.

### **Nation-Building in the Americas**

Ernest Renan (1823-92) asserted in the romantic terms of French nineteenth-century imagining of the nation, that the “nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things that, in truth, are but one constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is in the past, the other in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form” (261). I want to focus on Renan’s problematic notion of consent that he advances in “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” The Latin American state that emerges in the post-colonial period radically conflicts with the notion of imagined consent due to racialized structures of power in the region. As Arturo Arias points out “a cadre of elite men called ‘letrados’” (*Recovering Lost Footprints* 2) constructed their “national imaginaries through discourse, symbols, and rites” (3). However, he signals, these “configurations, publications, and the like were always crafted in Castilian [...], and always within Eurocentric parameters, that



never questioned Western teleology” and “viewed Western forms of thinking” as “not only universal but superior to all others” (3).

In a region where the elite land-owning and/or professional classes hold social, economic, and political power, the nation is not an imagined space of the popular, peasant, and mostly Indigenous classes. The nineteenth-century Latin American nation, as articulated by this “cadre of elite men,” emerges as an imagined space of the few and the elite where the Indigenous occupy only a symbolic space. They are envisaged as part of an ancient past of an extinct people or a people imagined in the national consciousness as vanquished in the process of colonization. This nationalist native mythology promotes a “fetishized” image of a noble Indigenous past that no longer exists in contrast to the oral traditions that continue to be present and practiced in contemporary Indigenous communities.

While the nascent Latin American nation-states practiced and sanctioned policies of wholesale genocide of Indigenous people, the founding fathers reconfigured the Indigenous past in their literary imagination and national discourses. In the process of “national consolidation” as Doris Sommer affirms in *Foundational Fictions*, “[e]ven the most elitist and racist founding fathers understood that their project of national consolidation under a civil government needed racial hybridization” (123). In her analysis of Latin American emerging fictions, Sommer points to Indigenous characters that simultaneously embody a violent expurgation of the past and an imagined inclusion in the present. The character written as the “anachronistic Indian” provides readers with “the double pleasure of relief at their absence and pride in the unyielding nature that can be claimed as a national heritage” (246). The anachronistic Indian operates as a discursive space, where, as Benedict Anderson writes in his book on the making of nations, “second-generation nationalists, in the Americas and elsewhere, learned to speak ‘for’ dead people with

whom it was impossible or undesirable to establish a linguistic connection” (198). Creating a sense of national identity by drawing upon an invented literary character written by a *criollo* or *mestizo*, while excluding the Indigenous as active agents, fetishized Natives as simulacral images on decorative symbols on coins, flags, and stamps, and verbal symbols in nineteenth century and twentieth century anthems, novels, and poems.<sup>1</sup>

Notions of *mestizaje* reinforced this sense of the mythic Indigenous and ennobled past while erasing the Indigenous of the present. In privileging the hybridity, as seen for example, in José Vasconcelos’ notion of *la raza cósmica*, he imbues the *mestizo* with a power of an ancient mythical, yet unreachable, past. At the same time, Vasconcelos sees the *mestizo* as superior because his connection with the cosmic past is crossbred with the modernity of the Western present. The Indigenous past affords the *mestizo* a mythical, cosmic, and untouchable power—the same power that is embodied in the bureaucratic and military apparatus of the nation-state. This apparatus that emerges in the nineteenth-century post-colonial period excludes the Indigenous as active agents. The Indigenous peoples that serve in the mines and in the fields, who continue to practice their ancient traditions and speak a language other than Spanish are not imbued with this mythical status. They are simply *los indios*—the masses of impoverished Indigenous peasants whose very existence threatens the socio-political structures of a tenuous nation-state.

Mythologized native figures present a stark contrast to active Indigenous agents whom we can access through the written historical archive. Hernán Cortés’ concubine and translator, commonly known as doña Marina (or more indecorously *la Malinche*), is one of the first active

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<sup>1</sup> Somner’s notion of this “foundational fiction” in the Central American context can be seen in the work of Alfredo Espino, Francisco’s Gavidia’s *Cuentos and Narraciones*, and Miguel Ángel Espino’s *Mitología de Cuscatlán*. This stanza from Honduran national anthem is perhaps the best lyrical representation of this fetishization: “Era inútil que el indio tu amado/ Se aprestara a la lucha con ira,/ Porque envuelto en su sangre Lempira,/ En la noche profunda se hundió;/ Y de la épica hazaña, en memoria,/ La leyenda tan sólo ha guardado/ De un sepulcro el lugar ignorado/ Y el severo perfil de un peñón.”

agents for whom we have written (albeit Spanish) records. As Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de soledad* writes, “[t]he symbol of [...] violation is doña Malinche, the mistress of Cortés. It is true that she gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador, but he forgot her as soon as her usefulness was over” (86). In contrast, Paz describes the last Mexica emperor Cuauhtémoc as a “young hero” and “the image of a sacrificed son” (86). While Paz readily admits that Cuauhtémoc is “more a myth than a historical figure” (84) and is intentionally underlining the manner in which these two figures are understood within the Mexican (national) collective (un)consciousness, it is, nonetheless, a telling portrayal. *Una malinche* is a common expression in Mexican Spanish to describe a treacherous betrayer, whereas there exists an ardent cult to Cuauhtémoc, and it continues to be a given name.

The historical archive tells quite another story, which is well-documented in Camilla Townsend’s *Malintzín’s Choices*. Doña Marina, or Malintzín, had to strategize and plan in order to survive. Malintzín was just one of the many Indigenous people who allied with the Spanish in order to overthrow the Mexica empire. And even the term alliance is problematic, for she was gifted to Cortés as a slave. Her incredible linguistic capacity made her indispensable to the Spanish forces, thereby guaranteeing her survival. As Townsend points out, it is quite probable that Malintzín continually interceded on behalf of Indigenous communities in order to prevent the brutal massacres initiated by the Spanish, such as those described by Bartolomé de las Casas in *Brevísima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias*. Given that Cortés most likely strangled his first wife to death (Townsend 138) and had a documented propensity for violence, that Malintzín survived, managed to procure a future for her children, and escaped concubinage with Cortés is a testament to her agency. However, the process of appropriation and disassociation (Earle 134), the appropriation of Cuauhtémoc, and the disassociation of Malintzín demonstrates

the national fetish of the anachronistic Indian that emerges in nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Latin America, and ultimately, the unwillingness by the *criollo* and *mestizo* elite to include Indigenous peoples as active agents of history and active members of the emerging republic. Because, as the socio-political reality suggests, including the Indigenous population would demand a profound examination of the political and economic structure, particularly and most importantly land distribution, *gamonalismo* and *latifundismo*. This much-debated *problema del indio* that materializes in nineteenth-century Latin America is not an ethnic or educational issue as José Mariátegui asserts, but a fundamental problem *de la tierra*: a profoundly imbalanced economic system in which the resources are concentrated in the hands of a small elite land-owning class and the remaining population, mostly Indigenous and African masses, are the impoverished (Mariátegui “El problema del indio”).

Ricardo Roque Baldovinos, in his work on nation-building in El Salvador, further explores this problematic construction of a nation within a colonial legacy of Indigenous oppression. In the article, “Poética del despojo: Mestizaje y memoria en la invención de la nación,” he asserts that Salvadoran national identity is a fictional exercise that “usurpa las historias concretas de sujeción y resistencia de los grupos subalternos y las transforma en relatos melancólicos” (“usurps concrete histories of domination and resistance amongst subaltern groups and transforms them into melancholic stories”; 1). This he argues, “implica un proceso de despojo y silenciamiento de las memorias de las víctimas para sustentar una mitología que sitúe la nacionalidad dentro del telos de la modernidad” (“implicates a process that plunders and silences the memories of victims in order to sustain a mythology that centers the nation in the *telos* of modernity”; 1). Indeed, the making of the Salvadoran *mestiza* nation was directly connected to the Indigenous massacres of 1932. After that date, the Salvadoran government

ceased to record Indigenous as a category on the census, systematically erasing Indigenous peoples from the state archive. The removal of Indigenous becomes an intentional extension of *mestizo* imagining.

In this sense, national boundaries, and the national imaginary, act as an imposition on a non-consenting subject. This act does not mean that there are not shared realities within the Central American border, but the state represents an oppressive apparatus both within its idea of itself as such, and in the actions it carries out. Roque Baldovinos in “Salarrué, una semblanza” captures the rejection of Renan’s consent citing the words of the Salvadoran author Salarrué in an editorial published in 1932, shortly after the Indigenous uprising and subsequent genocide: “Yo no tengo patria, yo no sé que es patria. ¿A que llamáis patria vosotros los hombres entendidos por prácticos? Sé que entendéis por patria un conjunto de leyes, una maquinaria de administración, un parche en un mapa de colores chillones” (“I don’t have a homeland, I don’t know what a homeland is. What do you men of logic and science call your homeland? I know that you understand it as a combination of laws, a system of administration, a section on a map of strident colors”; Salarrué in Roque Baldovinos 120). Rejecting the notion of an ethno-nation, as it is in his eyes a vague and unreal entity, Salarrué continues, “no tengo patria pero tengo terruño (de tierra, cosa palpable) [...] tengo Cuscatlán, una región del mundo y no una nación (cosa vaga)” (“I don’t have a country rather I have plot of land (of earth, a tangible thing) [...] I have Cuscatlán, a region of the world and not a nation (a vague thing)”; 120).

While Roque Baldovinos sets forth a strong critique of the Salvadoran *mestiza* nation as imagined in the political and literary realm, sociologist Marta Elena Casaús Arzú asserts that nation-making in Central America is a project of eugenics. She argues that positivist racial ideologies that circulated among Central American intellectuals in the early part of the twentieth

century prevented even the imagining of either a hybrid or multi-ethnic nation. For Casaús Arzú, the national projects in Central America had, at their core, a project of genocide that sought to erase, whiten, and *ladinizar* the mostly Indigenous population. In her article “El mito impensable del mestizaje en América Central,” she presents a thorough examination of Central American writing on national discourse from the nineteenth century through the 1930s, signaling that the intellectual discourse on nation-making set the stage for the Salvadoran genocide of 1932 and the Guatemalan genocide in the 1980s. She argues that the whitening of the nation-state was foundational, rooted both in the national imaginary of the intellectual elite and an agenda based on “una economía agraria cafetalera” (93). Said economy relied on Indigenous exploitation and land dispossession as a necessity of its growth (93).

Casaús Arzú provides copious documentation of Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Costa Rican intellectuals that wrote extensively on race and national identity. Most notably she cites the 1923 thesis of Miguel Ángel Asturias,<sup>2</sup> whose discussion on Indigenous identity is representative of the national discourse of the period. Asturias writes of the Indigenous populace that there exists “una degeneración permanente de la raza indígena, lo que le impide acceder al progreso y a la civilización” (“a permanent degeneration in the Indigenous race that impedes them from accessing progress and civilization”; Asturias qtd. in Casaús Arzú 85). The vision by Asturias and reproduced by intellectuals of his period presents the Indigenous population as an impediment to national advancement. The making of the nation, the modern nation-state is, for the intellectual elite, impossible to imagine when Indigenous people populate the countryside.

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<sup>2</sup> We should note here that Casaús Arzú cites Asturias’ sociology thesis, which Asturias later rejects in part. At the same time, these ideas most certainly reflect the intellectual zeitgeist of the period and are representative of numerous intellectuals from his generation. See Casaús Arzú for further discussion on these writers.

Carlos Samayoa Chinchilla perhaps best sums up the *letrado* vision of Indigenous citizenry in the Central American context:

El indio de Guatemala, es un valioso elemento decorativo, forma parte de nuestros paisajes y en lo que respecta a su condición merece nuestro respeto humano [...] Pero, el indio, cargado de conocimientos y favorecido por todas las circunstancias imaginables será siempre indio [...] su verdadera redención no llegará sino cuando su vieja sangre tenga oportunidad de mezclarse con representantes de raza blanca.

(“The Guatemalan Indian is a valuable decorative element, forming part of our landscapes, and given his condition, deserves our human respect [...] But, the Indian, even with education and in the best imaginable circumstances will always be an Indian [...] his true redemption won’t come until his ancient blood has the opportunity to mix with representatives of the white race”; Samayoa Chinchilla qtd. in Casaús Arzú 87)

Herein lies the tragedy of Guatemala, of Central America, and perhaps the whole of the Americas. In the paradigm of the nation-state, Indigenous peoples are envisioned as decorative elements stripped of basic human rights. They are permitted to exist in the national space as backdrops, in an imposed and colonizing nation-state absent of Renan’s consent.

### **Nativist Imagery**

Hayden White writes that fetishism “is a mistaking of the form of a thing for its content or taking of a part of a thing for the whole, and the elevation either of the form or the part to the status of a content or an essence of the whole” (*Tropics of Discourse* 194). White asserts in his article “Noble Savage Theme as Fetish” that the images of the Indigenous other emerge in the European discourse and consciousness as “monstrous forms of humanity and as quintessential objects of desire” (*Tropics of Discourse* 194). The monstrous form is embodied in Shakespeare’s

Caliban, while the object of desire can be seen in Daniel Defoe's character Friday (loyal and faithful) in *Robinson Crusoe*. Another poignant example of this object of desire can be seen in Bartolomé de las Casas' depiction of the rebel *cacique* Hatuey. Hatuey serves as the symbolic embodiment of the honorable and the brave, which is a stark contrast to the picture de las Casas paints of his Spanish counterparts. The object of desire becomes the comportment modelled by the *other*.

This process of fetishization is not unique to the European colonial period. It is also present in post-colonial Latin America with the rise of the nation-state. The pre-Conquest Indigenous past becomes Samayoa Chinchilla's decorative element, incorporated into nationalist literature, discourse, and iconography through a process of both fetishization and hybridity. It is the pre-Columbian Indian that appears in anthems and on stamps, while living, breathing Indigenous peoples are systematically marginalized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a project of the American nation-state. This is evidenced in the numerous Indigenous rebellions and subsequent state-sponsored massacres, such as the Maya Rebellion in the Yucatán, Aymara leader Pablo Zárate Willka's 1899 insurrection in Bolivia, and Anastasio Aquino's 1832 Nonualco Rebellion in El Salvador.

In the Western Hemisphere, the most prominent example of this process of appropriation and disassociation of an ancient pre-Columbian past is seen in the United States. The inclusion of nativist iconography in national symbols arose as westward expansion systematically practiced genocide, removal, and relocation of Native populations. This process can be characterized as an endemic element of the continent. Appropriation of the symbolic native arose synchronously with the appropriation of Indigenous lands. As in the nascent Latin American states, U.S. national policy supported emerging economic structures that relied on expansion in order to



develop and exploit the resources of these areas. The Indian Removal Act passed by President Andrew Jackson in 1830, initiated a policy of forced removal and subsequent relocation of the Native peoples west of the Mississippi. When resistance ensued, tens of thousands were massacred as President Jackson deployed U.S. military forces. Interestingly, thirty years after the



Fig. 1. "One Cent Coin"<sup>3</sup>

Indian Removal Act was signed, the Indian Head one-cent coin, or the Indian penny, was introduced (see fig. 1). As Indigenous peoples were being systematically massacred and/or relocated in the Trail of Tears to reservations, the U.S. minted a coin with the image of an Indian in full regalia with the words, "liberty" detailing his headdress. One cannot ignore the patent irony present in the symbolic manipulation of a massacred subject.

At the foundation of the U.S., its conceptual borders were delivered in the hands of a violent midwifery. The subsequent national narrative of American exceptionalism, as represented in the puritan work ethic, rugged individualism, and the egalitarian state, omitted the acts of

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<sup>3</sup> <[americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\\_1082325](http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1082325)>

genocide that accompanied this *city upon a hill*. The developing republic suffered from a profound cognitive dissonance. Nationalism became an expression similar to psychological trauma in which the republic acted as a “traumatized person [experiencing] intense emotion but without clear memory of the event” (Herman 38), or what Baldovinos defines as the “despojo y silenciamiento de la memoria.” The citizenry struggled to construct a coherent national narrative, but much like a soldier returning from war, the victimizer/victim of trauma pieces together an account from shattered images of the past.

Because “traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context” (Herman 38), the act of telling allows the survivor to begin to organize these memories into a coherent narrative. In this case, the survivor is not a member of the Haisndayin or the Naishan Dene, nor does the surviving narrative attempt to include these accounts. In contrast, the U.S. national narrative is both a part and product of the mechanisms of expansion. In traditional psychotherapy, the trauma victim must verbalize the trauma, and the reception of this speech act is a fundamental part of the healing process. Only “when the ‘action of telling a story’ has come to its conclusion, does the traumatic experience truly belong to the past” (Herman 195). In the case of the U.S. national narrative there, is an attempt to disassociate from the past through omission. The state negates and silences verbalization of the shared trauma of genocide, and the citizenry possesses symptoms of a damaged psyche—a fragmented and incomplete narrative—thereby residing in a state of national cognitive dissonance.



Fig. 2. "1913 Buffalo Nickel"<sup>4</sup>

In this process of appropriation and disassociation, the narrative omission of a violent expansion contrasts with the adaptation of native imagery in a perhaps (un)conscious attempt to reconcile the destruction of the *other* with the construction of a republic whose conceptual foundation rests on "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The imagery harkens back to an ancient, but vanquished, extinct, or quarantined people (see figs. 2 & 3). Native peoples are pictured like the buffalo on the coin introduced in 1913, as westward expansion had all but wiped out the species. They are depicted as a noble species of the past, admired as fierce and bold warriors, but belonging to the untamed plains brought into order and civilization through westward expansion.



Fig. 3. "1913 Buffalo Nickel"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> < [thecoinshop.shop/buffalo-nickels/1913-p-var-1-five-cents-raised-buffalo-nickel/](http://thecoinshop.shop/buffalo-nickels/1913-p-var-1-five-cents-raised-buffalo-nickel/) >

<sup>5</sup> < [usacoinbook.com/coins/910/nickels/buffalo/1913-P/](http://usacoinbook.com/coins/910/nickels/buffalo/1913-P/) >

The fetishization of the native contrasts sharply with the historic treatment of Indigenous people. The Indian brave becomes the talisman of the emerging nation, yet the actual warriors and leaders involved in advocating and struggling for Indigenous rights were systematically pursued by the state. In the twentieth and twenty-first century, this fetishization of the native is closely associated with an equal admiration for their war tactics. Baseball teams, cars, and missiles are named after the Indian brave, Indian tribes, and their weaponry: the Tomahawk Cruise Missile, the Washington Redskins (only recently changed), the Kansas City Chiefs, the Pontiac (see fig. 4), the Jeep Cherokee (reintroduced in 2014). There is an apparent paradox in a Boeing AH-64 Apache hovering over a village in Iraq or Afghanistan, using the name of a vanquished people in the conquest of another.



Fig. 4. “1948 Pontiac Hood Ornament”<sup>6</sup>

Across the hemisphere, the fetishization of the vanquished other is a repeated trope. In Central America, we see this evidenced in the national currencies and stamps. For instance, the Honduran Lempira (see fig. 5), introduced in 1932, is named after a Lenca resistance leader who died during the Spanish Conquest. In El Salvador, the Atlacatl stamp was introduced in 1920s (see fig. 7). And in Guatemala we have the example of the quetzal (see fig. 8) decorated with Tecún Umán, Maya-K’iche’ warrior, who was also purported to have died in battle during the

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<sup>6</sup> <pixels.com/featured/1948-pontiac-hood-ornament-2jill reger>

conquest. These are understood as vanquished Indigenous leaders, symbolic embodiments of an ancient past that is no longer knowable or reachable.



Fig. 5. “Honduran Lempira 1932”<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 6. “Honduran Lempira 1980”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> <[foreigncurrencyandcoin.com/product/honduras-1-lempira-1932-banco-de-honduras/](http://foreigncurrencyandcoin.com/product/honduras-1-lempira-1932-banco-de-honduras/)>

<sup>8</sup> <[usacoinbook.com/item/honduras-p68a-lempira-unc62-299893/](http://usacoinbook.com/item/honduras-p68a-lempira-unc62-299893/)>



Fig. 7. “Atlatl Stamp”<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 8. “.50 Quetzal”<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most egregious example of the fetishized Indigenous figure is present on the Guatemalan twenty-five *centavo* coin. What is striking in this case, is that we have this voice of this figure in the historical archive. In 1964, a Maya-Tz’utujil woman, Concepción Ramírez Mendoza was photographed and then selected by artist Alfredo Gálvez Suárez in a contest to represent “el rostro perfecto” (Galicia) of an Indigenous woman. She was awarded prize money of two *quetzales* (approximately \$2.00 in 1964). However, the tragedy represented in her personal story captures the contrast between Indigenous iconic representation and lived reality.

<sup>9</sup> <colnect.com/en/stamps/stamp/370603-Monument\_of\_Atlatl-Country\_Symbols-El\_Salvador>

<sup>10</sup> <foreigncurrencyandcoin.com/product/guatemala-50-centavos-de-quetzal/>

Years after the civil war, she narrates the violence that was inflicted upon the Tz'utujil inhabitants of Santiago de Atitlán and her family:

En ese entonces había tranquilidad. Teníamos luz y electricidad en el pueblo. Luz humana y electricidad. Cuando vinieron los militares, todos se encerraban en sus casas. Ellos torturaban gente por dinero, torturaban a la gente. La primera víctima fue mi papá, quien era pastor. Él fue torturado en Chacayá. Ellos lo tomaron como rehén y le dispararon. Ellos dijeron que él era jefe de la guerrilla. Su cuerpo lo encontraron en Agua Escondida.

Ellos mataron a mi esposo, Miguel Ángel Mendoza. Ellos lo torturaron junto con otras dos personas, Juan Pablo y Gregorio. El día que mataron a mi esposo, yo estaba torteando cuando me vinieron a avisar. Yo bajé corriendo a ver qué había pasado. Cuando vi su cuerpo, yo no podía ver su cara, porque estaba todo torturado. Solo recuerdo que me desmayé. Él era un hombre trabajador, comerciante. Según lo que la gente decía, a él lo asesinaron porque cuando venía en el bus, lo bajaron del bus y él comenzó a gritar que por qué lo hacían y que él solo estaba tratando de ir a trabajar.

Los soldados regresaron a amenazarnos y a decirnos que no lloráramos y que no dijéramos nada más porque si no, nos iba a pasar lo mismo a nosotros. Ellos no me dejaron llorar a mi esposo. Tuve que tragarme mis lágrimas y mi dolor. Yo no sabía qué hacer. No tenía dinero. Había mucha pobreza. Yo no tenía estudio y fui de casa en casa pidiendo trabajitos. Yo no pude darle estudio a mis hijos, que fue una desgracia en la familia. Hubo muchas repercusiones.

(“At this time there was peace. We had light and electricity in our village. Human light and electricity. When the military came, everybody locked themselves in their

houses. They tortured people for money, they tortured people. The first victim was my father who was a pastor. He was tortured in Chacayá. They took him prisoner and shot him. They said he was a guerrilla leader. They found his body in Agua Escondida.

“They [the soldiers] killed my husband, Miguel Ángel Mendoza. They tortured him with two other people, Juan Pablo y Gregorio. The day they murdered my husband, I was making tortillas when they informed me. I ran down to see what had happened. When I saw his body, I could not see his face because it was completely tortured. I only remember that I fainted. He was a hard worker, a vender. According to what the people said, they killed him because he was on the bus and when he got off, he began to yell that why were they doing this, he was just trying to get to work.

“The soldiers returned to threaten us and tell us not to cry and not to say anything or the same would happen to us. They didn’t let me cry for my husband. I had to swallow my tears and my pain. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t have money. There was a lot of poverty. I hadn’t gone to school and so I went from house to house seeking work. I couldn’t send my children to school. This was a misfortune for our family. There were a lot of repercussions”; Kepes Cardenás)

This is the story behind the face that graces the coin, commonly called “la choca,” as only one eye is in view in the original photograph and on the coin (Galicia) (see fig. 9). *Choco* is a common idiomatic expression in Guatemala for the blind. The symbolic manipulation of a massacred subject like the coin’s name is also a history blind to the lived reality of Ramírez Mendoza. National emblems that form part of nation building and myth-making do not shape *una historia sagrada* but tragically *una historia cegada* in which the state operates in the realm of national cognitive dissonance, negating and silencing the genocide of its populace.





Fig. 9. “Choca”<sup>11</sup>

### **Symbolic Violence and Genocide in Central America**

The appropriation of nativist imagery appears throughout the Western Hemisphere as Indigenous peoples are subsumed into the emerging nation-states. As Virginia Tilley argues, Latin American states “have used the romanticized memory of Indigenous heroes and civilizations for nationalist narratives” (85) and “every Central American country has its iconic Conquest Indian: Lempira in Honduras (whose name was appropriated for national currency); Tecún Umán in Guatemala (a Mayan, visible to tourists as imposing statues in the capital; and of course Nicaragua, of the Nahuatl-Nicarao, whose name was appropriated for the country itself” (91). This anachronistic Indian evokes “tragic defeat” (Tilley 91) and an extinct, no longer accessible past. This is the paradox of the modern nation-state in the Western Hemisphere. The “native” is possessed, appropriated, and fetishized while Indigenous peoples are systematically dispossessed and removed from their lands.

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<sup>11</sup> <[entremundos.org/revista/cultura/la-mujer-en-la-moneda-de-25-centavos-y-otras-vozes-del-genocidio-de-guatemala/](http://entremundos.org/revista/cultura/la-mujer-en-la-moneda-de-25-centavos-y-otras-vozes-del-genocidio-de-guatemala/)>

In El Salvador, the myth of Atlacatl that emerges at the turn of the century presents a stark contrast to the actual Indigenous leader Anastasio Aquino who led the revolt of Santiago Nonualco in 1832 and gave his life attempting to challenge the existing social order. After a long and heroic standoff in which Anastasio Aquino set forth demands for the return of Indigenous lands and the end of debt peonage, he was captured. He was decapitated and his head was put on display in a cage for three days in the Plaza of San Vicente with a sign that read *ejemplo de los revoltosos*. Atlacatl, on the other hand, is the mythologized Indian whose resistance to the Spanish is immortalized in poems, songs, and statues,<sup>12</sup> whereas the latter, Aquino, was portrayed in nineteenth-century newspaper accounts as a savage barbarian and was left out of the national discourse until recently. Atlacatl is understood in the Salvadoran nationalist mythology to be the Prince of Cuzcatlán.<sup>13</sup> As myth has it, he faced the conqueror Pedro de Alvarado in combat, and after a noble battle and heroic defeat he chose suicide rather than servitude, casting himself into a volcano. The creation of Atlacatl is in fact based on a mistaken translation of the *Memorial de Sololá, Anales de los Kaqchikeles* done by the French cleric Carlos Esteban Brasseur de Bourbourg. In his translation (1873-1874), Brasseur identifies the destruction of the town of Panatacat (Izcuintepeec or modern-day Escuintla in Guatemala) as Pedro de Alvarado moved towards El Salvador. Due to problems with the written form (lack of punctuation and spacing) in addition to Brasseur's limited knowledge of the language, he misidentifies the town Panatacat, also called Atacat,<sup>14</sup> with a cacique that did not actually exist (Recinos 101-102). He

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<sup>12</sup> As Virginia Tilley writes in *Seeing Indians*, "Atlacatl was freely reimagined, romanticized, and exoticized by Salvadoran nationalist intellectuals, who at the turn of the century, were reimagining El Salvador itself partly through a small corpus of fables, poetry, and music. An early literary journal, *La Quincena*, published a number of such works: in 1903, "Tepta, Indian Legend," "Indian Rhapsody," and even a short piano piece, "Atlacatl: Indian March [...]" and "The Court of Atlacatl" (91-92). There even existed a journal of letters, science, and arts titled *Atlacatl* founded in 1921 and directed by Abraham Ramírez Peña (Italo López Vallecillos 251).

<sup>13</sup> The original Indigenous name of the central region of El Salvador.

<sup>14</sup> The section referred to in the *Memorial de Sololá* as translated by Adrián Recinos is Section 150, "Veinticinco días después de haber llegado a la ciudad [Yximché] partió Tunatiuh para Cuzcatán, destruyendo de paso a Atacat. El día 2 Queh [9 de mayo] los castellanos mataron a los de Atacat. Todos los guerreros y sus mexicanos fueron con Tunatiuh a la conquista" (Versión de Recinos 101).

then adds the *l* (Recinos 101-102), making the Kaqchikel name Nahuatl, the language of Central Mexico, similar to the Uto-Aztecan language, Nahuat (Pipil), the primary language group in the area that is now El Salvador. He identifies the destruction of Panatacat as the destruction of the Indian Cacique Atlacatl (101-102). In fact, as Alvarado relates in his second *Relación*, the area of El Salvador, Cuzcatlán, was never conquered, because while Alvarado was gravely wounded by an arrow, the Nahua people of El Salvador fled (101-102).

Atlacatl was later “identified as the Nahua archer that wounded Alvarado in the thigh” (Tilley 91). At the turn of the century, the myth of Atlacatl was absorbed into the emerging nationalist literature. Salvadoran poet Alfredo Espino immortalized Atlacatl as an ancient noble savage, *el “indio indómito”* or the untamed Indian: “Aquel indio Atlacatl con su figura/ de recios bíceps y de pecho erguido, que en una leyenda hubiera sido/ de un Hércules de bronce la escultura” (“That Indian Atlacatl with his figure/ of robust biceps and built chest,/ and in a legend he would have been/ a bronzed statue of Hercules”; “Atlacatl” 93). In the early 1900s the literary journal, *La Quincena*, published numerous poems dedicated to Atlacatl (Tilley 92). Then in 1928, Atlacatl took physical form when Valentín Estrada Domínguez rendered a bronze statue of the cacique in the image of a North American Plains Indian—a mere four years before the *Matanza* of 1932, when speaking Nahuat and wearing Indigenous dress was considered a crime against the state (see fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Valentín Estrada's "Atlacatl" bronzed statue finished in 1928.<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 11. A cement copy of Valentín Estrada's statue (painted gold) situated in Antigua Cuzcatlán.<sup>16</sup>

Later, in the 1980's at the height of the Salvadoran civil war, the anachronistic Indian, el Cacique Atlacatl, was assimilated into a dangerous iconography represented in the military

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<sup>15</sup> <diariolavozsv.wordpress.com/2015/09/14/valentin-estrada-el-indio-atlacatl/>

<sup>16</sup> <deviantart.com/manuelibanez/art/Atlacatl-65727355>

regalia of the proto-fascist state (see fig. 12). In 1981, the infamous U.S.-trained Atlacatl Battalion was formed. The Atlacatl Battalion committed the most vicious and brutal of war crimes during this decade, including the torture and murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) and the El Mozote Massacre. The commander of the Atlacatl Battalion, Lt. Colonel Domingo Monterrosa intentionally incorporated the *mística* of the savage and fearless warrior in the military regiment (Danner *The Massacre of El Mozote* 50). The unit's repeated refrain was "Somos Guerreros" and standing at full attention the troop would sing: "¡Somos guerreros!/ ¡Todos guerreros! ¡Seguiremos adelante y mataremos/ a una montaña de terroristas!" (Danner *Masacre: Guerra sucia en El Salvador* 54) ("We are warriors!/ Warriors all!/ We are going forth to kill!/ A mountain of terrorists!"; Danner 50). The unit was also noted for maiming animals and smearing the blood on their faces before initiating a kill mission (Danner *The Massacre of El Mozote*). The *mística* reflected a form of psychological warfare by which the Atlacatl Battalion terrorized the countryside, evoking the memory of General Martínez and the massacre of 1932.

In the first year of the unit's formation the visceral brutality of the Atlacatl Battalion was etched in the Salvadoran consciousness with El Mozote Massacre. Perhaps the most infamous and horrific of war crimes during the Salvadoran civil war, more than 800 civilian non-combatants, mostly impoverished peasants, were murdered within a 24-hour period. Almost 70% of the village had already fled and the remaining inhabitants believed that because they were not politically involved that they would be spared military reprisals (Binford). As documented in Mark Danner's *The Massacre at El Mozote*, on the evening of December 10, the Atlacatl Battalion descended on El Mozote and imprisoned the villagers. The following morning the men, women, and children were separated. The men were then were interrogated for an hour, shot,

decapitated with machetes, and their corpses were burned. Next, the young women and girls (some as young as ten) were taken to the hillside of the village. The soldiers of Atlacatl raped the young girls intermittently throughout the day. In the evening before departing the village, they decapitated and then burned the girls. The women suffered the same fate as the men. Finally, the children were murdered (many of the soldiers had initially objected but ultimately followed through with orders). After the army had abandoned the site, the guerrillas arrived at the ghoulish scene. One of the guerrilla commanders who was first to encounter the aftermath described the carnage: “from the ruins of the sacristy came ‘a penetrating odor that indicated that beneath [...] were to be found who knows how many cadavers of the people of El Mozote’; and that in the shattered building he could see ‘macabre scenes, hunks of human hair, and fingers amid the rubble’” (Danner 88).

The intentional savagery associated with the unit was part and parcel of psychological warfare. The appropriation of the el Cacique Atlacatl added to the mystique of this frightening brigade, evoking images from the early conquest in which writers such as Bernal Díaz inverted the savagery of the Spanish, manipulating the text to promote images of “native” savagery and aggrandize the Spanish Conquest. Even the military regalia of the Atlacatl Battalion conjured up this imagery (see fig. 12). The anachronistic Indian sewn onto the uniforms represented a North American Plains Indian in a military salute with an M-16 rifle in hand. The Salvadoran military adopted this nativist iconography to promote a culture of death, savagery, and brutality during the civil war. This adaptation evokes the fetish of the hunter who wears the skin of his prey or adorns his house with the horns of a murdered elk; this is the process by which the state appropriates the body of the massacred Indigenous and manipulates this image to evoke fear.



Fig. 12. The Atlacatl badge sewn on the battalion's uniform.<sup>17</sup>

Similar to the Cacique Atlacatl, the figure of Tecún Umán of Guatemala, the Maya-K'iche warrior king has been subsumed into the national construct. According to the legend, Tecún Umán, like Atlacatl, was killed in battle with Pedro de Alvarado and in his death transformed into the majestic quetzal. The red on the neck of the quetzal is said to symbolize Tecún Umán's spilled blood. Though the battle between Tonatiuh (Pedro de Alvarado) and Tecún Umán is evoked in the traditional "Baile de la Conquista," the Guatemalan military incorporated Tecún Umán into national discourse. In 1960, just six years after the C.I.A.-sponsored coup that deposed President Jacobo Arbenz, General Ydígoras Fuentes declared Tecún Umán a national hero (Otzoy 51). While President Arbenz sought policies of agrarian reform to combat the grinding poverty of the peasants and Indigenous peoples in the rural areas, the contiguous military dictatorships that ruled from 1954-1986, intentionally dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their lands. Despite this intense structural racism and marginalization of

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<sup>17</sup> < m.facebook.com/Biria-Atlacatl-101498469997098/posts >

Indigenous peoples, the image of the Tecún Umán can be found throughout Guatemala in public spaces, on statues, and on the currency (see fig. 13).



Fig. 13. Statue of “Tecún Umán” in Xelajú<sup>18</sup>

An example of the manner by which Tecún Umán was subsumed into the nationalist discourse of the military state is demonstrated in the following military pamphlet from the 1990s: “For all Guatemalans, the figure of our courageous warrior Tecún Umán should represent a) a lesson in patriotism; b) an example of authentic nationalism; c) a symbol of national identity; d) an example of the defense of freedom, foundation for national unity; e) champion of sovereignty; f) the honor and courage of the Guatemalan soldier; g) principle of dignity for the Guatemalan army” (qtd. in Otzoy 59). The use of an Indigenous figure in the 1990’s to promote the dignity of

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<sup>18</sup> < [visitguatemaya.com/2013/04/monumento-tecun-uman-quetzaltenango.html](http://visitguatemaya.com/2013/04/monumento-tecun-uman-quetzaltenango.html) >



the armed forces contrasts with the horror of the previous decade of state-sponsored genocide in which hundreds and thousands of Indigenous people were forcibly removed from their lands, tortured, and murdered by the Guatemalan military forces.

In the 1980s, the Guatemalan civil war reached an unimaginable level of violence while the Reagan administration provided military support for the regimes of General Lucas García and General Ríos Montt who both initiated the disappearance and torture of thousands of Guatemalans and the genocide of Indigenous people in the rural areas. The intellectual masterminds of the *scorched earth campaign*, these generals commanded the nation's army to invade, raze, and destroy hundreds of Indigenous villages with the purported objective of eliminating the leftist insurgency—producing a generation of orphans and the bloodiest period in Guatemalan history since the Spanish Conquest. By 1981, the Guatemalan government was engaged in a full-scale war against the Indigenous people. This campaign was directed at rooting out the guerrilla movement of the Indigenous highlands. And the government's counterinsurgency tactics consisted of the systematic murder of Indigenous noncombatants in any village, hamlet, or cooperative the army suspected of supporting rebel insurgents (Americas Watch; 1983, 6). The end result was the genocide and displacement of thousands of Indigenous people, the expropriation of land, and the assassination of community organizers and political activists.

Of this period, Beatriz Manz writes, “[a]t the end of 1981 the army moved into a different strategic phase, an eighteen-month campaign whose scope was so bloody and pervasive it must be distinguished from what went before and has come after” (17). During this period some 440<sup>19</sup> Indigenous villages were destroyed, 45,000 to 65,000 people were murdered in the Indigenous

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<sup>19</sup> According to the CEH, this number has been revised. The commission determined that 626 villages were razed and destroyed during this period.

highlands, 200,000 children were orphaned, and in some areas such as Nebaj, Quiché, one third of the population was evacuated or wiped out (Americas Watch; 1984, 6). The government also instituted model villages, built on the smoldering ashes of the villages that had been burned to the ground by the army, to control Indigenous people who remained in highland territories. The new villages were constructed in a rectilinear pattern in an effort to regroup this population into concentrated, more easily controllable areas (Manz 42-43). As one development worker who witnessed the process relayed, “The army set up a series of model villages in Northern Guatemala and basically said you can move into this village surrounded by barbed wire, and if you leave it, you can die” (Anon. 3. Personal Interview July 2010).

The Guatemalan Armed Forces executed 93% of the war crimes committed during the civil war (Rothberg 179). As the Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) points out, “the army designed and implemented a strategy to provoke terror in the population” (Rothberg 186). In particular “the training methods of the armed forces and especially the *Kaibiles*, the CEH concludes that extreme cruelty was an intentional strategy used to produce and maintain a climate of terror among the population” (Rothberg 186). The Guatemalan Special Forces, the *Kaibiles*, adopted the name of the Mam warrior-prince, Kayb’il B’alam. While evoking the name of the hero, Kayb’il B’alam, an adept strategist, who had eluded Spanish capture during the Conquest period, the *Kaibiles* came to be identified with the U.S.-trained special forces, that carried out the most harrowing and violent military missions in the country. The adaptation of the Mam-Maya warrior’s name reflects an intended appropriation of Native images as a tool of psychological torture.

By co-opting Mayan iconography in the service of the nation-state, the Guatemalan military attempted to annihilate both the Indigenous sense of identity and collective history. In

fact, “‘Mayafying’ genocide was a common military practice” (Martínez Salazar 117). Despite having been a symbol of resistance in both oral and written Maya history to cultural hegemony and imperial violence, Kayb’il B’alam became part of the military nomenclature. The military incorporated symbolic Mayan figures into the military construct in order to alienate collective Maya social agency (Martínez Salazar 117). As outlined in Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*: “The methods of establishing control over another person are based on the systematic, repetitive infliction of psychological trauma. They are the organized techniques of disempowerment and disconnection. Methods of psychological control are designed to instill terror and helplessness and to destroy the victim’s sense of self in relation to others” (77). This method was precisely what was attempted in Guatemala. This intentional practice sought to subsume Maya heritage into the national construct through an exercise of *inclusionary genocide*: adopting the iconography and nomenclature of the Maya while simultaneously eradicating their social and cultural practices through a military reorganization campaign. In the case of the Kaibiles, by symbolically embodying the Maya ancestor of the Mam people, the message is: “your ancestors belong to me, your community belongs to me, I am you, I have the power to destroy you, you no longer belong to yourself” (see fig. 14).



Fig. 14. Photo taken from a protest on May 15, 2012. The sign directed at the president, General Otto Pérez Molina in 2012 reads: “What peace is this General? Your Kaibiles continue raping me, destroying my house, and occupying my land.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> <[cpr-urbana.blogspot.com/2012/05/todas-y-todos-somos-barillas.html](http://cpr-urbana.blogspot.com/2012/05/todas-y-todos-somos-barillas.html)>

The military states that emerged in Central America after independence from Spain extended the violence embedded in the conquest and colonization of the New World. The legacy of colonialism left the economic structure of the *encomienda* system that became the *latifundios* and *fincas* of modern-day Central America, where the Indigenous have served in a system of debt peonage and low-paid labor force. As outlined in the Guatemalan Truth Commission Report and as Rothenberg identified, the social and racial structures of inequality were the primary factors in the genocide of the 1980s:

the CEH found, understanding *la violencia* requires a consideration of a number of factors within Guatemalan society and history, particularly the nation's severe poverty and profound structural inequality. While Guatemala is rich in natural resources, a small elite identifying itself as ethnically and culturally distinct has long controlled most of the country's land and wealth. From the colonial era on, Guatemala's social and political system has supported gross inequality, linking the economic dominance of a minority with systematic discrimination against the majority, especially the nation's Indigenous Mayan population. The country long relied on a series of repressive law and regulations that, when challenged, were backed up by state violence. (xx)

Ultimately, when dissent and democratic protest arose in this imbalanced economic system, the military responded in a swift and decisive manner. Relying on the embedded racism that is “an ideological element of the general social context [...] enabled the army to link the Indigenous people [...] with the insurgents” and “heightened the sense of Indigenous people as distinct, inferior, almost less than human, outside the world of ordinary moral obligations, making it less difficult to kill them” (Rothenberg 66).

The Guatemalan military project “was characterized by persecution, displacement,

population control, social and political reorganization, and ‘reeducation’ and psychological campaigns to ‘reclaim’ the population” (Rothenberg 74). Possession of nativist iconography becomes part of the military process of reeducation and reorganization. However, this action can only be carried out if the memory and the traditions of a people are erased. For this reason, the military forces intentionally targeted Maya spiritual leaders who carried the oral traditions and knowledge in the Indigenous communities. The CEH documented numerous massacres that sought to humiliate, possess, and erase the practitioners of traditional knowledge:

My father was a Maya Chief Priest. He was eighty years old and had been living in Chimban for two years [...] Some forty soldiers arrived at my father’s house. They brought out a hooded man and that is how the soldiers took my father from the house. I followed the soldiers to the place where they killed him. First they interrogated him, saying that it was clear that he was a guerrilla. Then they started stoning him, and they split open his head. Afterwards they chopped him with machetes until he died. They cut off one of his arms and the soldiers took the arm in all the neighboring villages to teach the people what happened to ‘subversives’ (Rothenberg 74)

As Martínez Salazar states, “[t]he sadism in the annihilation of the Ajquijab [Maya leaders] was not random” (116). Beheadings, burnings, hangings were intentional displays of torture aimed at annihilating religious practices, oral traditions, and communal centers. In one instance that Martínez Salazar cites in her field notes, the Ajquijab, a highly respected leader in the Ixil area, was murdered in front of the community. After the community buried the body in an improvised grave, the army returned to the site to dig up the body and fed it to their dogs (116). Since the notion of the ancestor returning to the land as a process of rebirth is a central organizing principal of Maya cosmology, the intentional denial of this ceremony amalgamated

the Guatemalan Armed Forces' desire to simultaneously erase an Indigenous past and present through genocide, rape, and cultural dissolution. The goal of the military was to obliterate the Indigenous past and assimilate the survivors into a silenced populace in a dehistoricized version of the modern nation-state.

Jennifer Schirmer in *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy* outlines the practices and tactics of the Guatemalan military during the 1980s and the post-civil war era. Schirmer suggests three major tactics employed by the military to “subdue” the Maya population. The first, as delineated above, was the scorched earth campaign, or the process of extermination and relocation. Second, the Guatemalan military sought to homogenize the Indigenous communities through a process of *ladinización*,<sup>21</sup> which sought to:

*castellanizar*, to pressure the population to use Spanish language and culture, to suppress the distinctive *traje*, Indigenous dress and other exterior displays of differentiating oneself from the group. Given that the constitutional concepts are in the official language of Spanish, these measures will facilitate communication. Without these differentiating characteristics, the Ixils would stop thinking as they do and accept all the abstractions that constitute nationality, patriotism, etc. (Navy Captain Juan Cifuentes qtd. in Schirmer 104)

This second method sought to cleanse the Indigenous population of their traditions, language, and cultural heritage. Navy Captain Cifuentes insisted that the Maya-Ixil could only participate in the nation-state as *castellanos*, Spanish-speaking citizens. Any expression of Ixil culture and language was viewed as inhabiting the space of *otherness*, which was *subversive* or a

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<sup>21</sup> *Ladino* is the term used in Guatemala for hispanized population: indicating the populace of Guatemala that does not identify as Indigenous and has adapted the Spanish language. However, the notion of hybridity is not expressed in this term. For the Indigenous, it means lack of ethnic identity and for the ladino it signifies absence of Indigenous identity.

threat to the state. In this structure, to be Guatemalan, signifies hispanization and necessitates a process of homogenization, the erasure of one culture with the replacement of another. In this context, hispanization acts as a military imposition and a strategy the Ixil are forced to adopt in order to not just survive but to exist.

In contrast, Schirmer outlines a third tactic employed by the military. She refers to the concept of the *Sanctioned Maya*, which occurred after the scorched earth campaigns and the forced relocations to “model villages.” It is a process by which the military adopts nativist iconography with images that empty Indigenous peoples of “agency and history” (Schirmer 115). The subdued and “reeducated” Maya are molded to “fit the new modern Guatemala state” (Schirmer 114) in a process of *inclusionary* genocide. Or as General Cifuentes reiterates this is a technique “to rescue the Indian’s mentality until they feel part of the nation” (Cifuentes qtd. in Schirmer 114) and is achieved through the appropriation and possession of Mayan images. The example that Schirmer cites is the image Polín Polainas (see fig. 15) found on the 1985 edition of the *Revista Cultural del Ejército*:



Fig. 15. “Polín Polainas”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> <plazapublica.com.gt/content/polin-polainas-el-buen-indio>

Polín Polainas is defined as the “eponymous mascot of the Poles of Development.” As the description reads:

Ayer, quichelense, hoy sololateco, Polín Polainas, cándido y gentil, va surcando la campiña guatemalteca, dejando a su paso su ejemplar estela de amor por el estudio e inspirando augurios de la paz, del desarrollo y la concordia, como anhelos supremos de la unidad nacional. No importa su atuendo. No importa su origen. Polín Polainas es omnidimensional. ¡Polín Polainas es omnipresente!

(“Yesterday Quiche [one of the Indigenous groups from the state of Sololá], today Sololatecan, Polín Polainas, innocent and gentle, ploughs through the Guatemalan countryside leaving in his path an exemplary model of love of school. He inspires peace, development, and harmony, the supreme goals of national unity. His attire is irrelevant. His origins are irrelevant. Polín Polainas is omnidimensional. Polín Polainas is omnipresent!” [*Revista Cultural del Ejército*])

Polín Polainas is the “Sanctioned Mayan prototype constructed and continually reconstituted through the military’s optic, deprived of memory and mute” (Schirmer 115). In this process, the Indigenous subject is adapted into the national identity as a fetish, a decorative element devoid of history. Polín Polainas, and other such images adopted in modern-day Guatemala, are an extension of nineteenth-century configurations of the native fetish. The anachronistic Indian continues to decorate public plazas, currency, and military regalia, yet the legal and political institutions of the country dismissed the trial of General Ríos Montt, the primary architect of the Guatemalan genocide. The ousted president General Otto Pérez Molina was caught on video in the 1980s, standing over the murdered and tortured bodies in the Ixil



area.<sup>23</sup> He was known as Comandante Tito Arias as he was head of military operations in the Ixil Triangle (one of the areas hardest hit by the scorched earth campaign) during the Ríos Montt dictatorship. In his campaign for the presidency, his slogan, *mano dura*—iron fist, adorned the mountainsides of those same hills where he led invasions that included the torture, rape, and murder of thousands of civilians.

### **The Bird Who Cleans the World**

In this process of colonization and control of an entire hemisphere, the inhabitants of the region came to occupy a peculiar space in the discursive imagination of the Europeans. The “Discovery of the New World” as understood in the nomenclature was a virgin territory, *terra nullius*, unoccupied by the “civilized world.” The inhabitants, then, were not imagined to be fully human, active agents. They were configured as creatures that populate this virgin territory of the “New World.” The “natives” were understood to be barbarians and cannibalistic savages to be conquered and enslaved as depicted in the *cartas* and accounts of those early *conquistadores* like Pedro de Alvarado, Hernán Cortés, and Bernal Díaz de Castillo. Alternately, they were imagined as gentle lambs that needed to be baptized and brought into the Kingdom of God as in the account of Bartolomé de Las Casas. Indigenous peoples became tropes that populated the discursive imagination of the European. The “New World,” was reimagined as Paradise, *El Dorado*, *the city upon a hill*, or as in Cabeza de Vaca’s *Naufraños*, a transformative journey where one encounters Natives imagined as both Ariel and Caliban, gentle and barbaric.

The Central American states exist as extensions of this discursive imagination, and the nation becomes an imagined paradise, *una ciudad letrada* (Rama), a modern Enlightenment city.

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<sup>23</sup> For further evidence view “Exclusive: Allan Nairn Exposes Role of U.S., New Guatemalan President in Indigenous Massacres 1 of 2 Democracy Now” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9YieHwaP4M>.

Again, Indigenous subjects can only be a part of this project if they abandon their traditions, notions of time, ontological structures and participate in the Enlightenment project of Latin American modernity. Conversely, the economic structures that uphold the national apparatus operate outside of the enlightened city. In the most brutal and barbaric manner, the nation-state relies on an impoverished labor force, feudal land structures, transnational corporations controlling markets and resources, and a military apparatus to prevent social dissent and disorder. Herein lies the paradox of the modern state in the Western Hemisphere: How does one reconcile a project of conquest, expansion, forced conversion, genocide with Enlightenment notions of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*? In the context of the Americas, the nation is a site of trauma, born from the inherent violence of the Conquest, colonization, and pacification of Native peoples in order that they participate in global markets. The narrative paradox of the Conquest and Enlightenment project of independence played out in the military imagination. The various military tactics and proposals set forth by the Central American generals justified genocide while simultaneously including the dehistoricized and fetishized Indigenous into the illusionary and elusive peaceful democratic state.

The armed forces both in El Salvador and Guatemala unleashed incomparable violence against Indigenous peoples and the rural *campesinos*. Masking the violence under terms of reeducation and rescue, or saving the population from itself, the army promoted a culture of death. The military operations were given names that signified destruction, for example *Operación Ceniza* or Operation Ashes. One survivor from Nebaj,<sup>24</sup> captured by the army in this operation, and held at a military base for a year, relates this cult of destruction promoted by the military:

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<sup>24</sup> This survivor was held captive because his father was a respected member of the Indigenous community in Nebaj and also a leader in the EGP. The survivor, as he relates, was held at a military base in Quiché.

La gente torturada por parte del ejército—llegaron a sacar a la gente de su casa, no importa si era mujer o hombre a ellos los metían en unas cuevas oscuras no les daban de comer, los sacaban cada veinte minutos, les quemaban las plantas de los pies, les quitaban un dedo, les puyaban los ojos, diferentes clases de torturas habían allí. Finalmente, los degollaban y posteriormente los iban a tirar a un río. Excavaban hoyos y dejaban la gente torturada [ahí]. Vi como cuatro torturas, era muy pequeño tal vez para mí no significaba mucho porque no le tomaba mucha importancia a la vida. Y los gritos de cada noche, sí oía los gritos.

Las mujeres que torturaban, antes de ser torturadas eran violadas por 40 o 60 hombres y eran muertas a sangre fría. Los dejaban correr desnudas, era como una caza para ellos [los soldados] cazar un animal, los violadores luego las dejaban ir desnudas y las mataban. Yo vi como unas 10 o 15 casos de violación así que pasaban 50 incluso hasta 100 hombres con una mujer y a veces se morían allí mismo, ya no aguantaban tanto hombre y ellas se morían. Yo solo miraba y yo siempre lloraba y siempre que lloraba me retiraban [los soldados]. Me iban a dejar a un cuarto solo, me encerraban y siempre me decían que no dijera nada porque sino me iban a matar. A los hombres les quemaban las palmas de los pies, les quitaban uñas, a veces les quitaban sus partes y [después] los degollaban. Aproximadamente como unas 300 personas cada noche fueron torturados. Ellos subían a traer una familia completa para no dejar señas o algo así, rastros.

(“The people tortured by the army—they came and took people out of their houses, it didn’t matter if they were a woman or a man. They put them in dark caves, they didn’t let them eat, they took them out every twenty minutes to burn the soles of their feet, to take off a finger. They poked out their eyes, all kinds of torture was done there.

Finally they would slit their throats and afterwards throw them in a river. They dug holes and left the tortured people [there]. I saw four tortures, I was very little, perhaps, it didn't mean much because I did not understand the importance of life. And I heard the screams each night. Yes, I heard the screams.

“The women that they tortured, before torturing, they were raped by 40 or 60 men, and murdered in cold blood. They left them naked and running, as if it were a hunt for them [the army], hunting an animal. The rapists left them naked and then would murder them. I saw 10 or 15 rapes in which there were 50 or a hundred men with one woman. Sometimes they would just die there because they couldn't take so many men. I would only watch and I would always cry and [the soldiers] would take me away. They would leave me in a room alone. They would lock me in and always tell me to say nothing or they would kill me. They burned the soles of the feet of the men. They pulled out their fingernails and sometimes cut off their privates and [then] they slit their throats. It seemed there were 300 tortured every night. They brought entire families so as not to leave any signs, or any traces.”; Anon 1 Personal Interview 2005)

As the above testimony bears out, the military, as a practice of genocide, tortured and murdered Maya peoples and their communities, treating them as figures populating the countryside that needed to be cleared from the land. The military regime appropriated Indigenous language and terminology as a war tactic to uphold the existing social order. The national maneuvers took the sacred space of the Maya underworld and named a scorched earth campaign in Chimaltenango, *Operación Xibalbá* (Schirmer 43). Akin to Operation Ashes, *Operación Xibalbá* signified Operation Hell or Operation Destruction. The appropriation implied the strength of military and the vanquishing of the Indigenous past. Indigenous names, icons, and

terminology became the possession of the state, dehistoricized and removed from living and practiced traditions.

During the civil wars of the 1980s in Central America, *los zopes*—*los zopilotes* or *buitres*, the “birds who clean the air” in traditional cosmology and who had a major role in the cycle of life, death, and resurrection, no longer occupied this space of life and death/transfiguration and rebirth fundamental to the cultural and agricultural structures of Maya life. The vultures came to be associated only with death. The sudden appearance of *zopes* circling in the sky meant that some poor soul had been tortured, assassinated, and flung off a hillside or buried in a makeshift grave. The massive migration of the birds signified a recent massacre, as in the regions surrounding El Mozote, when the “[s]urvivors [...] straggling back from the caves and mountain gullies [found] the plazas of their ruined villages so thick with vultures that [...] ‘they seemed covered by a moving black carpet’” (Danner 85). As Victor Montejo writes, when reflecting on the presence of the military in the highlands, of the buzzards or vultures in his Jakalteq village:

[I]n ancient times, birds were considered the ‘living colors of the world’ and people admired them profoundly. Among these birds, the buzzard, also called the ‘bird who cleans the world,’ was appreciated because of its service in cleaning the surroundings of villages that lacked toilet or sewage facilities. But, sadly, when the army arrived in my town in 1982, the soldiers used the buzzards for target practice. (Bird Who Cleans the World 16)

In contrast to the culture of death promulgated by the military regimes, however, Montejo affirms, the *zope*, the “bird who cleans the world” signifies a space between life and death. Through death, life is restored, and transformation occurs. The “bird who cleans the world” is parallel to the Maya underworld, Xib’alb’a, “the place of ordeals and transformations” (Carrasco

170). One does not travel to the underworld to die or to suffer eternal damnation. In Maya cosmology, the underworld is a journey to transfiguration and rebirth. The hero twins are reborn and emerge from Xib'alb'a, resurrecting their father(s) One and Seven Junajpu, as the symbolic representation of corn: the beginning and creation of life in the Maya world. Rejecting the culture of death and destruction, fetishized by the nation, imposed by the military regimes, it is the regenerative cosmology of Indigenous traditions that comes to inform the literary, social, and political consciousness of the poets and writers of the *Generación Comprometida*.

## Chapter II

### The Spectacle of Martyrdom:

#### Otto René Castillo and the Poetics of *Compañerismo*

*Este cacique y señor anduvo siempre huyendo de los cristianos desde que llegaron a aquella isla de Cuba, como quien los conocía, y defendíase cuando los topaba, y al fin lo prendieron. Y solo porque huía de gente tan inicua y cruel, y se defendía de quien lo quería matar, y oprimir hasta la muerte a sí y a toda su gente y generación, lo hobieron vivo de quemar. Atado al palo decíale un religioso de Sant Francisco[...] que si quería creer aquello que le decía, que iría al cielo, donde había gloria y eterno descanso, y si no, que había de ir al infierno a padecer de perpetuos tormentos y penas. Él, pensando un poco, preguntó al religioso si iban cristianos al cielo. El religioso le respondió que sí, pero que iban los que eran buenos. Dijo luego el cacique sin más pensar, que no quería él ir allá sino al infierno, por no estar donde estuviesen y por no ver tan cruel gente. (92)*

—Bartolomé de las Casas

*The same cacique and lord knew the Spaniards and their ways only too well and he fled from them once they arrived on the island of Cuba, only resorting to outright resistance when they actually tracked him down. But, eventually he was captured and, although his only crime was that he had tried to escape the clutches of these cruel iniquitous monsters because he knew only too well that they were out to kill him and that, if he did not defend himself, they would hound him and all his people to death, the Spaniards' verdict was that he should be burned alive. Once he was tied to the stake a Franciscan friar [...] told him that, if he would only believe what he was now hearing, he would go to Heaven there to enjoy glory and eternal rest, but that, if he would not, he would be consigned to Hell, where he would endure everlasting pain and torment. The lord Hatuey thought for a short while and then asked the friar whether Christians went to Heaven. When the reply came that good ones do, he retorted, without further reflection, that if that was the case, then he chose to go to Hell to ensure that he would never again have to cast eyes on those cruel brutes. (28-29)*

—Bartolomé de las Casas

Structures that function within fiction to organize a narrative and imbue a text with symbolic meaning perform a similar task in historical analysis. As Hayden White argues, these

structural parallels in historical narratives confer “past events with meanings [...] by exploiting metaphorical similarities between sets of real events and the conventional structures of our fiction” (“Historical Text as Literary Artifact” 91). While for White the historical narrative functions “as an extended metaphor” (91), understanding history as an organized narrative does not negate the existence of the physical realities of war, death, destruction, and genocide. Rather, it allows students of history to understand how these events become structured, ordered, and catalogued in both the textual realm and in the popular imagination. If martyrdom, as defined in the introduction, is an inherently social and political act, then we can characterize martyrs as protagonists within these historical narratives. The martyr becomes a symbolic repository of a particular epoch identified with political resistance against state coercion. In this manner, the death of the Guatemalan poet Otto René Castillo in March of 1967 serves as the martyr-*guerrillero* prototype that emerges within the Central American landscape during the revolutionary epoch. In examining his artistic footprint, particularly his influence among young Central American writers of the *Generación Comprometida*,<sup>1</sup> the spectacle of his death becomes the *calvario* of the Central American poet and a model that many followed.

The narrative of Castillo’s death, as repeated in oral and written narratives, almost always includes his capture and his death by fire (See Appendix A for the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico* [CEH] Case 772 for the official documentation of his death). In March of 1967, Castillo was apprehended by Guatemalan military forces in Sierra de las Minas, a vast mountain range that extends across Guatemala from Alta Verapaz to Izabal. This name,

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<sup>1</sup> See Luis Alvarenga, “La Generación Comprometida de El Salvador: problemas de una denominación” for further discussion on the denomination, structure, and complexity of this group. He asserts that there exists a problem with the structuring of the group as such, as it consisted of various actors, and there never existed a complete consensus in the “compromiso” among the participants.



Sierra de las Minas, in Guatemala, is often uttered with a stress or a slight mystical intonation. The location is known for its rich mineral sources, and since the precolonial period, inhabitants have extracted precious jade from these mountains. It is also home to one of the world's largest cloud forests, a numinous biome rich in vegetation, evergreens, mosses, and an abundance of animal species amidst the ever-present fog among the foliage. This majestic place of unparalleled natural and transcendent beauty is the site of Castillo's capture by *anti-guerrillera* forces.

The nature of Castillo's career, capture in the mountains, and his tragic demise at the hands of the Guatemalan military typify the specter of martyrdom in the Central American revolutionary period. The narrative of his death reflects both Christian traditions and Latin American reception of these traditions. These traditions and Marxist aspirations combine in his poetry and life, making him a mythic and iconographic model of sacrifice. The spectacle of torture and death, or the making of the martyr, are evidenced in the visual and textual realm. Castillo's death and the subsequent narratives that emerge after his capture, torture, and disappearance parallel Christian hagiographic traditions. In Castillo's trajectory, we see how these traditions translate to the Central American context and play out in the revolutionary epoch.

Martyrdom is almost a commonplace of the asymmetrical power relationships that have dominated Latin America from the first appearance of Europeans. The superscript to this chapter demonstrates the dynamics of this colonial structure. It marks one of the earliest recorded encounters between the Spanish and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas; what the Spanish encountered, of course, was fierce resistance to the brutal conquest and the imposition of a foreign religion. And in an effort to convince the Spanish Crown of the madness of this imperial project and forced evangelization, Bartolomé de las Casas, in his *Brevísima relación de la*

*destrucción de las Indias* unwittingly constructs an archetype of Indigenous resistance and martyrdom. While de la Casas' rendering of Hatuey appears to be the imagining of the *noble savage* that later emerges in Enlightenment discourse, the imagery he employs evokes that of early Christian martyrdom. Perhaps, de las Casas intentionally casts Hatuey in the martyr's role, for certainly this passage reflects the spectacle of martyrdom present in Christian imaginary (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Sixteenth century illustration by Théodore de Bry<sup>2</sup> depicting the violence of the Conquistadores as described by de las Casas.<sup>3</sup>

Initially Hatuey's sentence appears to be that of a heretic, tied to the stake and burned in an *auto da fé*; however, his death could only problematically be classified as such. For as Saint Thomas Aquinas affirms, heresy is “a species of infidelity in men who, having professed the

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that due to de Bry's Protestant conversion, his paintings have been identified as “one of the pillars of the Black Legend” (Gravatt 225). For a more nuanced interpretation of his work see Gravatt's article, “Rereading Theodore de Bry's Black Legend.”

<sup>3</sup> <theyucatanimes.com/grabado-de-t-de-bry/>

faith of Christ, corrupt its dogmas” (qtd. in Wilhelm par. 3). Only the already converted could be censured for heresy, and the use of violence in such cases had been widely condemned by the Church in its first five centuries (Blötzer). Conversion through violence ran counter to early Christian tenets. Early Christians continuously debated and condemned such actions, as fourth-century Christian apologist and convert Lactantius writes:

Of what use is cruelty? What has the rack to do with piety? Surely there is no connection between truth and violence, between justice and cruelty [...]. It is true that it [religion] must be protected, but by dying for it, not by killing others; [...]. If you attempt to defend religion with bloodshed and torture, what you do is not defense, but desecration and insult. For nothing is so intrinsically a matter of free will as religion. (Lactantius qtd. in Blötzer par. 6)

De las Casas’ work, then, represents a dialogue with not only the violence of the Conquest, but with Church doctrine and the practices of evangelization within the Spanish realm. The Church’s problematic alliance with Spanish imperial power that emerges in the Conquest presents a challenge to Christian tenets. In his *Brevisima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias*, de las Casas continually indicts these practices, and through his symbolic inversion of the idea of “the heretic,” Hatuey becomes a martyr, embodying the spectacle of Christian sacrifice inherent to its inception.



Fig. 2. Sixteenth century illustration by Théodore de Bry depicting Hatuey burning at the stake.<sup>4</sup>

Hatuey's death by fire simultaneously conjures early images of Christian martyrdom and merges this martyr's image mimetically with the resistance that is cast at the initial stages of the Conquest (see fig. 2). This imaging, and the imagining of martyrdom, is both a reflection of and in dialogue with Christian imagery. The spectacle of torture or burning of the *other*, present in de las Casas' text, while cast as a protest against Spanish political and spiritual conquest of the Americas, produces a martyr-mimetic textual image of Indigenous resistance. De las Casas' account of Hatuey, in essence, becomes part of the *Acta Martyrum*.<sup>5</sup> Hatuey's resistance to the forced conversions of the Spanish conquistadores and their religious collaborators, particularly the death by fire, echoes the earliest images of martyrdom in the years of Christian persecution. Fire is the medium of persecution and death as well as the trope through which suffering

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<sup>4</sup> <[zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/hatuey/](http://zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/hatuey/)>

<sup>5</sup> The *Acta Martyrum* or the *Acts of the Martyrs* are in the narrowest sense "the official records of the trials of early Christian martyrs made by the notaries of the court" (Bridge, par. 1). However, a broader definition "is applied to all the narratives of the martyrs' trial and death" (Bridge, par.1) including: official reports, "non-official records made by eye-witnesses," and edited documents issued at a later date "but based on Acta" (Bridge, par. 1). Aside from these three categories, there are others written as romances and preserved in the "popular or literary tradition" but unreliable as historical documents (Bridge, par. 2). Other literary documents also grouped with the *Acta Martyrum* are the collection of saints' lives, such as the "Historia Ecclesiastica" of Eusebius (Bridge, par. 4). See James Bridge's article "The Acts of the Martyrs" for further detail.

becomes a symbolic triumph over religious imposition, violence, and cultural and political domination.

### **The Instrument of Our Death: Fire and Transfiguration**

Castillo's death by fire, like Hatuey's before him, was received into the iconographical imagination just as the early Christian martyr's death by fire. Within the early Christian tradition, the martyr, by transforming the destruction of the carnal self, lives eternally in his suffering and sacrifice. Through the spectacle of terror, the Roman Empire sought to vanquish the Christians and transform their resistance to mere ashes, and death by fire became a symbolic vanquishing of Christians from the Roman fold. Yet fire is at once a destructive and fecund element. For example, in the Greco-Roman tradition fire is represented as a transformative element, for Prometheus stole fire from the Olympians in order to alter the world: "For the power, the glory I gave to human beings/ I'm bound in irons./ I tracked down fire, where it springs from./ And stole it. I hid/ the spark in a fennel stalk, and brought it to human beings. Now it shines/ forth: a teacher/ showing all mankind the way to all/ the arts there are. *That's my crime*" (*Prometheus Bound*, lines 163-171). Chained to rock and condemned for all eternity, Prometheus' intervention through the resource of fire brought forth humanity.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *Mythologiques: The Raw and the Cooked*, discusses this "connection between fire and life" among the myths of the Americas. Despite the limitations of binary constructs and synchronic analysis, Lévi-Strauss presents an impressive collection of the myths of Indigenous peoples in the Americas. In recording and examining myths with these common elements, particularly his structural analysis of the myths of the Bororo and Xerente, Lévi-Strauss equates the elements celestial maleficent water/terrestrial beneficent water and culinary fire/funerary woodpile (195). Within these myths, fire repeatedly appears as a

transformative force. He writes of the Karaja people that “in order to light the fire, dead wood has to be collected, so a positive virtue has to be attributed to it, although it represents absence of life. In this sense, to cook is to “hear the call of rotten wood” (151). As he explains, the Karaja people only used wood that had fallen from trees for their fires as to do otherwise was considered a sacrilege. But this “call of the rotten wood,” embodies the structural function of fire itself and the mythological regenerative attributes become commonly shared.

Fire is an element that is simultaneously destructive and life-giving. Through its destruction it nourishes, warms, and provides. Indeed in the *Popol Wuj*, death by fire and resurrection is a recurring motif.<sup>6</sup> On numerous occasions the divine twins Junajpu and Xb’alanque are rescued from death with assistance from the animal world during their descent to Xib’alb’a—each salvation/ resurrection coinciding with a genesis in the earthly world. The final epitaph of the twins in the *Popol Wuj* reads, “And here it is: The Epitaph, the Death of Junajpu and Xb’alanque” (trans. Tedlock 130), identifying the mechanism of their destruction: “the instrument of our death will be a stone oven” (130). The twins tell the diviners Xulu and Pak’am to instruct the Lords of Xib’alb’a who seek their destruction to throw their burnt remains into the river having the diviners repeat to the Lords:

This is a good death for them, and it would also be good to grind their bones on a stone,  
just as hard corn is refined into flour, and refine each of them separately, and then:  
Spill them into the river,  
sprinkle them on the water’s way,  
among the mountains small and great. (130)

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<sup>6</sup> The Maya god Tojil is also a manifestation of Juraqan or Kaqulja Juraqan (Hurricane or Thunderbolt Hurricane), embodying both water and fire—forces that are at once destructive and life-giving.

After their death by fire and the grinding of their bones, the divine twins reemerge from the river: “And on the fifth day they reappeared. They were seen in the water by the people. The two of them looked like catfish when their faces were seen in Xib’alb’a” (132).<sup>7</sup>

The Lords of Xib’alb’a sought to vanquish Junajpu and Xb’alanque in the manner that ancient pagan imperial Rome sought to vanquish Christians: death by fire, transforming life into ashes, and existence into nothingness. In both cases, the transformation through fire became the symbolic representation of resurrection and creation. The spectacle of torture translates into an enduring testament to ever-lasting life and rebirth. The gruesome images of death and torture transposed with destruction and rebirth take central stage in biblical texts. One of the primordial accounts of martyrdom and death by fire in the Judeo-Christian tradition is that of the Maccabees. Resisting the increasing Hellenization that occurred under the rule of Antiochus IV, Jewish subjects refused to concede their religious traditions and adopt polytheistic behavior. The second book of the Maccabees details the brutal torture and death of the mother and her seven sons at the hands of Antiochus. Akin to Hatuey’s rejection of the Christian god, the mother and her seven sons refuse to worship Greek gods, receiving and embracing death. As Hatuey resists the forced conversion of the Spanish Catholic Empire, the Maccabees choose death over imposed gods, and both are portrayed in their texts as martyrs to the vicious practices of the oppressive empires under which they lived. Just as Hatuey embraces death rather than the kingdom of another’s god, the eldest son of the Maccabees declares, “We are ready to die, rather than to transgress the laws of God, received from our fathers” (2 Maccabees 7: 3). He is, of course, the first to die, as the king:

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<sup>7</sup> This is the explanation of in the *Popol Wuj* of the creation of river fish and the name of the diviners Xulu/ Pak’am are of Cholan origin “referring to catfish and something sown” (Tedlock 361).

commanded to cut out the tongue of him that had spoken first: and the skin of his head being drawn off, to chop off also the extremities of his hands and feet, the rest of his brethren and his mother looking on. And when he was now maimed in all parts, he commanded him, being yet alive, to be brought to the fire, and to be fried in the frying pan. (2 Macc. 7: 4-5)

After witnessing six of her seven sons die, the mother entreats her youngest: “So you shall not fear this tormentor, but being made a worthy partner with your brethren, receive death, that in that mercy I may receive you again with your brethren” (2 Macc. 7:29). In accordance with the text, eternal life is delivered through the brutalized and injured body.

The macabre images present in the Maccabees offer a blueprint of Christ’s suffering. Because we are so inured to the crucifix, a central symbol in the Western world, we are desensitized to the violent image it presents. It is an image of utter brutality, a spectacle of torture, a man nailed to the cross bleeding from his feet and his hands. Yet, within this image of the suffering Christ subsumes the suffering and hamartia of the world, offering us a renewed humanity. The violent images present in Christian texts repeatedly signify the triumph of resurrection and life, with the cross rising out of the skull, that often lies beneath iconographically, and the narrative itself set on Golgotha, the place of death. The cephalophore saints mirror this iconography, depicted in movement with their decapitated and often haloed heads in hand, signifying victory over brutality (see fig. 3). Torture becomes the central narrative element present in Christian iconography and textual narratives.

Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* details the deaths of numerous martyrs in the first 300 years of Christianity including the violent deaths of the Saints of Lyon under the empire of Marcus Aurelius. The viciousness evidenced in Eusebius’ account of the Saints of Lyon is





Fig. 3. “The Martyrdom of Saint Denis” by Léon Joseph Florentin Bonnat<sup>8</sup>

ameliorated only by the testament of the saints’ abnegation and grace:

But the corpse [...] was one continued wound, mangled and shriveled, that had entirely lost the form of man to the external eye. Christ suffering in him exhibited wonder; defeating the adversary, and presenting a kind of model to the rest, that there is [...] nothing painful where the glory of Christ prevails. (Eusebius 151)

Throughout the narrative of the Saints of Lyon, the suffering symbolizes the presence and impact of sin on the earthly world and the pain it causes. The martyrs’ abjuration of this sin and the horror it represents is celebrated in their triumph of eternal life:

the bodies of the martyrs after being abused in every possible manner, and thus exposed to the open air for six days, were at length burned and reduced to ashes by the wretches, and finally cast into the Rhone that flows near at hand, that there might not be a vestige

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<sup>8</sup> <discoverwalks.com/blog/8-facts-about-saint-denis-of-paris/>

of them remaining on land. These things they did as if they [the Romans] were able to overcome God, and destroy their resurrection [...]. (Eusebius 157)

While the Romans deliver this torture as a means by which to destroy the victims and their theology, the torture serves to frame the narrative and demonstrate that the death act cannot overcome the utopia embodied in sacrifice.

The genocidal practices of the Spanish depicted in de las Casas' *Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* follow a similar narrative structure of the *Acta Martyrum*. The intense suffering of the Indigenous people and the abjuration of Hatuey evoke the same images as the suffering Saints of Lyon. In de las Casas' textual representation, Hatuey becomes the first icon of resistance to the Spanish empire in the Western Hemisphere. As noted in our initial definition of martyrdom, it is "a public and political spectacle [...] placing in question the collective integrity and legitimacy of the dominant group" (Smith 10). The textual envisioning of Hatuey's death, if not the spectacle in and of itself, offers one of the earliest written accounts of martyrdom in colonized America (see fig. 4).

The spectacle of Hatuey, just as in the Maccabees and in the *acta* of the Saints of Lyon, is performed both in the physical and textual realm, but it is through the text and through oral narratives that the spectacle of this death is preserved. The figures who suffer these deaths in these texts come to represent the ethos of a particular historical moment; they become the protagonists, the symbolic repositories of suffering and triumph. In the case of Hatuey, he is at once the vanquished Indigenous subject and the resistant martyr of the Spanish Conquest, immortalized in the text by de las Casas and in Cuban song and poetry. Recall the *décima*, "Hatuey y Guarina" by Cuban poet Juan Cristóbal Nápoles Fajardo-El Cucalambé which reflects the affirmation of Hatuey in both written and oral Cuban expression, "Yo soy 'Hatuey', indio

libre/ Sobre tu tierra bendita,/ Como el caguayo que habita/ Debajo del ajengibre/ Deja que de nuevo vibre/ Mi voz allá entre mi grey,/ Que resuene en mi batey/ El dulce son de mi guamo/ Y acudan a mi reclamo/ Y sepan aún vive Hatuey” (“I am ‘Hatuey,’ free Indian/ Upon this blessed earth,/ Like the lizard ‘neath the ginger tree/ Let my voice rebound/ Amongst my flock,/ And resound in my batey / the sweet sound of my conch/ Echoing my cry/ So all may know Hatuey is still alive”); 55).



Fig. 4. Statue of Hatuey consumed in flames in Yara, Cuba.<sup>9</sup>

Hatuey is represented in the literary realm just as he is presented in Cuban iconography. The photo of the statue of Hatuey in Yara marks the assumed historical place of Hatuey’s death by fire (see fig. 4.). The statue portrays the spectacle of Hatuey’s martyrdom, burning alive on the colonial funeral pyre. Additionally, the apparition of “La Luz de Yara” continues to exist in the oral tradition of the inhabitants (Quiñones, par.18). The *luz*, is the apparition of Hatuey, who

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<sup>9</sup> <[cubatechtravel.com/municipality/detail/en/205/yara-municipality-granma-cuba](http://cubatechtravel.com/municipality/detail/en/205/yara-municipality-granma-cuba)>

repeatedly appears to Yara's inhabitants as a disembodied but everlasting light. According to their testimony (Quiñones, par. 18), he also appears to Yara's inhabitants as an inversion of Saint Denis (see fig. 3). Rather than the headless body, Hatuey's head itself is said to wander through the streets suspended by eternal light (Quiñones, par. 18).

### **Bread and Lyric: The Poetics and Politics of Otto René Castillo**

Since the inception of nationhood in Latin America, and prior to independence, poets and lyric played a role in each developing national consciousness. Leading intellectuals and poets, such as José Martí rejected European cultural imitation and insisted on regional affirmation in both the political realm and artistic production: “el vino, de *plátano*; y si sale agrio, ¿es nuestro vino!” (“wine from plantains; it may be sour, but it is our wine!”; Martí par. 10; trans. Allen 294). But the stylistic experimentation brought forth in the early part of the twentieth century by the *vanguardistas* with the juxtaposition of incongruent images, free verse, and the use of everyday language opened up the poetic form as a creative space for exploring social ills. To a certain extent, the juxtaposition of incongruent images best captured the postcolonial experience; this is in many ways what has been classified in the West as the magical real. It is a reflection of the endemic dissonance of the Latin American state: disenfranchised masses alongside Frenchified dictators, modern weaponry of the state trained upon the Indigenous population, and modern capitalist production coupled with feudal land structures.

Within the *Vanguardista* movement, certain poets, like César Vallejo, Manolo Cuadra, Pablo Neruda, and Aimé Césaire, began to explore the social role of poetry and develop the idea of engaged political lyric in the 1930s. Neruda's “Explico algunas cosas” written in 1937, after the onset of the Spanish Civil War and the assassination of fellow poet Federico García Lorca by falangist forces, best captures the spirit of the direction of these *Vanguardista* poets:

“Preguntaréis ¿por qué su poesía/ no nos habla del sueño; de las hojas, de los grandes volcanes de su país natal?/ Venid a ver la sangre por las calles/ venid a ver/ la sangre por las calles,/ venid a ver la sangre/ por las calles!” (“You will ask: why does your poetry/ not speak to us of sleep, of leaves, / of the great volcanoes of your native land?/ Come and see the blood in the streets, / come and see/ the blood in the streets,/ come and see the blood/ in the streets!”; *España en el corazón* 14; trans. Walsh 15).

Castillo, like these *vanguardista* poets, viewed both the poet and poetry as a transformative force; although, without imbuing the poet or the lyric with a mystical power, as he said, he did not “carry a cross but a responsibility” (Alvarado 31). His commitment to the *lucha armada popular* ushered in a new era as the fifties marked the beginning of the revolutionary period. Roque Dalton asserts, “La vida y la muerte de Otto René Castillo plantean incuestionablemente *la ruptura con el modo tradicional de militancia revolucionaria en nuestros países...con una nueva etapa de la historia centroamericana que habrá de sustanciarse y solucionarse a través de la lucha armada popular,*” (“The life and death of Otto René Castillo unquestionably sets forth *the rupture of traditional revolutionary militancy in our countries...with a new stage of Central American history that will be conducted and solved through the popular armed struggle*”; “Otto René Castillo: Su ejemplo y nuestra responsabilidad” par. 25). This is the distinction among many of the poets of the *Generación Comprometida*, the commitment of both the art and the physical self to resistance movements. As Salvadoran author Manlio Argueta explains, “tal vez una falla nuestra, sólo quien no sueña no falla, por supuesto; es que soñábamos de que a través de la literatura y la palabra podíamos cambiar el mundo [y] en aquella época andábamos viendo cómo derribábamos el poder militar” (“perhaps this [was] our error, but he who doesn’t dream doesn’t fail, of course; we dreamed that

through literature and the word we could change the world [and] in that period we were looking for ways to overthrow the military forces”; Personal Interview August 2008).

Although the grandson of a university professor who had served in the government, Castillo came from a family of limited economic resources (Castillo Cabrera 3). Unrecognized by his father, after the death of Castillo’s grandfather, the family cast his mother out (3). His unmarried mother embroidered hats in order to feed and clothe her five children (3). Growing up in conditions of poverty in Xelajú,<sup>10</sup> a mostly Indigenous state in the Guatemalan highlands, the contrast of his “illegitimate birth” with his family’s bourgeois roots undoubtedly formed Castillo’s consciousness. Although he had *ladino* bourgeois origins, the economic conditions of his childhood coupled with his intellectual heritage afforded him a complex social status. Possessing only his mother’s surname, marked with illegitimacy, he belonged to society’s undesirables, and in Guatemala this included the poor, the Indigenous, the unmarried, and the “illegitimate.” Despite, and perhaps due to, these difficult social and economic circumstances, Castillo became politicized at a young age and began to participate as a secondary student in the political changes brought forth by the October Revolution and the Jacobo Arbenz presidency.

In the introduction of the posthumous collection of Castillo’s collected works *Informe de una injusticia*, Roque Dalton writes that “Otto René Castillo ejemplifica el más alto nivel de responsabilidad intelectual revolucionario, del creador revolucionario, en la unidad del pensamiento y la práctica,” (“Otto René Castillo exemplifies the highest level of revolutionary intellectual responsibility and revolutionary artistry through unity of thought and praxis”; “Otto René Castillo: Su ejemplo y nuestra responsabilidad” par. 8). Dalton emphasizes the influence of this young Guatemalan poet, who in 1954, at the age of seventeen is exiled to San Salvador.

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<sup>10</sup> The official name of Xelajú is Quetzaltenango

Castillo had been the president of the Asociación de Estudiantes Post-primaria (Association of Secondary Students) and an activist in the Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (PGT or the Guatemalan Worker's Party) ("Otto René Castillo: Su ejemplo y nuestra responsabilidad" par. 1). After the U.S.-orchestrated coup d'état in 1954 in which President Arbenz was removed from power, Castillo fled to El Salvador, hoping to continue his political work in the proximity of his country ("Otto René Castillo"). In exile, and while still an adolescent, Castillo remained committed to social change, participating in political and cultural activities on both sides of the border. When he arrived in El Salvador as an exile, he was forced to accept work of any kind in order to survive; as Dalton notes, he worked as night guardian in a car park, a painter, and a book vendor ("Otto René Castillo" par. 1) until he managed to enroll in the University of El Salvador. He was engaged in clandestine work, often crossing the border back into Guatemala, a risky venture, to say the least, if captured by the military authorities.

Note these actions take place five years prior to the Cuban Revolution. Castillo then precedes the revolutionary imagery promulgated after the ouster of President Fulgencio Batista, establishing in and for Central America a model of a young, committed intellectual. In other words, the military success of the Cuban Revolution served as a political and cultural impetus for young revolutionaries to participate and join in the armed struggle, but Castillo is politically engaged ten years before the revolutionary movements took hold in Central America. I highlight this point here to address the continual reference made to the Cuban revolutionary influence on the poets of this generation. While this influence is undeniable, these political-poetic movements grew out of specific regional conditions—whether political, cultural, or literary. Castillo's social commitment is firmly established in 1954, and the network *Círculo Literario Universitario* formed at the University of El Salvador, provide evidence of this.

When the writers and students established *Círculo Literario Universitario*, the principal theme was “la responsabilidad social del escritor y del artista en las condiciones de los países atrasados y súper-explotados de la América Central” (“the social responsibility of the writer and the author in the developing and over-exploited countries of Central America”; “Otto René Castillo” par. 13). This is clearly expressed in Castillo’s work both in the content and in his conversational style. He articulates the artist’s struggle as intimately connected to the inequalities of his socio-political context, specifically the brutality of the Central American landscape. Social inequality is then articulated as the artist’s suffering and dialectically, as the artistic creation that emerges from this suffering. Because the artist cannot, and as Castillo insists, should not, extricate himself from the social context, the literary text is both product of and a tool to combat social suffering.

The mid-fifties marked a fertile moment in Salvadoran literary history. During the period of the *Círculo Literario Universitario*, the military regime of Lieutenant Colonel Óscar Osorio had relaxed, to a degree, previous repressive institutions, or as Manlio Argueta says, the regime opened “unos pocos espacios de libertad” (“a few spaces of freedom”; Personal Interview August 2008). The social and educational reforms of this period are generally attributed to a more stable economy. There was economic growth due to the rise of cotton and coffee prices. However, the students and the populace were still living under a military dictatorship, albeit not that of General Martínez. Union leaders and activists continued to be jailed, tortured, and exiled during this period. Cayetano Carpio, a union leader and activist, outlines his experience in his testimony *Secuestro y Capucha*. Carpio, who later formed the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL) in the seventies, was captured, tortured, and imprisoned during Osorio’s regime in 1952.



Miguel Ángel Asturias was also present in El Salvador in the mid-fifties as the ambassador from Guatemala as were Dalton and other figures of the *Generación Comprometida*. Manlio Argueta comments on the bond between Asturias and Castillo during this period, “era como el maestro de Otto, el papá de Otto René, incluso una de las tragedias de los dramas de Asturias—porque cuando Asturias es apoyado por los que mataron a Otto lo consideraron como un traidor” (“he was like Otto’s teacher, Otto René’s father, and even one of the tragedies of Asturias’ dramas—because Asturias worked for those responsible for murdering Otto”; Personal Interview August 2008). Argueta elaborates in this interview that Asturias is in no way responsible for Castillo’s death, but that he served as an ambassador for the regime (the same regime responsible for Castillo’s death) and thus witnesses the regime murder his de facto son. In this manner the tragedy of his novels intertwines with the loss and disillusionment of his own life.

When *Círculo Literario Universitario* formed, Castillo was a central figure in this group (“Otto René Castillo” par. 3). Dalton writes of Castillo that he was “un divulgador de los poetas revolucionarios que más influyeron [...] [a] la ‘generación comprometida’ (Nazim Hikmet, Miguel Hernández, César Vallejo—visto como poeta comunista—, Pablo Neruda, etc.)” (“a great circulator of the revolutionary poets that most influenced [...] the *Generación Comprometida* [Nazim Hikmet, Miguel Hernández, César Vallejo—viewed as a communist poet—, Pablo Neruda, etc.]”; “Otto René Castillo” par. 3). Due to censorship imposed by military regimes in Central America, as well as the lack of editorial resources, lack of written texts presented a major challenge to artists of this period. To hand out texts and mimeographs of leading authors was both a cultural and political act. In highlighting Castillo’s willingness to

distribute these texts to his fellow poets, Dalton pays homage to the generosity of Castillo's spirit and the great risk he took for the word, in this case poetry, to be shared.

Manlio Argueta affirms that despite his youth, Castillo was the head of the *Círculo Literario Universitario*, publishing a series of journals in which both Castillo and Dalton wrote letters and essays about what constitutes literature (Personal Interview August 2008). Argueta laments that there is no record of these journals, a testament to the difficulty of preserving and distributing literary material during this period due both to the censorship imposed by the military regimes and the precarious situation in which these poets labored: “cuatro números salieron, Hojas, que por cierto nadie las tiene esos ejemplares...uno han encontrado” (“four numbers came out, *Hojas*, and really no one has these originals, one has been found”; Personal Interview August 2008). This demonstrates the difficult nature of archival work on the revolutionary period and the absolute necessity for oral interviews to develop a complex and nuanced picture of artistic production. During this period, Argueta asserts, Miguel Ángel Asturias' declaration, “el poeta es una conducta moral,” served as the defining motto of the *Círculo Literario Universitario* (Personal Interview August 2008). Castillo and Dalton expand this sentiment, developing the concept of the committed artist: “Sobre esta frase se improvisó un pequeño pero sólido edificio de principios ético-estéticos: el poeta [...] debe escribir como piensa y vivir como escribe, está comprometido con el pueblo, con sus luchas liberadoras, con la revolución” (“with this phrase we built a small but solid foundation of ethic-aesthetic principles: the poet [...] ought to write as he thinks and live as he writes, committed to the people, their liberation struggles, and the revolution”; “Otto René Castillo” par. 13).

If we imagine Castillo at the center of this unfolding movement, in a moment of social upheaval, censorship, and military oppression, his impact is undeniable. The young students of

the *Círculo Literario Universitario* envisaged Castillo as a leader, and as repeated testimony in the numerous songs, poems, and anthologies, a generous spirit with undeniable compassion for his compatriots, the poor *campesinos* and workers of Central America. His commitment at such a tender age to the revolutionary cause, to the promotion of social change, and to seeing poetry as a transformative tool served as a catalyst for the pulsing poetic ethos emerging in Central America. His poetry serves as testament to this legacy, the legacy of the *Generación Comprometida*, in which poetry becomes an agent of political change and social commitment takes center stage. If the text is the stage upon which the poet performs, the text becomes Castillo's stage both in life and in death. The text, in essence, functions as a passion of the *Acta Martyrum*. His poems tell the story of his commitment to the revolutionary cause and his willingness to sacrifice his life for the poor. Dalton writes of Castillo that he was "an unrelenting worker" who sought to inculcate the young writers of his generation with "la responsabilidad social-revolucionaria del creador" ("the social-revolutionary responsibility of the artist"; "Otto René Castillo" par. 13). In the tradition of José Mariátegui and César Vallejo, Castillo adapts the role of the Gramscian organic intellectual. Only within the Central American context, he perceives this role as moving beyond that of the engaged intellectual to the politically active (and armed) intellectual or the *poeta guerrillero*.

While the participation of poets in the *lucha armada* has been characterized, to a certain extent, as a radical break from both previous Marxist militancy and literary traditions, it is more of a reflection of the socio-historic context. After all, Central America had already experienced three popular uprisings in the twentieth century: the October Revolution in Guatemala, Sandino's movement in Nicaragua, and the Salvadoran uprising of 1932. In the fifties, democratic options in Central America were cut short by U.S. covert operations and direct military intervention that

led to the 1954 coup in Guatemala. This signaled to a whole generation that the U.S. government would not permit representative democracy if it interfered with corporate interests (in this case those of the United Fruit Company). Indeed, when Che Guevara, present in Guatemala during the coup d'état, witnessed this crushing end to the Guatemalan democratic experiment, he cemented his revolutionary vision and commitment to the armed struggle:

Aquí estuvo todo divertido con tiros, bombardeos, discursos y otros matices que cortaron la monotonía en que vivía [...] [.] De todos modos estaré atento para ir a la próxima que se arme, ya que armarse se arma seguro, porque los yanquis no pueden pasar sin defender la democracia en algún lado.

(“Here everything was so much fun with gunshots, bombings, speeches and the other shadowy events that cut short the monotony in which I lived [...] [.] At any rate, I will be ready for the next armed event, since being armed allows for a securely constructed structure, as the Yankees cannot pass up the chance to defend democracy somewhere.”

[“Carta a su tía Beatriz desde Guatemala” (22 de julio de 1954)]

Note the play on the word *armar* in the letter; Guevara indicates that one must use arms to build a nation because the U.S. will not permit democracy by any other means. After the 1954 coup d'état, democracy appeared to be an elusive endeavor in the Central American context as indicated by the dictatorships that took hold in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras.

Therein emerges the crisis of twentieth-century Central American literature; the rigid control and violent nature of the dictatorship forced the artists to respond to coercion through the text and through actions. The editorials, the institutions, the magazines, journals, and newspapers

were censored and closed, destroying all means of sanctioned literary production. The artists were pursued, jailed, murdered, exiled, or disappeared. As Argueta recalls:

Es una cultura de salir corriendo y eso es terrible. Tú tienes que estar dispuesto a salir corriendo. Mi hijo me critica [ahora]—me dice—“usted se sienta [...] siéntese bien que siempre se sienta como que va a salir corriendo” y es cierto. Ahí estoy en una casa ahí ¿entiendes?, no me acomodo del todo, siento que como que estoy listo por cualquier cosa, pueden ser por las persecuciones de antes ¿entiendes? Hay esas cosas ¿no?

(“It is a culture on the run and this is terrible. You have to be ready to get up and run. My son critiques me [now] and says, ‘sit down, sit properly [...] sit properly, you always sit as if you are about to get up and run.’ And it’s true. There I am in a house and I cannot get comfortable, I feel as if I am ready for anything perhaps because of the persecutions. You understand? There are these things, right.” [Personal Interview August 2008])

This was the period, as Argueta says, of:

las catorce familias—Pero, era un sueño de jóvenes [derrocar la dictadura], estamos hablando de gente que tenía veinte, veintiún años y fuimos creciendo ¿no? ya a los veinticuatro años ya los periódicos aquí decían que la culpa del desorden político que había aquí eran los escritores y que había que deshacerse de ellos. Entonces, a los veinticuatro años nosotros nos echan del país ya. Imagínate qué caricaturesco eso ¿no? es decir, los escritores son los culpables de lo que pasa en el país—parece chiste y parece mentira ¿no?

(“the fourteen families—But it was a dream of young people [to overthrow the dictatorship], we are talking about people who were twenty, twenty-one and coming into adulthood, at twenty-four, the newspapers began to say the political disorder was the fault

of the writers and that they had to be dealt with. So at twenty-four we were thrown out of our country. Imagine that, what absurdity right, to say that the writers are to blame for what goes on in our country—it seems like a joke, an impossibility.” [Personal Interview August 2008])

Due to this social context and these political realities, artistic expression of the period has been generally classified as propagandistic leftist literature and seen merely as a byproduct of the revolution. However, as Manlio Argueta asserts:

nos tuvimos que estar defendiendo de los regímenes militares Somoza en Nicaragua donde había aquí en Guatemala pues con sus dictaduras atroces y nosotros [en El Salvador] con dictaduras más institucionalizadas [...] yo pienso que es por la época de las dictaduras militares y —digo— a partir de que nos convirtiéramos en república banana [...] a partir de una guerra civil quedamos como tropicales, como belicosos, como guerreros. Dejamos de ser [vistos como] humanista con Rubén Darío, con Consuelo Suncín [...] entonces todos nos ven como república banana, como país de paso y se olvidan que tenemos un Darío, se olvidan que tenemos un Roque Dalton.

(“We had to defend ourselves from the military regimes, Somoza in Nicaragua, here in Guatemala with its atrocious dictatorships and us [El Salvador] with our institutionalized dictatorships [...] I think because of the period of military dictatorships we were seen as a banana republic [...] after the civil war we were seen as tropical, bellicose like warriors. We were no longer [seen as] humanist with Rubén Darío, with Consuelo Suncín [...] so everyone sees us as banana republic[s], like irrelevant countr[ies] and they forget that we have a Darío, they forget that we have a Roque Dalton.” [Personal Interview August 2008])

Argueta is clearly concerned with the general dismissal of Central American literary traditions, but also the classification of twentieth-century Central American artists as strictly social-realist or propagandistic guerrilla-poets. Due to the social commitment, or as Argueta eloquently puts it, self-defense, the artists are identified with the movements that incorporated *foquista* strategies in the 1960s and 1970s.

As Marc Zimmerman writes of Otto René Castillo in his extensive study *Literature and Resistance in Guatemala*, “[he] is perhaps emblematic of the misguided romantic martyrology so much part of the *foquista* period of Central American political struggle” (283). *Foquismo*, however, is best identified as a military strategy employed by various revolutionary organizations in the 1960s and 1970s rather than a specific historic period. The success of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 with the military strategies employed, promulgated this revolutionary model and pattern. At the same time, R gis Debray’s text *Revoluci n en la revoluci n*, that outlines this strategy, was not published until 1967, the year of Castillo’s death, whereas popular uprisings and Indigenous uprisings have occurred throughout the Americas since the eve of the Conquest.

The willingness of thousands of people to put their lives on the line to participate in popular movements reflects an ethos and cultural compact that existed outside of Marxist paradigms. Indigenous uprisings arose out of the colonial context prior to the existence of Marxism and were most often organized around land issues and resistance to peonage. Revolutionary impetus, even in nationalist movements such as Sandino’s in Nicaragua, relied heavily on traditional cultural expressions. Sandino’s testimony, *Maldito Pa s*, as recorded by Jos  Roman, refers continuously to the musical and lyrical traditions of Nicaragua and the use of these traditions within the movement to motivate and inspire the *campesino* population. Within

Sandino's army, "cada columna tenía su propia orquesta" ("each column had their own orchestra"; Román 150). And throughout the testimony, Román records the music played at every encampment and event, "cantando en coro canciones populares segovianas y del ejército Sandinista" ("singing in chorus popular Segovian songs and Sandinista army songs"; 26). Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, literacy rates in Central America, even in the 1970s were at 50%,<sup>11</sup> so access and circulation of Marxist economic theory was limited. While these materials undoubtedly circulated among the educated university sectors, participation and commitment of thousands in the popular movements reflects the communal social structures dominant in rural and Indigenous communities.

The reductive notion that Marxist political theories motivated thousands of Central Americans to join *la lucha armada* and many more thousands to join popular non-violent movements overlooks regional cultural production, Indigenous resistance, and of course Catholic traditions as well as the emergence and practice of liberation theology. Anne Peterson, in her detailed ethnographic study of political involvement in the 1980s and 1990s, points to the collective sense and ideals expressed by those who were politically active or part of the *guerrilla* during the war. Peterson conducted over seventy interviews and attended numerous community events and Catholic rituals documenting the political involvement of hundreds of Salvadorans. Published in 1997, her study, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, asserts that those engaged in the popular movement felt a deep sense of social commitment that was often motivated by religious beliefs. She also argues that the Salvadoran community has its roots in the Indigenous cosmovision in which the community transcends individual interests and this links the collective sense to the popular movement.

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<sup>11</sup> Literacy rates in 1970 and 1975 were as follows: Guatemala 45% and 49%, El Salvador 58% and 62%, and Nicaragua 67% and 59% (<http://www.ourworldindata.org/data/education-knowledge/literacy/>).



Historical and anthropological studies have often infantilized and minimized Indigenous and *campesino* uprisings or depicted rebellions as savage acts.<sup>12</sup> However, these movements are often deeply rooted in the cooperative ethics of Indigenous communities and tied to communal visions of more just relationships to land and resources. The following testimony of a Guatemalan Holocaust survivor<sup>13</sup> expresses this deep sense of communal ethics passed from generation to generation in Indigenous communities. This individual, held captive for over a year at a military base in Quiché, attests to these ethics. Two social workers managed to free him and bring him to an orphanage, both were likely disappeared.<sup>14</sup> He was captured at eight years old because his father was a *guerrilla* leader (EGP) and a respected member of the Ixil community in Nebaj. Despite the murder of his father and the disappearance of his mother, he continues to assert the transcendental effect of his father's commitment:

No saben nada de mí [en Nebaj] y la gente incluso no saben mucho de mí, solo saben que yo soy el hijo del señor que los ayudaba mucho. Toda la gente me tiende la mano cuando yo voy allá, me dan comida, recuerdos porque mi padre era buena gente con ellos. Todos me dicen, “Yo era amigo de tu papá, yo trabajaba con tu papá”. Yo me siento orgulloso de mi papá porque él luchó por una causa justa. A él no le gustaba que la gente sufriera y por eso luchó y por eso murió él. Me siento bien porque yo sé que él murió luchando por una causa justa. Me siento orgulloso de todo lo que hizo mi padre porque yo sé que él luchó por una causa justa, luchó por su gente, por su tierra, por su familia más que todo. Aunque a veces sí me hace mucha falta, pero yo tengo muchos malos

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<sup>12</sup> See Virginia Tilley's *Seeing Indians: A Study of Race, Nation, and Power in El Salvador* and Rebecca Earle's *The Return of the Native: Indians and Myth-Making in Spanish America 1810-1930*.

<sup>13</sup> The names of Guatemalan war survivors have been intentionally omitted to protect their identities.

<sup>14</sup> I was unable to verify the surviving individual's assertion as he did not have the names of the individuals and there are no records as to who delivered him to the orphanage.

recuerdos de la guerra en el pueblo y sólo con recordar lo bueno que él hizo yo me siento tranquilo, se sacrificó su vida por su gente.

(“People don’t know much about me, they only know that I am the son of the man that helped them a lot. Everyone takes care of me when I go there [Nebaj]. They give me food, keepsakes, because my father was a good person to them. And they tell me, ‘I was a friend of your father, I worked with your father.’ I feel proud of my father because he fought for a just cause. He did not like to see people suffer and that is why he fought and that is why he died. I feel good because I know that he died fighting for a just cause. I feel proud of everything my father did because I know he fought for a just cause, he fought for his people, for his land, and for his family. And although sometimes, yes, I miss him, I have many awful memories of the war in the village, but by remembering the good that he did, I feel at peace. He sacrificed his life for his people.” [Anon. 1. Personal Interview 2005])

While Zimmerman is correct in asserting that many of the military strategies employed during these two decades were ineffective and produced disastrous effects as Guatemalan rebel leader Mario Payeras also outlines in his testimonial account *Los días de la selva*<sup>15</sup> and his essays *Los fusiles de octubre*, there were political, social, religious, and literary movements that occurred independent of these military strategies. Classifying the art produced before, after, and during the period in which *foquista* military strategies were employed removes the artist from the aesthetic traditions, religious traditions, and complex historical context of resistance. While the imagery of martyrdom present in Castillo’s poetry was no doubt influenced by Marxist political theory (not *foquista* strategies), it is more a product of Catholic and Indigenous religious and

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<sup>15</sup> The work was published in 1981 and won the *Casa de las Américas* prize.

aesthetic traditions. Despite the imposition of Marxist teleology on the lyric by critics, and at times, by the artists themselves, the text cannot be so easily shut down.

Regardless of the political commitments of many Central American poets, their texts too often leave their readers with a sense of unresolved endings and openings. And the impasse of the colonial and postcolonial experience is one of competing paradigms, cosmological divides, and the structural inconsistencies of the feudal/capitalist economic structure. The text acts as a dialogic site with multiple polyphonies, or what Roque Dalton dubs counterpoint, “La guerra de guerrillas en El Salvador (contrapunto).” Contrapunto or counterpoint is a musical term associated with a European tradition in Baroque tradition that harmonizes to independent rhythmic and melodic voices so that these operate simultaneously in a single, polyphonic composition. In this manner, Dalton explains Nahua resistance to Pedro de Alvarado as well as the continual Indigenous and popular uprisings of Central America. Although Dalton and Castillo, among others, impose Marxist teleology on their own texts and linear structures, the artistic imaginary and the text itself produces a counterpoint where the polyphonies of competing cosmologies and paradigms are expressed.

Both thematically and stylistically, Castillo seeks to convert the text into a dialogic site of the utopian imagination. His poetic voice is most often represented as his own and directed to a *beloved* or to his compatriots. In his “Holocausto de la merienda tranquila,” in a Brechtian manner, he inserts the artist in the lyric, shifting from a narrative style to a more intentionally accessible conversational lyric.<sup>16</sup> The use of common language and everyday images contrasts with the ever-present social violence, reminding the reader of the impending context. In this

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<sup>16</sup> Having studied in East Germany, Otto René Castillo was heavily influenced by Brechtian theatrical technique as evidenced by his translations from German of *Mother Courage* and *Señora Carrar's Rifles* (Patrice Castillo in Yagüe Herrero) and the publication of “Apuntes sobre el teatro épico de Bertolt Brecht.”

case, hunger is the social violence. The artist seeks to sate his own hunger, “Yo, que busco mi pan diario/ en las manos nupciales de la harina; que amo la gaviota/ silvestre de su vuelo/ y el corazón mundial del trigo” (“I, that searches for my daily bread/ in the nuptial hands of flour; that love the seagull/ wild in its flight/ and the earthly heart of wheat”; *Para que no cayera la esperanza* 92). But, as the title suggests, the tranquil *merienda* of the exiled artist at the banks of the Seine or along the Malecón is laid waste by the violence of hunger.

Another example of this phenomenon—the exploration of social violence through the hunger—is the moment of radical conversion for de las Casas when he denounces his holdings and becomes *el defensor de los indios*. In *Historia de las Indias*, he identifies ritual sacrifice as the reliance on a product manufactured by the hands of another who is not justly compensated, a colonial practice, which he condemns. To say mass with bread produced by enslaved Indigenous peoples is then sacrilege. Enrique Dussel, in his article, “The Bread of Eucharist Celebration as a Sign of Justice in the Community” writes on the symbolism of bread in the Christian tradition using the experiences of Bartolomé de las Casas’ conversion from Book III, Chapter 79 of *Historia de las Indias* (41). Asked by Diego Velázquez to perform the Easter mass, de las Casas consults *Ecclesiasticus* and in re-reading of the following passage, he reconsiders his dominion over the Indians that had been granted to him in the *repartimiento* system:

Tainted is every sacrifice that comes of goods ill gotten; a mockery, this, of sacrifice, that shall win no favor. For those who wait upon him in loyal duty, the Lord alone is God. Should the most High accept the offerings of sinners, take the gifts of the wrong-doer into his reckoning, and pardon their sins because their sacrifices are many? Who robs the poor and then brings sacrifice, is of their fellowship that would immolate some innocent child before the eyes of his father. Poor man’s bread is poor man’s life; cheat him of it, and

thou hast slain him; sweat of his brow, or his life's blood, what matters? Disappoint the hireling, and thou art own brother to a murderer. Build while another pulls down, and toil is its own reward. Pray while another curses, and which of you shall find audience with God? Cleanse thyself from dead body's contamination, and touch it again, what avails thy cleansing? So it is when a man fasts for his sins, yet will not leave his sinning; vain is the fast, the prayer goes unanswered. (Wisdom of Sirach: 34)

The conversion of de las Casas, is not the traditional conversion as related in hagiographies, from sin to purity or from paganism to Christianity. Rather it is a hermeneutical narrative that seeks a radical rereading of the biblical text. Through this rereading, de las Casas calls into question the colonial paradigm that allows for a continent of peoples to be enslaved by another. And it is through the Eucharist that de las Casas deciphers the inequities and injustice of Spanish colonialism.

Dussel further asserts "when the Bible speaks of the 'poor,' it does not mean simply those who have no goods [...] for there to be poor, there have also to be rich, there has to be domination, productions, product, alienation from it and productive structuration of the domination. The poor are the dominated; those who are structurally alienated from the fruits of their work" (45). In other words, "Poverty is a dialectical concept" (Dussel *Beyond Philosophy* 89). Then if "poor man's bread is poor man's life," and the poor are forced to work but not consume the product they produce, they experience hunger and death (Dussel 45-46). So one who reaps the product of their suffering in a false sacrifice, a false ritual or false Eucharist, murders their own brother. By the same token, for Castillo, the poet is inspired by the human experience that is in essence his bread, reaped from the toils of others. The toils and sufferings are the poetic inspiration and the poet in turn consumes these experiences. Poetry thus, is the

product of these experiences, and unless it is shared as a social product for the greater good, written production becomes for Castillo, an empty ritual.

Bread, in Catholic iconography, represents the incarnation and Christian communion through the sacrifice and violent death of Christ. The Eucharist is the communal participation in this sacrifice, and by consuming the body of Christ, the practitioner shares in his suffering and hoped-for resurrection. The sacrament is a reenactment ritual, imbued with meaning only by the practitioner's willingness to follow in Christ's path: "The Mass [...] is fundamentally communal. But the Christian community cannot worship in an authentic way unless it at first effectively put into practice the precept of love for fellow man" (Torres "Letter to the Cardinal" *El Tiempo*: June 25, 1965; ed. Gerassi 325). In Castillo's poetry, however, bread is the symbolic representation of poetry. As de las Casas indicated in his homily, the poet in the "Holocausto de la merienda tranquila," like the wealthy, cannot consume this bread or partake of it while others are hungry, "yo no puedo comer mi pan tranquilo,/ mi pan que amo y que me gusta,/ porque me da la fuerza para el beso,/ para el vuelo de mi mano,/ para la lluvia de mi frente./ Yo, no lo puedo comer tranquilo/ mientras le falte al mundo" ("I cannot tranquilly eat my bread,/ my bread that I enjoy and love, / because it strengthens my kisses,/ the flight of my hand,/ the rain from my forehead,/ I, cannot eat tranquilly/ while the world hungers"; 92).

For Castillo, poetry is a communal act, as with the Eucharist, a ritual rendered insignificant if it is devoid of social action. The poet cannot have a tranquil merienda, "mientras el mundo no cambie/ y no cese el combate/ jadeante de los dientes;/ mientras lo humano se desgaste/ y lo lobo nos crezca/ y el hambre nos mate/ a sobresaltos sucesivos" (92; while the world unchanging/ does not end war/ gasping from its teeth;/ while what is human erodes/ and the wolf grows in us/ hunger kills us/ in successive thunderbolts). The *merienda* becomes a

metonymic representation of hunger. The artist's hunger is ameliorated only through the total destruction, "the holocaust" of his immediate desires. He chooses not to eat so that others may eat.

### **Revolution as an Act of Love**

Transcendental sacrifice is the organizing principal of Catholicism. And while there is a tendency among artists of the *Generación Comprometida* to reject the cultural influences of the Church, the imaginary, or in Jungian terms, the "collective unconscious," expresses the shared symbols and archetypes, the images that induce metaphorical and lyrical production. Even in Castillo's less overtly political poems, sacrifice functions as a fundamental element of its imagery. In "Viernesanto," the title itself marks the day of the crucifixion with the lamentation of romantic loss and supplicant plea to the beloved, "¿Dónde pondré/ mi frente el viernesanto,/ si me faltan tus manos?/ ¿Dónde pondré/ mi simple boca,/ si se han fugado tus labios?" ("Where will I rest my head on Good Friday/ if I don't have your hands?/ Where will I rest/ my innocent mouth/ if your lips have fled?"; lines 1-6). The poetic voice articulates the loss of his beloved through biblical imagery, "A las tres de la tarde/ será crucificado mi beso/ en la cumbre de tu ausencia./ De todo, lo que más odio/ es la corona de mi soledad:/ ahí estará tu nombre/ apoyándose en espinas./ A esa hora me negarás./ No tres veces, sino mil" ("At three in the afternoon/ my kiss will be crucified/ upon the summit of your absence./ Of everything, what I most hate/ is the crown of my loneliness:/ where your name will be found/ resting upon the thorns./ And in that hour you will deny me./ Not three times, but a thousand"; lines 7-15 ). Castillo equates the summit of the absence of his beloved to Christ's journey to the crucifixion atop Golgotha. The pain of lost love parallels the suffering of Jesus represented in the crown of thorns.

Castillo evokes two scenes from the passion narrative. With the reference to three denials, “A esa hora me negarás. No tres veces, sino mil,” he conjures Christ’s warning at the last supper when he tells the Apostle Peter of his impending denial: “and Jesus said to him, Believe me, this night, before the second cock-crow, thou wilt thrice disown me” (Mark 14:30). Castillo also skillfully reworks the crucifixion scene, referring to Christ breathing his last breath at three in the afternoon (“a las tres”) in a state of absolute abandonment (“corona de mi soledad”). This crown of thorns (“espinas”) bears his lover’s name and she will deny him, not three times as the Apostle Peter, but a thousand. Here, Castillo depicts the emotional intensity of the crucifixion scene, appropriating it as his personal suffering and simultaneously elevating the experience of human love. In this way, Castillo compares the suffering of the loss of the union of love and the suffering of the lover with the suffering of Christ. The crown upon his head bears his loneliness and amongst the thorns is the name of his beloved.

Castillo’s allusions to the biblical narrative of Peter’s denial do not express recrimination against his lover, but rather he contemplates the human experience in which fear and cowardice prevent us from action. The lover does not sit in judgment, nor is he vengeful or angry with his beloved. His agony is at the loss, their departure from each other, but his love is boundless and continuous: “Cuando vuelvas,/ saldrá a encontrarte/ un agudo viento de campanas/ que se va de mi pecho,/ viudo ya de su agonía./ Tenía que ser así/ entre nosotros. Tú llegaste demasiado/ temprano./ Y yo vine demasiado/ tarde,/ amor,/ al encuentro de nosotros” (“When you return,/ a sharp wind of chimes,/ will greet you/ sailing from my breast/ widowed of its agony./ Between us/ this had to be. You arrived too/ soon/ And I came too/ late, / my love,/ to our encounter” lines 16-28). While the death or the crucifixion of their romance, “Ahora llega viernesanto/ con su rostro de luto” (“Now Good Friday arrives/ with a face of mourning”) produces loss and



desolation, from the loneliness, life bursts forth extending its wings: “Un frío solitario/ extiende sus alas/ en mi alma./ En el fondo de mí/ te apagas lentamente” (“A solitary cold/ extends its wings/ in my soul./ In my abyss/ you slowly dim”; lines 31-35). The death of the relationship does not signify the end, but a new cycle of life, “Y a pesar de todo, continuo viviendo” (“In spite of all this,/ I continue living”; lines 36-37).

We see in Castillo’s poetry the imagery and theological concepts from the scriptures, most importantly the central message of love. Despite his adherence to Marxist economic theory and his disavowal of the hierarchical nature of the Church, the abundance of images and concepts that emerge from Catholic cultural and theological traditions are ever present in his poetry. Castillo, like many of the artists and writers of the 1950s, viewed the Church as an authoritarian force that worked in tandem with oligarchic structures: the fourteen families in El Salvador, the twenty-four families in Guatemala, and the Somoza family in Nicaragua. On the other hand, Argueta states, “aunque nosotros hubiéramos sido adversarios de la Iglesia Católica, porque era muy conservadora, nosotros siempre fuimos católicos, nosotros siempre bautizamos a nuestros hijos” (“although we were adversaries of the Catholic Church, because it was very conservative, we were always Catholics, we always baptized our children”; Personal Interview August 2008).

The massive cultural shift in the Catholic Church that occurred after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), most importantly the vernacularization of the mass, radically altered the nature of Catholicism in the region. The release of the encyclical of Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* with its critique of the “international imperialism of money” (qtd. in Gerassi 37) had a profound impact in Latin America where the Church was beginning a process of renewal under the influence of Vatican II and the emerging liberation theology. The Conference of Bishops at

Medellín in 1968 marked a turning point with the bishops establishing concrete practices based upon the principle of a “preferential option for the poor.” The presence of Pope Paul VI at the conference sanctioned the progressive agenda set forth in 1968. Among these concrete practices were the establishment of base communities, lay participation, literacy campaigns, and the use of the bible as a dialogic teaching tool. By the 1970s, priests, nuns, and lay workers in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and the Quiché area of Guatemala had developed active ties and supportive programs for urban squatters, workers, and the impoverished Indigenous and *campesino* communities.

Revolutionary and popular movements had surged by 1968, and many priests were actively engaged in programs of social justice. But as civil wars and guerrilla movements took hold in Latin American, the Church had to address the issue of violence. Interestingly one of the manifestos that appeared at the 1968 conference (though not released in the final report) directly addressed the issue of violence in the Americas. Signed by 920 priests, it reads:

we cannot condemn an oppressed people when it finds itself obliged to use force to liberate itself; otherwise, we would commit a new injustice upon a people [...] On the other hand, not opposing the violence of the oppressors is equivalent to provoking indirectly the legitimate violence of the oppressed.

These facts move us to ask [...] that our clergymen united in this assembly: [...] should not, in considering the problem of violence in Latin America, under any circumstances whatsoever compare or confuse the *unjust violence* of the oppressors who maintain this odious system, with the *just violence* of the oppressed, who find themselves forced to use it to gain their liberation [...]. (Gerassi 41)

Thus the Latin American Church began looking to the Christian concepts of just war as a way to understand and minister to the thousands of practitioners who saw the *lucha armada* as the only viable option for social change. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Saint Thomas Aquinas outlines this concept, offering a theological foundation based on early Christian apologist Saint Augustine, for the concept of war as a necessity for peace:

...Augustine says (Ep. ad Bonif. clxxxix): "We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace. Be peaceful, therefore, in warring, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against, and bring them to the prosperity of peace."

(*Summa Theologiae: Secunda Secundae Partis, Article 1 Reply to Objection 3*)

The just war theory that Aquinas outlines searches for a peaceful society of love and fellowship, but as he asserts, this may not always be possible without the insertion of violence. The Catholic concept of just war was adapted in various social sectors and used as theoretical support for the Marxist revolution in Central America. There were also radical elements within the Latin American Church, priests who abandoned their cassocks for arms, for example and most notably, priest, sociologist, and educator Camilo Torres who died in a battle, fought for the Colombian revolutionary front as part of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN).

Camilo Torres, in his death, became an emblem of Marxist-Catholic soteriology. He viewed salvation as being delivered through the ultimate act of love. Revolutionary resistance, willingness to lend one's mind and body to overthrow an unjust economic system in order to create an egalitarian socialist economic structure, was part of that love. Camilo Torres, before going to the mountains, was a popular organizer, deeply respected and sought out among *campesinos* and workers (Gerassi). Torres' vision was cut short, as he died in his first ELN

battle, perhaps emblematic not of “misguided martyrology” but of the problematic revolutionary strategy of militarized cadres guiding the movement.

As Torres cemented his commitment to the *lucha armada*, he looked to the Christian doctrine to guide him and his compatriots. Returning to the principles set forth in the Christian message, the radical commitment to love, Torres writes:

In Catholicism the main thing is love for one’s fellow man: “[...] he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the Law” (Romans 13:8). For this love to be genuine, it must seek to be effective [...] power must be taken from the privileged minorities and given to the poor majorities [...] it constitutes the essential characteristic of a revolution. The revolution can be a peaceful one if minorities refrain from violent resistance. Revolution is, therefore, the way to obtain a government that carries out works of charity, of love for one’s fellows—not for only a few but for the majority of our fellow men. This is why the revolution is not only permissible but obligatory for those Christians who see it as the only effective and far-reaching way to make the love of all people a reality. (“Message to Christians” published in *Frente Unido*, August 26, 1965 in Gerassi 368-369).

As in the letters and messages of Torres, the central theme in Castillo’s poetry is love. Dalton affirms, “es evidente que el amor en la poesía de Otto René Castillo es algo más que la simple exaltación de la relación hombre-mujer: es la reafirmación constante del sentimiento de la vida, contrapuesto en todo momento a la injusticia, a la tristeza y a la muerte” (“it is evident that love in Otto René Castillo’s poetry is more than a simple exaltation of the male-female relationship—it is the continual affirmation of life in the face of injustice, sadness, and death”; “Otto René Castillo” par. 5). This attention to love grafts the courtly tradition of Spanish canonical poetry to the Christian message. And it is clear that Castillo’s poetry, to an extent,

emerges from both these traditions, where the poetic and religious framework often overlap. However, the concept of love in Castillo's poetry is intimately entwined with self-abnegation, and in this sense, his poetry is more closely related to that of the mystical tradition in which the poetic voice denies both the body and carnal love, while ascending the spiritual ladder to a more profound love manifested in union with God.

Consider San Juan de la Cruz's poem "La noche oscura" in which he explores the purgative and illuminative path towards the mystical union with God. While the comparison of a Marxist-guerrilla poet with a mystic poet of the sixteenth century may be perceived as an act of literary iconoclasm, only through these comparisons can we begin to see the many ways that Central American poetics syncretizes diverse strands, including Catholic imagery, Spanish poetic traditions, Indigenous cultures, and Marxist political theory. De la Cruz begins "La noche oscura" with the *vía purgativa*,<sup>17</sup> with the journey of blessed traveler (*la dichosa*) from the security and warmth of her home into the darkness of the night: "En una noche oscura,/ con ansias, en amores inflamada,/ ¡oh dichosa ventura!/ salí sin ser notada,/ estando ya mi casa sosegada" ("On a dark night,/ Anxious, by love inflamed,/ O joyous chance!—/ I left not seen or discovered, /My house at last completely quiet"; Cruz; Ed. Ruano 253; trans. de Nicolás 103). She continues into the darkness secretly, lit only by the mystery and faith in the union with God:

A escuras y segura  
por la secreta escala, disfrazada,  
¡oh dichosa ventura!  
a escuras y encelada,  
estando ya mi casa sosegada.

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<sup>17</sup> Palabras liminares: "En que canta el alma la dichosa ventura que tuvo en pasar por la oscura Noche de la Fe, en desnudez y purgación suya a la unión del Amado" (Nicolás 102).

En la noche dichosa,  
en secreto, que naide me veía  
ni yo miraba cosa,  
sin otra luz y guía  
sino la que en el corazón ardía. (254)

(In the darkness, with light  
By the secret ladder, disguised,  
—O joyous chance!—  
I left in darkness, covered,  
My house at last completely quiet.

On that joyous night,  
In secret, seen by no one,  
Nor with anything in sight,  
I had no other light or mark,  
Than the one burning in my heart. [103])

The poetic voice in “La Noche Oscura” is an imagined female other, and the journey takes place in an imagined poetic space, rather than in the physical realm. This is a marked contrast to Castillo’s work, in which the poetic voice is almost always an extension of the poet, but a poet mired in the realities of his socio-political context. However, Castillo’s “Carta de amor constante,” as in “La Noche Oscura,” begins in the *vía purgativa*, with the poet embarking on a

journey, leaving behind his beloved, “Al decirte aquella tarde/ que pronto volvería hacia mi tierra,/ porque allí me esperaban los caminos/” (“Upon telling you that afternoon/ that I would soon return to my land/ because the trails called my name”; *Para no que cayera la esperanza* 31). This is the path of purgative denial in which he abandons the refuge, love, and security that exile provided. He sets out to travel secretly as the *dichosa*, to return clandestinely to his country, “y una apretada música de abrazos,/ recuerdo que hablaste de nosotros,/ de los parques que juntos conocimos,/ de las lágrimas que me seguirían/ cuando yo volviera hacia mi pueblo/ del hondo dolor que te causaba/ mi clandestino regreso a Guatemala/” (“in a tightened tango of embraces,/ I remember that you spoke of us,/ of the parks we walked together,/ of the tears that would follow me/ when I returned to my people/ of the deep pain caused/ by my clandestine return to Guatemala”; 31).

The poetic voices of Cruz and Castillo accept their journey and denial of physical warmth and security because they are guided by a profound light or the *vía iluminativa*. For the *dichosa*, faith, love, and light of God guide her, “Aquésta me guiaba/ más cierto que la luz del medio día,/ adonde me esperaba/ quien yo bien me sabía,/ en parte donde naide parecía” (“This light guided me/ More directly than the midday sun,/ Where waiting for me/ Was the One I knew so well, my delight,/ In a place with no one in sight”; 254; 103). Castillo, in contrast, is guided by “el futuro de su pueblo” (“the future of the people”; 32) and revolutionary destiny, “volví a mi país/ por un mandato exacto. De mi estrella perenne” (“By a precise command/ from my eternal star/ I returned to my country”; 32).

Both poetic voices are also altered by this light. For San Juan de la Cruz, this transformative light produces a mystical union with God, as the *dichosa* walks in the path of sacrifice and denial towards the gift of light, a love brought forth by that sacrifice, “¡Oh noche

que guiaste!;/ ¡oh noche amable más que la alborada!;/ ¡oh noche que juntaste/ Amado con amada,/ amada en el Amado transformada! (“O night! O guide!/ O night more loving than the dawn!/ O night that joined/ Lover with beloved,/ Beloved in the lover transformed!”; 254; 103). Likewise Castillo’s poetry follows the ladder of mystical poetry ascending, though not a spiritual ladder, but the teleological advance of the Marxist revolution. Still, this utopia is articulated as the ultimate expression of brotherly love or *compañerismo*, or commitment to the armed struggle as an effort to liberate the poor and the suffering. The utopian moment, is not mystical union with God, but with the revolution, “y al pie de sus recuerdos/ grabo mi destino de soldado/ de los viejos anhelos populares,/ hundo mi voz en los geranios/ con una gran pasión silvestre/ y abrazo al primer hombre/ que llora en medio de la calle” (“and at the foot of these memories/ I solidify my soldier destiny/ with the long-awaited yearnings of my people,/ I bury my voice in geraniums/ with a wild passion/ and I embrace the first man/ that cries in the streets”; 32).

Sacrifice and love are inextricably linked in Castillo’s poetry. Love, though, is not an expression of carnal desire nor the platonic love of courtly sonnets nor the mystical union with God. Love is the sacrifice of the revolutionary, or *el compañerismo guerrillero*, made manifest in his willingness to offer up his life for an imagined social future devoid of suffering. Castillo’s faith in a utopian dream and the possibility of a more just and egalitarian society expresses the triumph of life over death through personal sacrifice. As he writes in “A los intelectuales,” “Pero si uno cae,/ Uno cuyo amor/ es más grande/ que las catedrales juntas/ de todos los planetas,/ si uno cae,/ es porque alguien/ tenía que caer, para que no cayera/ la esperanza./ Siempre ha tenido/ que caer alguien/ en algún sitio,/ cuando la dignidad,/ la libertad/ y la merienda/ estuvieron tan lejos/ de la vida cotidiana” (“But if one falls,/ One whose love/ is greater/ than all the cathedrals/ of all the planets,/ if one falls,/ is it because/ someone had to fall,/ so that hope/ would not./



Someone has always had/ to fall/ somewhere,/ when dignity,/ liberty/ and sustenance/ were so far/ from daily life”; *Para que no cayera la esperanza* 107).

Castillo’s poetry, although framed in the context of the Marxist revolution, continually references a faith that transcends the material world. In this way, the poetry at once embraces and rejects Marxist materialism. Revolutionary action is not part of an inevitable teleological unfolding of history; rather it is a commitment that grows out of love for one’s brother and faith in the power of love. This love is expressed in the very Christian sense as love for one’s neighbor and for one’s brother in a just system in which no one suffers from hunger or violence.

“Comunicado,” which is written as if it was a communiqué from the battlefield, includes a message that affirms this indeterminate and unquantifiable faith in *compañerismo revolucionario*. He writes, “Nada/ podrá/ contra esta avalancha/ del amor./ Contra este rearme del hombre/ en sus más nobles estructuras./ Nada/ podrá/ contra la fe del pueblo/ en la sola potencia de sus manos./ Nada/ podrá/ contra la vida” (“Nothing/ against this avalanche/ of love./ Against this re-arming of men/ into noble structures/ Nothing can/ against the faith of the people/ in the power of their hands/ Nothing can overcome life”; *Para que no cayera la esperanza* 89). His faith is not in an otherworldly divine being, but in the people, united in arms to overthrow a dictatorship. Castillo envisions the armed struggle as an act of love that is affirmation of life, “Y nada/ podrá/ contra la vida,/ porque nada/ pudo/ jamás/ contra la vida” (“And nothing can/ against life,/ because nothing/ ever/ could/ against life”; 89).

### ***Murió Amando: The Death of Monseñor Romero***

Manlio Argueta asserts that in the twenty years after the emergence of the *Generación Comprometida*, many of the writers fled into exile, went underground, joined the guerrilla, or were captured and killed (Personal Interview August 2008). In this same period, he remarks the

Church went through a radical transformation, particularly in El Salvador. Priests and nuns began to assume the role of the writers in offering a social critique of the dictatorship and its accompanying political oppression. The most vocal critic of the disappearances, the political assassinations, the torture, and the massacres was Monseñor Oscar Romero,<sup>18</sup> the archbishop of El Salvador from 1977 to 1980. It is impossible to examine martyrdom in Central America without bringing Romero into the discussion. At the time of his assassination and before his official canonization, he was revered as a saint among vast portions of the rural peoples in El Salvador. Unlike Camilo Torres, he did not represent the radical or militarized element of the Church; rather he was a voice of dissent that brought attention to the colonial economic structures of the period and to the military violence that upheld these structures. The increasing commercialization of the farming industry that took place in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s led to a growing impoverished and displaced peasantry. Landless rural workers rose from 11% of the labor force in 1961 to 40% in 1975 (*Americas Watch: El Salvador's Decade of Terror* 2). In this period, 70% of the rural population lived in poverty and 85% lacked electricity, running water, and functioning sewage systems. Half of all children under five were considered malnourished, and 60% of the population lacked access to healthcare (*Americas Watch: El Salvador's Decade of Terror* 1). The abject poverty and continual persecution of *campesinos* inspired many priests, nuns, and religious workers to respond to these social conditions by calling for agrarian reforms, access to education, and healthcare.

Romero proclaimed that the Church was of the people and lent the Church as a space and as an institution to meet the needs of the poor and persecuted. Romero's willingness to offer his life for this message, as did many priests, nuns, and lay workers during the revolutionary period,

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<sup>18</sup> Pope Francis canonized Monseñor Oscar Romero in 2018. He is now officially Saint Romero.

represents the ethos of the era. According to Americas Watch, in the 1980s alone eighteen priests were murdered (33) and three dozen journalists were assassinated (39). Between January and October of 1980, ninety primary school teachers were killed, and between January and mid-March of the following year, 156 teachers of various levels were assassinated (*America Watch: El Salvador's Decade of Terror* 41). The deep sense of social commitment expressed by the writers and artists was shared amongst the Church, its followers, and the popular social movements signifying the increasing ethos of martyrdom or “una inclinación al sacrificio” (“inclination towards sacrifice”; Argueta Personal Interview August 2008) that emerged and multiplied during the revolutionary period.

At the funeral mass of priest Rutilio Grande, after he was gunned down by paramilitary forces, Monseñor Archbishop Romero declares that *murió amando*, undoubtedly asking as Christ did to pardon his murderers, “sin duda que, cuando sintió los primeros impactos que le traían la muerte, pudo decir también como Cristo; ‘perdónalos, Padre, no saben, no han comprendido mi mensaje de amor’” (“without a doubt, when he felt the first shots of those that brought death to him, he said like Christ, ‘Forgive them Father, they know not what they’ve done, they don’t understand my message of love’”; “Homilía en la misa Exequiel del Padre Rutilio Grande” in *La voz de Monseñor Romero: Textos y homilias*; 23). This message of love, in the Church of liberation theology, builds upon the principles of preferential option for the poor, a conviction that views poverty as a sin. If we return to Dussel’s assertion, that poverty is a dialectical concept that is relational, we understand the “sin” of poverty to be formed out of the economic structures that prevent the consumption of the “poor man’s bread,” thus causing hunger and its accompanying suffering. This message articulated at the 1968 Conference of Bishops in Medellín is a message of love in that it asks that we consider the physical wellbeing, the hunger

of our fellow citizens. Hunger is the privation that feeds the wealthy, or in Bartolomé de las Casas' view, the tainted sacrifice. Only through the radical denunciation of the system that allows for such privation (in the case of de las Casas' the colonial system), can one experience the message of brotherly love set forth in Christian doctrine. Whereas, de las Casas' conversion occurred through the rereading of biblical texts, for Monseñor Romero, it was a re-encounter with his flock, the rural and urban poor that made up the majority of the Church in El Salvador: "I am a shepherd who, with his people, has begun to learn a beautiful and difficult truth, our Christian faith requires that we submerge ourselves in the world" (qtd. in Brockman 174).

Romero used his pulpit to condemn the economic structures in El Salvador and the government that held these structures in place through violent and oppressive military regimes. He used his office to stand with and defend the *campesinos* and the urban masses whose children, husbands, wives, and relatives were being rounded up, tortured, and disappeared by the military. Boldly speaking out in any public forum, mediating in conflicts, using the Catholic radio station YSAX to inform the public of military violence, and forming the legal aid clinic Socorro Jurídico, Romero challenged the censorship and silence imposed by the military regime. In a period where more than 30,000 were disappeared by paramilitary forces and thousands more murdered in military attacks on civilians, Romero's efforts addressed the endemic violence of the government. In his last homily broadcast on March 23, 1980 on YSAX, in a bold and dangerous move, he directly confronted the Salvadoran armed forces:

I would like to appeal in a special way to the army's enlisted men, and in particular to the ranks of the Guardia Nacional and the police—those in the barracks. Brothers: you are part of our own people. You kill your own campesino brothers and sisters. And before an order to kill that a man may be given, God's law must prevail that says: Thou shalt not

kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God. No one has to fulfill an immoral law. It is time to take back your consciences and to obey your consciences rather than the orders of sin. The church, defender of the rights of God, of the law of God, of human dignity, of the person, cannot remain silent before such abomination. We want the government to understand seriously that reforms are worth nothing if they are stained with so much blood. In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people, whose laments rise to heaven each day more tumultuous, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression! (qtd. in Brockman 241-242)

Monseñor Romero was fully aware that inserting himself publicly as an archbishop and as representative of the Church into the suffering of the Salvadoran people meant exposing his physical self to the violence of the Salvadoran military regime. In the days leading up to his assassination, he acknowledged his pending death in his written reflections, in his homilies, and his conversations (Brockman). He knew that he had challenged a dangerous regime, the military would seek revenge, and that his death would stand as a testament to this regime, “mi muerte, si es aceptada por Dios, sea por la liberación de mi pueblo y testimonio de esperanza en el futuro. Pueden decir, si llegasen a matarme, que perdono y bendigo a quienes lo hagan” (“my death, if it is accepted by God, may it be for the liberation of my people and a testament to hope for the future. If they kill me, it can be said, that I forgive and bless those who did it” (*La vida de Monseñor Romero* 244)).

The documentation and details of Romero’s death, his homilies aired on YSAX, his writings, and the accompanying testimonies of priests and nuns who worked alongside him provide tremendous insight into the willingness with which he accepted his impending death and the conscious choices that he made in the path towards the physical sacrifice of his body. Unlike

the writers and artists of this period, for whom we lack documentation of their demise, Romero's death is a matter of public record, testified to by many witnesses and written documents.

Precisely because he was connected to a powerful institution, we know his final hours, we know his final words, and we have thousands of witnesses to his homilies and his works. But it is through the spectacle of his death that we are able to bear witness to the deaths of so many others who perished during the revolutionary period.

However, it is necessary to draw a distinction, as Argueta does, between Romero, other religious leaders, and members of non-militarized popular organizations, who were all unarmed and with many of the writers and artists of this period: “¿Dónde está la diferencia? Nosotros no decíamos eso ‘Nosotros tenemos que defendernos. Nosotros tenemos que ver cómo manejar el fusil’” (“Where is the difference? We said, ‘We had to defend ourselves, we had to know how to use a gun’”; Personal Interview August 2008). But the model, the commitment to a utopian doctrine, and the willingness and inclination towards self-sacrifice embodies the ethos of the revolutionary period and is written into the *Acta Martyrum*. The mise-en-scène of Romero's assassination frames the narrative of martyrdom in the revolutionary period. Unlike the deaths and disappearances of thousands of others, Romero's assassination was a recorded and publicized international spectacle—as well as an intentional message sent forth by the Salvadoran military regime.

Monseñor Romero said his last mass in the chapel of Hospital de la Divina Providencia, on March 24, 1980. As it was an anniversary mass for the death of one of his friend's mothers, the scriptures corresponded appropriately addressing the Christian concepts of life, death, and afterlife, with a reading from the gospel of John: “a grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die, or else it remains nothing more than a grain of wheat; but if it dies, then it yields rich fruit”

(John 12:24-25). In the accompanying homily, Romero said, “But whoever out of love for Christ give themselves to the service of others will live, like the grain of wheat that dies, but only apparently. If it did not die, it would remain alone [...] only in undoing itself does it produce a harvest” (qtd. in Brockman 244).

This mass marks the final moments of Romero’s life before his assassination by Major Roberto D’Aubuisson’s<sup>19</sup> paramilitary forces (CJA). With this assassination the Salvadoran military sent forth a very public, intentional and state-sanctioned message that attempted to instill fear in the population and communicate that those who engage in political dialogue and speak out against the military will suffer and perish. Before the assassin raised his gun, Monseñor Romero said his last words, blessing the Eucharist:

This holy mass, this Eucharist, is an act of faith. With Christian faith we know that at this moment the wheaten host is changed into the body of the Lord, who offered himself for the world’s redemption, and in this chalice the wine is transformed into the blood that was the price of salvation. May this body immolated and this blood sacrificed for humans nourish us also, so that we may give our body and blood to suffering and to pain—like Christ, not for self, but to teach justice and peace to our people. (qtd. in Brockman 244)

As Romero raised his hands in his final moments to call for a united blessing of the Eucharist, shots rang out in the chapel, and with a single bullet, he was murdered.

### **Panoptic Disorder: Death Squads, Discipline, and Torture**

The military forces communicated a public message and symbolic exhibition of power with Monseñor Romero’s death—along with the deaths of eight other priests within the

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<sup>19</sup> Major Roberto D’Aubuisson founder of the ARENA party passed away in 1992 of throat cancer. He was major force in the extrajudicial executions carried out by the death squads. He is also considered one of the major players in the assassination of Monseñor Oscar Romero according to both the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Center for Justice and Accountability. See also “How We killed Archbishop Romero” in *El Faro* and CJA court case Doe v. Saravia.

following months and thousands of tortures and disappearances. This symbolic display harkens back to images of Hatuey's torture at the hands of a Franciscan friar on the eve of the Conquest and the Saints of Lyon under the rule of Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. Assassinations and executions are an assertion of symbolic power and therefore, "[p]ublic torture and execution must be spectacular; it must be seen by all almost as its triumph. The very excess of the violence employed is one of the elements of its glory" (Foucault *Discipline & Punish* 34).

We may find it difficult to conceive and to imagine, in a country with a majority Catholic population, that the state would sanction attacks on priests, and the military would be so bold as to carry out such a murder in a place of worship during mass. Yet it is precisely because of the symbolic power of the place, the scene, the moment, and the liturgy, that the chapel became the place of Romero's death. In this way the military asserted its strength through organized strategies that sought to alienate and disempower the populace (Herman 77). In desecrating the Church, the sacred space, the military announced its potency, that it did not even fear God, and that it possessed a power greater than the sacred.

As Foucault asserts, "Torture is a technique" rather than an "expression of lawless rage" (33). To convey its symbolic power, torturers follow an almost scripted methodology, one that has been repeated (to our shame) many times in history and certainly most recently in the Western Hemisphere in Central America. Public execution symbolically expresses state power and force and performs it before an audience primed for state terror. Public torture and execution compel the public to bear witness to the subversive's suffering and the exertion of the state's power. Foucault asserts that torture "must mark the victim: it is intended, whether by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy" (34). "Tortures that take place even after death" (34) with the burning of corpses, hanging



bodies, decapitated heads, and battered bodies scattered on the roadsides, pursue the body beyond the experience of pain.

In a diachronic approach to the European landscape, Foucault describes the use of torture in the *ancien régime*, but he did not discuss torture in a modern postcolonial state, particularly during the Cold War years. The use of torture and state violence in a postcolonial setting differs radically from the European experience of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as explored by Foucault—although French colonial practices involved torture and state violence. In the wake of the European genocides in the Second World War, international human rights ideology and laws were introduced and ratified. But, in actual fact, the United Nations Convention Against Torture, a non-binding international human rights treaty, was not signed until 1984, and it did not come into force until 1987. Guatemala did not ratify the treaty until 1990, while El Salvador and Honduras only ratified it in 1996. While Guatemala and El Salvador, undoubtedly authorized the military violence employed during the revolutionary period, the government denied that it had sanctioned human rights abuses and civilian attacks. The geo-political circumstances (that is, the Cold War) allowed for the Guatemalan and El Salvadoran military to use tactics of torture and terror under the façade of democracy. State functionaries denied the occurrence of extra-judicial killings and paramilitary assassinations, while military insiders and government officials participated, planned, and sanctioned these egregious crimes. As U.S. military aid poured in during the 1980s, justified as a defense of democracy and necessary in the fight against the communist totalitarianism sought by guerrilla forces, these states had economic, logistical, and political support from foreign powers. Between 1980 and 1984, the U.S. government sent \$86.9 million in military aid to Guatemala, and former President Ronald Reagan said of former Guatemalan dictator General Ríos Mont that he is “a man of great personal integrity and

commitment” who “wants to improve the quality of life for all Guatemalans and to promote social justice” (*Americas Watch Report* 1985). And from 1980 to 1992, the U.S. sent over \$3 billion dollars in economic aid and over \$1 billion in military aid to El Salvador (*Americas Watch: El Salvador’s Decade of Terror* 141).

So while the military regimes, subsequent presidents and dictators from post-World War II through the revolutionary period claimed to be defending freedom and battling the specter of communism, popular organizations, democratic movements, and voices of dissent were targeted, dismantling the very nature of the democratic state that these governments claimed to uphold. The symbolic exertion of power is simultaneously disconnected and disjointed from the state. The population experiences bombings, massacres, extra-judicial killings, and disappearances, yet voices of the government, the censored newspapers, and media communicate a dissonant narrative.

The U.S. Army School of the Americas trained thousands of military personnel, including the man implicated in Romero’s assassination, Major Roberto D’Aubuisson. The School of the Americas incorporated in its curriculum manuals that outlined torture and interrogation techniques (Nelson-Pallmeyer). Training manuals put together by the Central Intelligence Agency were used to instruct military officers on the alienation technique associated with torture. One of the first manuals assembled by the CIA in 1963 presents the following methodological summary of torture:

The circumstances of detention are arranged to enhance within the subject his feelings of being cut off from the known and the reassuring, and being plunged into the strange [...] Control of the source’s environment permits the interrogator to determine his diet, sleep pattern and other fundamentals. Manipulating these into irregularities, so that the subject

becomes disorientated, is very likely to create feelings of fear and helplessness.

(KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation “The Coercive Counterintelligence Interrogation of Resistance Sources” qtd. in Danner 170).

In essence, the military regime operated in the same manner as the interrogator, and the social milieu was a reflection of the torture room. The military forces controlled the social environment, cutting the populace “from the known” and plunging them into a constant state of uncertainty with dead bodies and limbs appearing on roadsides, staged macabre scenes of unimaginable torture, cars appearing in the middle of the night dragging victims from their houses. Thousands of narratives of disappearance emerge at this time, such as this one:

Pues con esa esperanza yo vivía, porque nunca, nunca supimos de que mi papá estaba muerto. Simplemente se desapareció y muchos, muchos hablaban de que ellos se fueron para México. Ellos se fueron a refugiar allá que van a regresar decían y yo siempre vivía con esa esperanza de algún día van a regresar. Siempre me hacía esa ilusión pues de tarde o temprano tenía que llegar a sacarme del orfanatorio. Como yo sabía pues de que él tenía carro a veces yo escuchaba llegaba a parar un carro allí en frente del hogar, decía, ah puede ser mi papá decía yo. Con esa esperanza pues, y pasó el tiempo y pasó el tiempo y nunca más volví a ver a mi papá.

(“I lived with this hope, because we never found out if my father was dead. He had simply disappeared and many talked about how people had gone to Mexico. That they had sought refuge there and they are going to return. I always lived with this hope that one day they would return. I always had this illusion that sooner or later he would come and get me out of the orphanage. Since I knew that he had a car, whenever I heard a car pull up in front of the orphanage, I would think to myself that’s my father, he has come

for me. I always had this hope, but time passed and time passed, and I never saw my father again.” [Anon. 2 Personal Interview Summer 2010])

The victim’s son’s narrative demonstrates the intense psychological suffering and alienating confusion that emerges from the military technique of selected disappearances. As a child, this survivor witnessed the kidnapping of his father and two brothers when the Guatemalan military occupied his Kaqchikel village and subsequently burned most of the male villagers alive. A priest and a social worker rescued the surviving children and brought them to an orphanage. The car, which was so rare at this time in this isolated Kaqchikel community, became a metonymic association that haunted his psyche. Disappearances traumatize the psyche and are perhaps the most effective psychological tool for alienating the population. Members of populist organizations, activists, or target family members are kidnapped and pulled into vehicles, never to be seen again. The body does not appear; the victim cannot be buried and returned to the earth.

As in this case, where there is no physical body, there is no evidence of a crime, yet bodies litter the garbage dumps, the roadsides, and the *barrancos*. The profound psychological impact of these disappearances recreated the anguished reality of a torture room, but across the whole countryside. In this way the military exerted its power through symbolic violence, simultaneously declaring the spectacle of horror to be a figment of the popular imagination.

### **The Utopian Moment: *Sierra de las Minas***

How does one combat the *torture room* when a whole country becomes a site of torture? How does one affirm life when death occupies every horizon? The brutalized and defiled body is the spectacle and the specter that haunts every sector of daily existence. The unburied dead line the streets and penetrate the psyche. Screams are heard and muffled, people are disappeared but not dead. Only through a communal compact can a society affirm life amidst the death of the

*torture room*. The military intends, through the symbolic exertion of violence displayed in the spectacle of torture, to induce fear and alienation in the populace. However, the populace overcomes the symbolic violence when the communal ethos converts the spectacle of torture into a narrative of martyrdom, sacrifice, resurrection, and an affirmation of life—just as the manner of Christ’s crucifixion spread through the gospels and by the apostles converted the spectacle of torture and execution under the Roman Empire into a narrative of life and resurrection.

Robert Hertz writes in *Death and the Right Hand* that death in the collective consciousness is a “temporary exclusion of the individual from human society. This exclusion effects the individual’s passage from the visible society of the living into the invisible society of the dead” (86). Mourning, then, is a process that allows the living to reintegrate the dead into the social fabric and “death as a social phenomenon consists in a dual and painful process of mental disintegration and synthesis. It is only when this process is complete that society, its peace recovered, can triumph over death” (86). It is this process of mourning that allows the society to reincorporate and reintegrate the dead into the world of the living. “The imaginary trials encountered” by the individual as he faces death “constitute a true sacrament” that allows the deceased to regenerate (73). Through the mourning process—disintegration and synthesis—the individual “will not simply return to the life he has left; the separation has been too serious to be abolished so soon. He is reunited with those who, like himself and those before him, have left this world and gone to the ancestors. He enters this mythical society of souls which each society constructs in its own image” (79).

This “mythical society of souls” in Central America included the martyred priests who offered their physical bodies for the liberation of their people. This became the ethos of the religious workers of this period, where fear and cowardice, the initial denial of Apostle Peter, is

replaced with brave and outspoken priests who refused to bow down to the military regime. The result is a bloody scene of torture and death; murdered priests then become the martyrs of the period and a model to follow. The collective consciousness of the populace does not imagine the priests as dead, but rather transfigured in the struggle for liberation and justice—*¡presente!* in the continual struggle for love over brutality, peace over violence, and life over death. As Hertz writes, “[t]he last word must remain with life: the deceased will rise from the grip of death and will return, in one form or another, to the peace of human association. This release and this reintegration constitute, as we have seen, one of the most solemn actions of collective life” (78). Death in this narrative becomes a means of salvation, and the spectacle of violence imposed by the military transforms, becoming part of the *Acta Martyrum* rather than the site of annihilation.

The martyred poets of the *Generación Comprometida*, like the priests, are regenerated and integrated into this “mythical society of souls,” which is articulated in the utopian vision of the triumphant revolution. The ephemeral nature of physical and corporeal existence under the military dictatorship is replaced by the surviving hagiographies. The spectacle of torture transforms into the spectacle of martyrdom sanctified in the collective consciousness and the popular narrative. The torture that eviscerates and the fire that consumes a generation of poets are incorporated into the martyr narrative. In this manner, life triumphs over death, love over violence, and the poets over their executioners.

Even prior to the “moment of death,” the hagiographic nature of the poetry of the revolutionary period serves as a counter-narrative, and a testament to the brutality of the military regimes. The text is the stage of the martyr act, recording and celebrating the poets in their path towards revolutionary sacrifice. Poets write about their experiences, about the poor, about injustice, and their death and the death of their fellow poets memorializing the revolutionary

struggle and the fallen in order to bear witness to the historical moment. The pain and suffering is celebrated as a process of sacrifice, transfiguration, and rebirth through poetic verse.

Salvadoran poet Jaime Suárez Quemain in “Y nacerá un huracán de abajoarriba,” writes: “Pero el dolor, paradójicamente,/ tiene algo positivo:/ engendra un amor especial, solidario,/ que va creando una atmósfera genuinamente libertaria/ y se pega la piel,/ a las paredes de las fábricas,/ a los instrumentos de trabajo,/ a las rejas de las cárceles,/ a las covachas de los desposeídos:/ a todos los lugares/ donde la libertad es de luto” (“But pain, paradoxically,/ is positive:/ it gives birth to a special solidary love,/ creating an atmosphere of real freedom/ it sticks to the skin, / to the factory walls,/ to the humming implements,/ to the prison bars,/ to hovels of the dispossessed:/ to all the places/ where liberty is in mourning”). Suárez Quemain elevates the pain and suffering of the communal experience that creates an atmosphere of solidarity and *compañerismo*. A poet, who worked for the literary publication *La Cebolla Púrpura* and as editor for the newspaper *La Crónica del Pueblo*, an open critic of the military *junta*, Suárez Quemain was repeatedly warned that if he continued to write about the *junta*, he would be targeted. Aware of the death that awaited him if he continued speak out, he refused to modify his publication or flee in exile. And in 1980, Suárez Quemain was kidnapped, hacked to death with machetes and abandoned in a garbage dump in Antigua Cuscatlán (“Algo Personal” Galeas).

Otto René Castillo, like Suárez Quemain, announces his own death in his poems, the poetic voice representing the poet himself, in this case the martyred *guerrillero*, the “Viudo de mundo.” He writes of his commitment and dedication to the revolutionary cause, “Compañeros míos/ yo cumplo mi papel/ luchando/ con lo mejor que tengo” (“My comrades/ I fulfill my role/ fighting/ with all my power”; *Para que no cayera la esperanza* 103). And he mourns not the loss

of his life, but that he could not participate in the struggle longer, “Qué lástima que tuviera/ vida tan pequeña / para tragedia tan grande/ y para tanto trabajo” (“What sadness that I had/ such a short life/ for such a great tragedy/ and for so much work”; 103). But he accepts his imminent death peacefully, knowing that his hope for an alternative order will live in the people who continue the struggle: “No me apena dejaros/ Con vosotros queda mi esperanza/ Sabéis,/ me hubiera gustado/ llegar hasta el final/ de todos estos ajetreos/ con vosotros/ en medio de júbilo/ tan alto. Lo imagino/ y no quisiera marcharme./ Pero lo sé, oscuramente/ me lo dice la sangre/ con su tímida voz,/ que muy pronto/ quedaré viudo de mundo” (“It does not pain me to leave you/ My hope remains in your hands/ You know,/ I would have liked/ to be here/ with you/ at the end/ of this struggle/ amid the jubilation. I imagine it/ and I don’t want to leave./ But I know, hinted by the blood/ with its quiet voice,/ that soon/ I will be widowed of this world”; 103-104).

In 1967, Otto René Castillo was “herido en combate fue capturado por las fuerzas antiguerrilleras del gobierno. Junto con la compañera Nora Paiz fue conducido a la base militar de Zacapa y después de haber sido terriblemente torturado y mutilado, fue quemado vivo. Sus propios verdugos han testimoniado su entereza y su coraje ante el enemigo, el tormento y la muerte” (“wounded in combat, captured by government counterrevolutionary forces; together with his *compañera* Nora Paiz, he was driven to the military base in Zacapa and after having been terribly tortured and mutilated, he was burned alive. Even his executioners have testified to his strength and courage in the face of his enemies, the torment and death”; (“Otto René Castillo” Dalton 13). The moment of Castillo’s execution has arrived. We already knew this story and that it could have no other ending. It followed the pattern of a martyrology hitherto recorded, rewritten and rearticulated within Marxist revolution. We have been waiting for Castillo’s death as the final act of the poetic lyric played out in the revolutionary theater.



However, to imagine the death as only tragic is to negate the vision that Castillo pursued for a more just and egalitarian society. By recounting his trials through a process of synthesis and reintegration, we return him to the world of the living in a transfigured and transcendent state. In this manner, his death ceases to be tragic. The spectacle of his annihilation, rather than a tragic tale of vanquished hope, becomes the glorious moment of rebirth. His suffering is recorded in the *Acta Martyrum*. Through the narration of his death, his torture turns into sacrifice, and death into resurrection, *¡presente!* and eternal in the continued struggle.

Castillo's *compañero* and fellow poet Marco Antonio Flores, appropriating the language of the passion of Christ narrative, writes of his death: "Quedó crucificada tu palabra/ y resucitará/ de los que como tú/ echan su vida al fuego de la patria" ("Your word was crucified/ and it will resurrect/ in those like you/ that throw their life into the flames of our country"; "Otto René El Poeta" 33). For Flores, Castillo's poetry, the *logos*, testifies to his dedication and will live in others who follow his path. And the profound impact of his commitment will not be forgotten as it left a model for others: "Y no se olvidarán las calles/ de tus pasos/ tu andar era profundo/ Se quedará tu voz vibrando/ en la canción de nuestro pueblo/ en el rancho/ en el monte" ("And upon these streets / your footprints will not be forgotten/ your path furrowed/ Your voice will echo/ in the song of our people/ in the countryside/ and in the mountains"; 33). For Flores, Castillo will not die, but his image will reverberate through the country as others partake in his vision and follow the revolutionary path as a catechism that he set forth; "El eco de tu voz comprometida/ se hará el catecismo de los míos/ y de todos los hijos de tu pueblo" ("The echo of your committed voice/ will serve as catechism of my children/ and of all the children of your people"; 33).

According to the official documentation published in 1999, and three years after signing the peace accords, after wounding Castillo, the military forces brought him with Paiz to the military base in Los Achiotes, Zacapa and tortured the two (raping Paiz) for five days (CEH: *Memory of Silence* 4117). The version of Castillo's death as narrated by his sister Zoila Quiñones Castillo (Castillo Cabrera 7-8) and the dominant narrative that circulated in texts for the thirty years after was that he was captured, tortured, and burned alive. We still do not have official documentation of the full circumstances of his death. But in his last hours, according to the narrative reported by Castillo's sister Zoila (based on undisclosed sources), he was tortured at the army base (Castillo Cabrera 7-8). The unnamed captain of the Army took pleasure in the torture. The captured poet, as Castillo's sister relates, was tied by the hands and the feet, and the captain then tied a razor to a bamboo stick, and with each verse from Castillo's poem "Vamos Patria a Caminar," he cut his eyes, his mouth, his cheeks, his arms, his neck, ridiculing him:

Con que vos sos el poeta que decís que los coroneles orinan en los muros de la patria [...] con que vos sos él que se quedará ciego para que la patria vea.... Así que vos te quedarás sin voz para que Guatemala cante.... Pues se te hizo cabrón, porque todo eso es lo que realmente te va a pasar a vos y no en versitos sino en la pura realidad.

("So you're the poet that says the colonels piss on the walls of the country...so you're the one that will accept blindness so others can see...So you're the one that will give up your voice so that Guatemala can sing...Well you're fucked, because this is what's gonna happen to you, but not in your little verses but right here and right now." [qtd. in Castillo Cabrera 7])

Then the thirteen unnamed *campesinos*, who formed part of the guerrilla forces, were shot in front of him. These thirteen, who had been captured along with Castillo and Paiz, and were

unable to stand for their execution, due to their broken bones and weakened states, they were dispatched sitting down. Castillo and Paiz were then burned alive (Castillo Cabrera 7-8).

In the *Acta Martyrum*, the trials of the martyr are as relevant to the narrative as the moment of death itself because trial displays the brutality and the futility of violence in the face of courage and self-sacrifice. For this reason, almost every narrative of martyrdom includes the martyr's acts, his trial, and his death. The brutality of the death contrasts with the glorious narrative that emerges replete with symbolic imagery that deepens and strengthens the story that will be written down and retold. Death by fire is an ancient method of transfiguration, and Castillo's death by fire has been incorporated into the *Acta Martyrum* as his final trial. Through the narration of these trials, the martyr is included in the "mythical society of souls" that resides in our collective consciousness, reintegrated into the world of the living. The poet-martyr survives in a transcendent state.

### Chapter III

#### A Death Foretold:

#### Roque Dalton & His Hagiographies

*No me siento solo en la noche,  
en la oscuridad de la tierra.  
Soy pueblo, pueblo innumerable.  
Tengo en mi voz la fuerza pura  
para atravesar en el silencio  
y germinar en las tinieblas.  
Muerte, martirio, sombra, hielo,  
cubren de pronto la semilla.  
Y parece enterrada el pueblo.  
Pero el maíz vuelve a la tierra.  
Atravesaron el silencio  
Sus implacables manos rojas.  
Desde la muerte renacemos.*  
—Pablo Neruda

*La gloria no es la que enseñan en los textos de historia:  
es una zopilotería en un campo y un gran hedor.*  
—Ernesto Cardenal

Otto René Castillo's fellow poet and member of the *Círculo Literario*, Roque Dalton, followed Castillo's path as the emblematic *poeta guerrillero*. Unlike Castillo, however, Dalton died at the hands of his comrades as opposed to the glorious self-sacrifice envisioned by the political activists of his generation. He wasn't captured or murdered by state actors, nor did he fall in battle. The reality of his death tragically contradicted the narratives he carefully constructed in his literary works. He possessed a near obsession with the *Acta Martyrum*, and his literary works reflect his desire to *rescatar*, to rescue, history from the victors and reassert the fallen heroes of Salvadoran resistance into the national discourse. The trials of the martyr take central stage in his writing as the narrative of death or near death are repeated themes in his

testimonial narratives and fictionalized historical reconstructions, and the revolutionary martyr emerges as a central figure of a rearticulated national identity. This identity, Luis Melgar Brizuela asserts in his copiously researched analysis of Dalton's work, *Las brújulas de Dalton*, that the author is guided by the cultural markers of the Salvadoran landscape: Quetzalcoatl, Christ, and Marx creating a  *fusión ideológica*  (45). In his poetry and testimonial work, Dalton fuses Christian martyrology with Marxist ideologies, bringing the *Acta Martyrum* into the contemporary era, on the written page, with revolutionary heroes reimagined as secular saints. Through the secular *Acta Martyrum*, Dalton weds Catholic soteriology to Marxist theory to produce an anti-capitalist and anti-colonial narrative. This narrative has a dual function in that it uses historical resources, oral traditions, and expressions to present a counterhegemonic narrative that seeks to educate and engage the popular classes.

This chapter will examine how Dalton, through creative linguistics, historical research, and complex theoretical approaches, forges an innovative and dialectical art form. Divided into five sections, this chapter first examines Dalton's use of historical figures to construct secular hagiographies in "Cantos a Anastasio Aquino" and in his posthumous collection *Poemas clandestinos*. In the second section, we will demonstrate how, through the use of humor, he de-sanctifies and deconstructs colonial and contemporary structures of power. In the third section, we will specifically examine *Las historias prohibidas del Pulgarcito*, in which he combines both of the above techniques to forge a modern genre of epic poetry. Finally, we will examine his use of the testimonial narrative in *Miguel Mármol* as an experimental genre that both challenges and engages with Marxist theories. Tragically, this literary and theoretical experimentation interplays with the concrete realities of the Salvadoran civil war. And Dalton's demise is intricately linked

to the inherent conflict of Marxist teleology with the complex social fabric and cultural practices of contemporary El Salvador.

### **Mythical Society of Souls**

Melgar Brizuela's theory of a *fusión ideológica* manifests in Dalton's martyr narratives. Christian imagery intersects with an Indigenous past as he resurrects forebearers of the socialist revolution introducing Salvadoran historical figures into a "mythical society of souls" (Hertz 79). Through archival work and literary invention, Dalton methodically restructures a Salvadoran "mythical society." While the majority of the rescued figures had been systematically censored, erased, and removed from the historical archive through the successive dictatorships, historical figures are reintroduced through poetic inscription, and in this manner, Dalton "subvierte la historia oficial" ("subverts the official story"; Hernández 44). He reanimates the Salvadoran collective consciousness by reintegrating historical figures into the world of the living, illuminating martyrdom as a transcendent state that is embodied in the past, the revolutionary present, and an imagined utopia.

Dalton's work, "Dos puños por la tierra," published with Otto René Castillo represents an early example of this effort. Awarded the Certamen Centroamericano de Poesía in 1955 (Melgar Brizuela 192), Dalton integrates his section of the collection in his first formerly published work, *La ventana en el rostro* (Melgar Brizuela 34). The poems, "Cantos a Anastasio Aquino" cast the leader of the 1832 Nonualco rebellion as the forefather of the Marxist revolution, a representative of an impoverished and dispossessed proletariat: "Tu pie descalzo ante la dura tierra: barro en el barro./ Tu rostro unánime ante el pueblo: sangre en la sangre./ Tu voz viril de campo enardecido: grito en el grito./ Tu cuerpo, catedral de músculo rebelde: hombre en el hombre" ("Your bare foot on the hard earth; clay upon clay./ Your unanimous face before the

people; blood in blood./ Your potent voice from a countryside in flames: a cry upon cry./ Your body, a cathedral of rebellious muscle: man in man”; *Poesía completa*, 315). In contrast to earlier representations of Indigenous figures in Salvadoran literature, Dalton presents Aquino as an active agent in the formation of the Salvadoran nation. Unlike Alfredo Espino’s “indio indómito” as discussed in Chapter I or the fetishized *indio* of the Atlacatl Battalion also discussed in Chapter I, Dalton characterizes Aquino as a fallen martyr but reincarnated in the revolutionary struggle: “Tu corazón de pétalos morenos, sin espinas: rosa en la rosa./ Tu paso hacia adelante presuroso: ruta en la ruta./ Tu puño vengador, alzado siempre: piedra en la piedra./ Tu muerte, tu regreso hacia la tierra: lucha en la lucha” (“Your heart of brown petals, without thorns: rose upon rose./ Your determined step forward: path upon path./ Your avenging fist, raised high: stone upon stone./ Your death, your return to earth: resistance within the resistance ”; *Poesía completa*, 315). Aquino is represented by this *puño vengador* as an active historical agent returning to earth incarnate in the contemporary *lucha armada*.

As Melgar Brizuela affirms, “[l]a visión que encontramos en los *Cantos de Anastasio Aquino* es una utopía socialista inspirada en la rebelión de los nonualcos...[de] recuperar la tierra y los medios de producción para los campesinos” (“[t]he vision that we find in the *Cantos de Anastasio Aquino* is of a socialist utopia inspired by the Nonualco rebellion to recuperate land and the means of production for the peasants”; 218). While his vision creates a more complex and layered understanding of the Indigenous place in Central America history, Dalton, nonetheless, imposes positivist paradigms upon Indigenous ontologies. Because Indigenous voices are absent in the historical archive, the Nonualco rebellion is articulated through a mestizo and national (although nonhegemonic) narrative. Dalton attempts to frame Anastasio Aquino’s rebellion within a Marxist teleology. The imposition of such teleology in the Salvadoran context

creates continual digressions within his poetry and prose. The digressions form “a zone of contact” between the Indigenous cosmovision and the standard and formal literary and political training of Dalton. As Dalton develops as a writer, we begin to see this digression consistently intervening in his narratives, particularly in *Miguel Mármol*, discussed later in this chapter.

“Cantos de Anastasio Aquino” begins with a dedication to Salvadoran historian Jorge Arias Gómez, who had published an investigation on Aquino’s armed insurrection during the same period (Melgar Brizuela 215). The dedication moors the poetic space to real historic events while also classifying these events as part of an imagined utopia that extends from the ancient past to a definitive future embodied in the socialist state: “Anastasio Aquino fue la encarnación del más antiguo ideal del hombre/ americano: el ideal de convivir pacíficamente con la tierra” (“Anastasio Aquino was the incarnation of the ideal ancient/ American: the ideal to coexist peacefully with the earth”; *Poesía completa*, 313). Dalton effectively connects Aquino’s rebellion to the subsequent insurrection in 1932 and the future revolution: “En el año 1832, exactamente un siglo antes de la dolorosa epopeya de/ Feliciano Ama y Farabundo Martí, padres de la patria futura, Anastasio/ Aquino se reveló [sic] al frente de la comunidad indígena de San Pedro/ Nonualco, contra el sistema opresor de los blancos y ladinos ricos que comer-/ ciaban, como ahora comercian, con el hambre y el dolor del indio” (“In the year 1832, exactly one century before the painful epic story/ of Feliciano Ama and Farabundo Martí, fathers of the future homeland, Anastasio/ Aquino led the resistance of the Nonualco community of San Pedro, Nonualco, against the oppressive system of whites and wealthy ladinos that profited,/ as they now profit, from the hunger and pain of the Indian”; *Poesía completa*, 313). In this dedication he casts Aquino’s struggle as part of the historic process for sovereignty. Even in these early poems,



we see the departure from Marxist doctrine in that he categorizes proletarian struggle as part of the Indigenous struggle against the colonial structures of race.

But Dalton also introduces references to the central Christian narrative that complicate his Marxist teleology. The second section of the canto “Orígenes” echoes sections of the Nicene Creed: “Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato, passus et sepultus est, et resurrexit tertia die, secundum Scripturas, et ascendit in caelum, sedet ad dexteram Patris. Et iterum venturus est cum gloria, iudicare vivos et mortuos” (“[He] was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried; and the third day rose again according to the Scriptures. And ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, and shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead” [The Nicene Creed]). The purpose and path of Christ’s trajectory presented in the Nicene Creed is reflected in Aquino’s death, conviction, and resurrection in this canto. The verbal structures within this and the other cantos mirror the Creed as Dalton employs both the past verb forms and future forms (Melgar Brizuela 218) to aggregate the past and incorporate it in the present and future socialist utopia. However, rather than the complete past, Dalton employs *pretérito perfecto*, which grammatically transfers the focus from the past to the relationship of the past with the present. He also shifts from the third person, addressing Anastasio Aquino in the familiar *tú*: “Has nacido/ para desentrañar la solución del odio,/ para ascender, llevando al pueblo de la mano,/ a la altura del trueno;/ para romperle el alma al hambre” (“You were born/ to resolve hate,/ to ascend, taking the people by the hand,/ to heights of thunder;/ to smash the soul of hunger”; *Poesía completa*, 315). Aquino becomes the father and the son that has ascended not into the heavens, but into the present social compact, so as to bring forth a proletarian revolution: “para decirle al soldado, al cura,/ al poeta repleto de soledades sórdidas, a todo aquel que se quedó en la noche,/ que aún contamos con él para construir el

mundo proletario/ que nos dará la dicha así,/ sencillamente,/ como se da la mano,/ la tierra,/ la esperanza...” (“to tell the soldier, the priest,/ the poet full of sordid loneliness, to anyone that remains in darkness,/ that he is with us as we construct a proletariat world/ that will give us fortune,/ simply,/ just like hope,/ lends earth a hand”; *Poesía completa*, 316).

Aquino embodies *la esperanza* as the first sacrifice of the socialist revolution presented in the canto, “Anastasio Aquino, tu vida,” his death marking the first in a series of apostolic sacrifices. In this canto, the uprising of 1932 becomes the second of this series of sacrifices that paves the way for the activists of Dalton’s generation:

Después del gran martirio, de la muerte escarlata,  
tus rosas renacieron en treinta mil pechos agrarios  
el antiguo mandato. Besó desde tu sombra los amplios mares de su sangre  
Tu muerte ha sido vida de las muertes  
vivas de estos ángeles bravos  
Tayte Feliciano Ama  
Farabundo Martí  
Luna y Zapata.

(“After the great martyrdom, from the scarlet death,  
from an ancient command, your roses reborn  
in 30,000 agrarian hearts. Your shadow kissed the wide seas of your blood  
Your death has been the life of the dead  
living in the valiant angels  
Tayte Feliciano Ama  
Farabundo Martí

Luna y Zapata.” [*Poesía completa* 320])

In these lines, Dalton signals that the hope Aquino brought forth is reborn in the rebellion cycle led later by 1932 insurrectionists Farabundo Martí and Feliciano Ama.

“Cantos de Anastasio Aquino,” both in the structure and content, reflect the clear influence of Pablo Neruda’s “Alturas de Macchu Picchu.” “Alturas” shares two central characteristics with Dalton’s “Cantos”: the evocation of Christ’s Passion and a mystical Indigenous past. In the canto “Pausa para el Machete,” Dalton begins with a citation from Section IX of “Alturas de Macchu Picchu:” “*Bastión perdido, cimitarra ciega*” (“Lost bastion, blind scimitar”; trans. Schmitt 37). He defines Anastasio Aquino in this canto as an eternal and enduring subject, “Cuerpo inmortal de rayo descendido” (“Immortal body of descending light”; *Poesía completa*, 317). In Dalton’s “Cantos,” Aquino represents both an embodied and resurrected Indigenous subject similar to the ascending Indigenous figures in Neruda’s “Alturas,” that the *yo poético* urges to “Sube a nacer conmigo, hermano” (“Rise up to be born with me, my brother”; 152; trans. Schmitt 41).

In “Alturas,” the poet, “transfigurado en la imagen de una Pasión y Resurrección, convoca con voz cósmica a las sombras de los esclavos y proletarios del imperio a encarnarse en la unidad de la sangre, la voz y la acción: ‘Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta’” (“transfigured in the image of Passion and Resurrection evokes with a cosmic voice the shadows of the empire’s slaves and the proletariat to be embodied in the union of blood, voice, and action: I come to speak for your dead mouth”; Alegría 83). “Alturas” concludes with the *yo poético* subsuming the ancient Indigenous past, becoming incarnate in the words of the poet: “Dadme el silencio, el agua, la esperanza./ Dadme la lucha, el hierro, los volcanes./ Apegadme los cuerpos como imanes./ Acudid a mis venas y a mi boca./ Hablad por mis palabras y mi sangre” (“Give

me silence, water, hope./ Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes./ Cling to my body like magnets./ Hasten to my veins and to my mouth./ Speak through my words and my blood”; 153; trans. Schmitt 42). Neruda reconstructs the mythical imagination from a remote past that is articulated through the poet (Alegría 79).

This is where Dalton departs from Neruda. Dalton’s mythos is embodied in the revolutionary struggle. The Indigenous past is not remote, but recent, and the poem is centered in this history, in the incarnation of the revolutionary struggle in Anastasio Aquino rather than in the poet. The *yo poético* disappears and Aquino, the central historical figure, drives the narrative. Whereas Neruda’s Indigenous figures are represented as anonymous “Juan Cortapiedras,” “Juan Comefrío,” and “Juan Piesdescalzos,” Dalton anchors the poem in the historical agency of “padre Anastasio Vida,/ padre Anastasio Pueblo, violador de la noche: llegaste desde el centro de la Historia,/ desde el origen de las Historia,/ desde las proyecciones de la Historia” (“Father Anastasio Life,/ Father Anastasio People, violator of the night: you arrived from the center of History,/ from the origin of History,/ from the projections of History”; *Poesía completa* 321). While Neruda elevates the poetic voice as a vehicle through which the mythical is articulated, Dalton presents the poet as secondary to the socialist utopia—a utopia moored in history that advances forward through a cause for which Aquino gave his life and is resurrected in future struggles: “que se encarna en nosotros tu figura antigua;/ que aparezca de nuevo tu manera silvestre/ de reclamar de dicha;/ que en cada pan hay un recuerdo de tu ausencia” (“your ancient figure is incarnate in us;/ may your native ways reappear/ reclaiming fortune;/ in each bread there is a memory of your absence”; *Poesía completa* 322).

The first person is all but erased in Dalton’s canto. Although, the last line of the cantos read, “Anastasio Aquino, / camino” (*Poesía completa* 322). We might interpret this as the *yo*

*poético* inserting the self in the narrative, but until this point, the poet is all but silenced, appearing as the “poeta repleto de soledades sórdidas” (“the poet full of sordid loneliness”; *Poesía completa* 315) or the intellectual as “los que estudiamos para el pueblo” (“we, who study for the people”; *Poesía completa* 322). The first person, the *yo*, is embodied in not only the resurrected Anastasio Aquino, but in “los campesinos sólidos, los obreros en pie” (“the solid peasants, the organized workers”; *Poesía completa* 322) and all the sectors of society that Dalton envisions constructing la “gran mañana,” “el camino,” or the future and imagined utopian socialist society (*Poesía completa* 322).

The resurrected Aquino that emerges in Dalton’s early poems mirrors the ascendant motif in his later works which articulate his utopian vision through secular sainthood. In his collection, *Poemas clandestinos*, we see an intentional union of Catholic traditions and revolutionary ideologies. Written during his clandestine period in El Salvador, the collection was published posthumously (mimeographed) by the Resistencia Nacional (RN) (Melgar Brizuela 476), which formed after breaking from the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), the organization responsible for Dalton’s assassination. While Melgar Brizuela argues that the collection “se cae en un ideologismo a causa del cual la estructura formal se simplifica [...] perdiendo originalidad” (“gives into ideology so as the formal structure is simplified [...] losing originality”; Melgar Brizuela 480), Carlos Paz Manzano asserts that the collection is a solid manifestation of Dalton’s literary style (109), citing Manlio Argueta’s summary of *Poemas clandestinos*:

El poema surge de los rincones más inesperados, allí donde otros no ven; precisamente unos de los valores en el quehacer poético: decir cosas que de otra manera no podrían

expresarse. Tal lenguaje poético y de trasfondo liberador solo podría surgir de una difícil, limpia y honesta práctica vital. Poesía popular. O sea, poesía para todos y de todos.

(“The poem emerges from the most unexpected corners, where others don’t see; one of the precise values of the poetic task; to say things that cannot be expressed in another manner. Such poetic language and from a liberating backdrop could only emerge from a difficult, clear, honest, and vital practice. Popular poetry. That is poetry from everywhere and for everyone.” [109])

The intentionality of the structure in *Poemas Clandestinos*, that Argueta emphasizes, expresses Dalton’s deep interest in history and anthropology, fields that directly informed his work. We can see the collection as calculatedly political but also profoundly aware of the social environment in which he was engaged.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the emergence of *comunidades de base* in the 1970s throughout El Salvador began to shape the popular imagination, intersecting and influencing the direction of the revolutionary movement. Dalton, an astute observer of social movements, dialogues with these communities and with the emerging theologies related to radical Catholicism. The section of the collection published under the pseudonym Jorge Cruz,<sup>1</sup> with the title “Poemas para salvar a Cristo,” is in essence a *mimeographed book of hours* that pays tribute to two influential Latin American Catholic thinkers engaged in political work in the post-Vatican II period: Paulo Freire and Camilo Torres (see Chapter 2). The author, Jorge Cruz, is described as a:

dirigente católico universitario y posteriormente asesor jurídico voluntario del movimiento obrero católico. Habiendo renunciado a su carrera universitaria dedica por

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the organization of this collection was not structured by Dalton himself, but by the RN and other intervening editors thereafter.

completo su tiempo en la actualidad a la labor de concientización cristiana-revolucionaria entre los trabajadores rurales. Ha escrito un extenso análisis de la obra de Paulo Freire y ha publicado en edición clandestina “Oda Solidaria a Camilo Torres” (1972).

(“a Catholic University student leader and later a volunteer legal advisor to the Catholic Worker movement. Having renounced his university career, he dedicates all of his time to developing Christian-revolutionary consciousness among rural workers. He has written an extensive analysis of the work of Paulo Freire and published an underground edition of “Solidarity Ode to Camilo Torres” (1972).” [*Poemas Clandestinos* 42; trans. Hirschman 43])

Paulo Freire’s dialogical method is the central organizing principle of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and in many ways key to the conversational poetic style that Dalton develops in *Poemas clandestinos*. He seeks a style that both speaks to and dialogues with the *masas populares*. This contrasts with the didactic nature of “Cantos a Anastasio Aquino.” However, he continues to develop this “mythical society of souls,” cultivating secular saints as models that simultaneously reflect and instruct popular action. In this manner, he accesses the religious practices of the populace, thereby engaging this audience to consider and think about how these practices lend themselves to popular action. In this way, “Poemas para salvar a Cristo” serves both as a tool to reach and recruit the masses, but also engage with the populace about their relationship to Catholicism as an institution and in practice. In “Dos Religiones,” calling on the spirit of *guerrillero*-priest Torres, Dalton subsumes radical Catholic action into the popular movement:

Pero Camilo Torres, entre otros,  
nos dejó dicho que también hay una religión positiva

que surge del alma de la revolución  
a la manera de los poemas y los cánticos,  
y que se juega la vida en este mundo  
y no hasta después de la muerte.

En esta religión militan hombres que son  
(como los verdaderos comunistas)  
la sal de la tierra.

(“But Camilo Torres, among others,  
has told us there is a positive religion too  
that surges from the soul of revolution  
by way of poems and songs,  
and that one risks one’s life in this world  
and not after death.

In this religion, men who serve are  
[like true communists]

the salt of the earth.” [*Poemas clandestinos* 56; trans. Hirschman 57])

Dalton calls on religious activists to understand their organizing as a form of militancy. Equating the willing sacrifice of the priest to that of the *guerrillero*, he syncretizes Catholic soteriology with revolutionary sacrifice, manifesting the teachings of the dead in poetry for the living.

Drawing on Christian imagery and fusing it with revolutionary and anti-imperialist ideology, Dalton also constructs in “Poemas para salvar a Cristo” a secularized *Golden Legend* populated with fallen rebel leaders like Camilo Torres and Che Guevara: “El Ché Jesucristo/ fue hecho prisionero/ después de concluir su sermón en la montaña/ (con fondo de tableteo de



ametralladoras)/ por rangers bolivianos y judíos/ comandados por jefes yankees-romanos” (“Ché Jesus Christ/ was taken prisoner/ after finishing his sermon on the mountain/ [to a background of rattling machine guns]/ by Bolivian and Jewish rangers/ commanded by Yankee-Roman chiefs; “Credo de Ché” in *Poemas clandestinos*, 48; trans. Hirschman 49). In “Credo de Ché,” the image of the fallen rebel evokes an anti-imperialist Christ: “Después le colocaron a Cristo Guevara/ una corona de espinas y una túnica de loco/ y le colgaron un rótulo el pescuezo en son de burla/ INRI: Instigador Natural en la Rebelión de los Infelices” (“Then they put a crown of thorns/ and a madman’s smock on Christ Guevara/ and amid jeers, hung a sign of mockery from his neck—/ INRI: Instigator of Natural Rebellion of the Impoverished”; *Poemas clandestinos*, 48; trans. Hirschman 49). Che represents the sacrificed body of the rebel leader, be it a Salvadoran *guerrillero*, Christ, or Aquino, whose decapitated head was also displayed under a sign.

Analyzing Dalton’s work from a strictly formalist approach removes the literary product from the social environment and historical context in which it was shaped. We might consider how Dalton imagined his poems read or perhaps how they were received in the streets of El Salvador. Residents from the heavily militarized sectors of San Salvador often gathered on the streets to listen to readings of Dalton’s poetry. The reader would pull a paper from his pocket, while others kept their eyes out for the military patrols. While these are personal anecdotes narrated by refugees and witnesses, these scenarios, nonetheless, reflect the vision expressed in Dalton’s verses. These verses had a concrete purpose in the social movement with which he was actively engaged. The accessible style of the poetry reached the young crowd, who saw themselves transfigured in the verses as ascending saints. *Poemas clandestinos* functions like *Miguel Mármol*, as a recruitment tool, but not in the sense of propaganda or *panfletismo*. *Poemas clandestinos* functions in the dialogical method of Freire, drawing on the experiences of the

*masas populares*, conversing with symbols and images that populated the collective consciousness at the time.

Dalton's experience not only as a poet, but as an intellectual, critical theorist, and organizer meant that he was deeply attuned to how his poetry represented and was received by his intended audience. As Dalton's biographer, Luis Alvarenga writes, he drew on interdisciplinarity in his texts:

Emprender una labor de crítica cultural marxista implicó para este autor nutrirse de las perspectivas que abren disciplinas como la antropología, la teología, el psicoanálisis, la historia, entre otras. La riqueza de referencias históricas, artísticas, filosóficas o teológicas que están en su obra—y que aparecen, a veces, citadas directamente, pero también aludidas de forma implícita—dota la poesía daltoniana de una riqueza de matices.

(“Undertaking a Marxist cultural critique involved drawing on disciplines like anthropology, theology, psychoanalysis, among others. The rich historical, artistic, philosophical or theological references that are in his work—and that appear, sometimes, directly cited, but also alluded to in an implicit form—afford Daltonian poetry deep nuances.” [*La radicalización de las vanguardias* 332])

Likewise, Dalton's “Atalaya,” also in “Poemas para salvar a Cristo,” engages in this theory and praxis, addressing the emerging dialogue about the role of religion in social movements. As Manlio Argueta asserts, despite Dalton's militancy, “fue formado por jesuitas” (“he was formed by Jesuits”; Personal Interview July 2008) and he draws on this training to develop poetry that dialogues with popular religious practices. The poem attacks the watchtower approach of the Church as isolated and sequestered guardians. Dalton speaks against the elements of the

Salvadoran Church, that rather than advocating for the poor, ask this sector to accept their suffering as divine fate: “Una religión que te dice que sólo hay que mirar hacia arriba/ y que en la vida terrenal todo es bajeza y ruindad/ que no debe ser mirado con atención” (“A religion that tells you there’s only pie in the sky/ and all earthly life is lousy and vicious/ and that you shouldn’t be too concerned”; *Poemas clandestinos*, 44; trans. Hirschman 45). He counters, that this religion, “es mejor garantía para que tropieces a cada paso/ y te rompas los dientes y el alma/ contra las piedras rotundamente terrenales” (“is the best guarantee you’ll stumble at every step/ and break your teeth and soul/ against absolutely earthly rocks”; *Poemas clandestinos* 44; trans. Hirschman 45). As Catholicism was one of the dominant cultural forces in El Salvador, the poem engages with this force in the revolutionary milieu, asking the listeners and readers to reconsider a religious practice that embraces, without protest, an imbalanced social structure.

Dalton’s lyric perceives and engages with the new direction of the Salvadoran Church that begins to actively support the popular masses and speak out against unjust economic practices and military repression. A Church, that Manlio Argueta describes as taking on the role, “que nosotros [los poetas] jugamos en los sesenta, casi treinta años después, lo está jugando la Iglesia” (“that we [the poets] played in the sixties, thirty years later, the Church plays this role”; Personal Interview July 2008). This direction of the Church culminates in another cycle of the exiled, disappeared, or tortured body—the death of hundreds of priests, nuns, and *celebradores de la palabra* in the decade following Dalton’s death. The most noted cases, Rutilio Grande, Monseñor Romero, and the six Jesuit priests assassinated on the grounds of the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA), join Otto René Castillo, Roberto Obregón, Jaime Suárez, and other disappeared poets in Dalton’s “mythical society souls” as individuals martyred in pursuit of a project of sovereignty and self-determination.

## When We Laugh with the Dead

As discussed in Chapter 2, *Círculo Literario* participants, like Otto René Castillo and Roque Dalton, promoted the study and development of poetic styles that dialogue with the populace. The group studied political and literary theory in a censored and dangerous environment, developing new techniques, structures, and content to address this context. While soteriology was a dominant theme in Dalton's work, he simultaneously desecrated the sacred in his verses. Deploying vocabulary of the sacred that was accessible to the popular masses, Dalton's desecration also opened up a critique of sanctified social spaces. The use of humor and satire allowed Dalton's verses to appeal to a wider audience but also invited this audience to join the critique present on the page and imagine new directions outside the literary artifact.

In the last decade, the process of elevating Dalton's verses, anointing him as El Salvador's national poet, and affording his work a rightful place in the Latin American canon, we have seen an increased focus on an analysis of Dalton's aesthetics, structure, and form. Such endeavors are necessary and admirable work as the poet was in many ways imprisoned by the post-Berlin wall era that readily identified Dalton as *un poeta marxista y panfletista*. However, a strictly formalist approach that removes Dalton from the political context that informed his verses simultaneously undermines the complex theoretical approach that he incorporated into his work. Yvette Aparicio contextualizes this theoretical approach as a reflection of the political climate, writing "since the end of the Salvadoran civil war (1980-1992) former allies on the Left and former enemies on the Right have appropriated the figure of Roque Dalton as an icon of national culture and of postwar reconciliation" (170). We might even argue that the depoliticization of Dalton, in an effort to establish his place in the literary canon, undermines the effort to elevate Central American writers. For Dalton and the *Generación Comprometida*, the

socio-political context defined and shaped their work. The dialectical relationship with the concrete reality of the Central American is a foundational characteristic of 20<sup>th</sup> century literary production.

Luis Alvarenga affirms, “[e]l proyecto de liberación que propone Dalton propone un tipo de modernidad alternativa, que desplace la racionalidad eurocéntrica e instrumental y atienda a otros tipos de racionalidad, la lógica, la ciencia, la naturaleza y el futuro de los “otros” excluido de la modernidad hegemónica” (“[t]he liberation project that Dalton proposes is a modern alternative that challenges Eurocentric and instrumental rationality and lends itself to other forms of rationality, logic, science, nature, and future of the *other* excluded from modern hegemony”; 252). Alvarenga asserts that in Dalton’s work we see the influence of Antonio Gramsci and José Mariátegui, authors beyond the scope of the Soviet canon (247) and indeed, like Paulo Freire and Ernesto Cardenal, members of what we might label a Catholic canon of radical thinkers. Dalton also draws on Gramscian concepts as he writes humorously in “Qué le dijo el movimiento comunista internacional a Gramsci,” “No tengo edad,/ no tengo edaaad/ para amarte...” (“I’m not old enough,/ I’m not old enough/ to love you...”; 57).<sup>2</sup> Modifying Gramsci’s theoretical approach, he develops his social role as an anti-colonial organic intellectual with a literary style that represents and communicates with the subaltern class, using the signs, signifiers, and symbolic markers to articulate and dialogue with their experiences.

As Dalton develops as a writer and theorist, his dialogue with Latin American traditions takes shape and his critique of the intelligentsia class crystalizes. He simultaneously demonstrates his appreciation for the craft while skewering authors he clearly admires. Of “A

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<sup>2</sup> The poem references the song “Non ho l’età” or “No tengo edad” composed by Mario Panziera and sung by Gigliola Cinquetti. Translated into multiple languages, the popular song won the 1964 Eurovision contest. It narrates the tale of a young woman that is interested an older man, but not quite ready to embark on this journey, “Tal vez querrás esperarte que sea mayor/ Y pueda darte mi amor” (“Perhaps you’ll want to wait for me to get older/ and be able to give you my love”).

Carlos Fuentes,” he writes, “[l]a Región más transparente/ cambió de piel:/ ya es un muro de smog” (“[w]here the Air is Clear/ changed its spots/ now it’s a wall of smog”; 114). In his posthumously published novel *Pobrecito poeta que era yo*, he offers a critique of Neruda as a “Rubén Darío, con menos tragos, que ingresó al Partido Comunista. Su poesía no es dialéctica. Es un himnón al amor, a las cosas, a la vida. Y cuando habla de las cosas que hacen los marxistas con la vida, cae de lleno en la acotación al margen. Con todo y su hermosura” (“a less alcoholic Rubén Darío, that joined the Communist Party. His poetry is not dialectic. It is a paeon to love, to things, to life. And when he talks about the things that Marxists do, it’s clearly a footnote. Beautiful as it may be”; 173-174). These critiques demonstrate his effort to set his generation’s artistic endeavors apart from the insular walls of the *ciudad letrada* and synthesize a poetic project that incorporates working political theory with artistic production.

The dialectic contained within artistic production becomes central to Dalton’s work, particularly in *Poemas clandestinos* and *Miguel Mármol*. While *Poemas clandestinos* is continuously classified and identified as Dalton’s most propagandistic and sectarian work, the intentionality of the work, as Argueta points out, is *poesía popular*. There exists an inherent contradiction in producing dialectical poetry that is simultaneously propagandistic. Poetry that intentionally engages the thinking populace, using the language of the *masas populares*, resists, in its literary attempt, the classic tools of propaganda. Dalton, like “el maishtro Bertolt Brecht,” does not endeavor to manipulate his audience; rather he resists the methodological tools of propaganda (“Solo el inicio” *Poemas clandestinos* 134). Brecht, early in his career, was painfully aware of the danger of propagandistic art, having witnessed the rise of fascism in Germany. Brecht asserts that the “essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the

feelings than to the spectator's reason" (22). The *Verfremdungseffekt* seeks to produce a critically engaged audience and humor is an essential literary tool to achieve this effect.

As with Brecht, humor has both a literary and political function in Dalton's work. The use of common Salvadoran linguistic expressions, cultural and symbolic markers, and curated humor demonstrate the regional appeal of his work. Humor and satire become essential markers of his literary production. Juan Ramos, in his article "Utopian Thinking in Verse" demonstrates the connection between the use of humor (in particular satire) and utopian thinking (178).

Drawing on Robert Elliot's work, he argues that satire and utopia are intrinsically linked as the former offers a critique of the world as it is and the latter is embodied in what this world might be (187). Ramos writes:

utopia is often associated with an idealized, projected, unattainable but imaginable place or time onto which we project our hopes, dreams, aspirations, and desires, all of which have an anchor in negative or critical evaluations of the past or the present. Thus, the desire to imagine or envision emerges as reaction to a certain discontent with past or current state of affairs. (201)

Likewise, Søren Kierkegaard's notion of contradiction that "[t]he tragic and the comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction" (459) applies to Dalton's paradoxical use of humor to express discontent with the socio-political status quo. In other words, humor, particularly satire, "entails pain, but this pain has a dialectic which gives it a teleology in the direction of a cure" (Kierkegaard 462). We might understand this as praxis in the Brechtian notion of anti-cathartic art or anti-Aristotelian theater that seeks a resolution outside itself.

Contradiction becomes a central element in Dalton's work, one that evokes, in a Brechtian sense, critical thinking in his audience. Through humor, Dalton unmasks the inherent contradictions of a desperate regime that murders its subjects and then hands out gifts: "Dicen que fue un buen Presidente/ porque repartió casas baratas/ a los salvadoreños que quedaron." ("They say he was a good President/ because he distributed cheap houses/ to the Salvadorans that were left"; *El turno del ofendido* 103). Humor disarms the contradictions present in Salvadoran society by de-sanctifying hierarchical structures. Dalton asks his audience to laugh at the irony of these contradictions and also to think about how these contradictions uphold systems of oppression.

Even the hallowed realm of poetry does not escape Dalton's satire. In "Americolatina," he turns his verses against himself, criticizing the hymnal, sanctified space that poetry occupies in Latin America:

El poeta cara a cara con la luna  
fuma su margarita emocionante  
bebe su dosis de palabras ajenas  
vuela con sus pinceles de rocío  
rasca su violincito pederasta.

Hasta que se destroza los hocicos  
en el áspero muro de un cuartel.

("The poet face to face with the moon  
smokes his exhilarating daisy  
drinks his share of another's words



flies with sable's-hair brushes of dew  
scratches his fiddle like a pederast.

Until he smashes up his kisser

on the rough wall of a barracks.” [*Taberna y otros lugares* 33; trans. Cohen et al. 98])

Dalton does not depict the poet as the tragicomic, misunderstood, hungry, and diminished figure of Rubén Darío's “El Rey Burgués.” The poet, instead, is a tragicomic figure whose musings are interrupted by torture and death at the hands of violent military regimes.

Laughing with the dead allows us to mourn the tragedy while simultaneously identifying the social forces that caused such tragedy. The massacre of 1932 becomes a pivotal subject that Dalton continually excavates in verse:

Así fue con lo de El Salvador en 1932.

Los comunistas dicen que el General Martínez

mató en menos de un mes

a más de treinta mil guanacos.

Eso es una exageración

los muertos comprobados no pasaron de veinte mil.

Los demás

fueron considerados desaparecidos.

(“It was the same in El Salvador in 1932.

The communists say that General Martínez

killed more than thirty thousand *guanacos*

in less than a month.

That's an exaggeration:

The verified dead didn't exceed twenty thousand.

The rest

were considered missing.” [(“Hitler Mazzini: Comparación con Chile 1974 y El Salvador 1932,” *Poemas Clandestinos* 138; trans. Hirschman 139)]

The humor lies not in the number of dead nor the tragedy of genocide, but rather the ridiculous manner by which the regime eschews, denies, and dissimulates the brutality that it perpetrates. Despite the legacy of 1932, Dalton insists on elevating the resilience of the populace as seen in “El Salvador, País con Corazón.” Through humor, Dalton allows his readers to belittle those emboldened with military power who shape the political and economic structures of oppression while contrasting these brutes with a resilient population that is, “Claro que un poco decapitado./ Y (según el gobierno de Molina/ y la oligarquía)/ sin estómago” (“Clearly a little beheaded./And [according to the Molina government/ and the oligarchy]/ without stomach”; *Poemas Clandestinos* 128; trans. Hirschman 129).

Dalton's use of humor to desecrate and deconstruct hierarchal structures is most apparent in his critique of the Church for its role in supporting and sanctifying the oligarchy. We see this clearly in his “Poemas católicos.” In the section “Otra ingratitud ecuménica,” Dalton dissects not just the Church, but the most sacred of the Christian teachings, the virgin birth: “Todo el mundo maravillado/ por la fructificante virginidad de María/ y nadie piensa en la mala fama / que desde entonces cogió/ San José...” (“Everyone marveled at the fruitful virginity of Mary/ no one thought about the bad reputation/ that Saint Joseph/ caught”; *Un libro levemente odioso* 83).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Note the use of the word *coger* in this line. There multiple meanings of this verb: to take, to grab, to harvest, to catch, but also in Central America, to fuck or to screw. The use of a common curse word implicates a challenge to the sanctity of venerated images.

Using popular expressions and humor to deconstruct the iconography of the nativity, the Virgin birth and Joseph's necessary, yet redundant, presence, he makes the sanctified earthly, allowing the reader to critique what heretofore had existed in an untouchable and sanctified realm.

By dissecting what is most sacred with laughter, Dalton is able to point out contradictions within Christianity but also within the practices of those who claim to be guardians of the sacred. "Así en la Iglesia como en Gólgota," he writes, "Ganaron los ladrones/ dos a uno" ("That's how it is in the Church like in Golgotha, The thieves won/ two to one"; *Un libro levemente odioso*, 83). The thieves, who at the Crucifixion represent the basic Christian tenet of repentance, transformation, and salvation, are replaced by the thieves within the Church who commit the deadly sin of greed against Christ manifest in the population the priests have ostensibly vowed to serve. In this manner, Dalton captures what Terry Eagleton labels the "carnavalesque bathos" that "lies at the core of Christianity, as the awesome question of salvation comes down to the earthly, everyday business of tending to the sick and feeding the hungry" (*Humour* 163-164). Dalton practices this within the poetic realm of Brecht's anti-Aristotelian theater. As readers, we do not experience the catharsis of *pietà*; rather humor invades the Crucifixion. Dalton has us laugh at death in order to reveal the structures of power that lead us to this death. Dalton replaces pity and agony, erasing the cathartic moment marked by the nailing of Jesus to the cross. He converts the Crucifixion to a *mise en scène* of laughter. The *guerrillero* trickster replaces the weeping Virgin, and the reader/ witness is the ascendant sacrifice, embodied in the Revolution ready to take out Pontius Pilate, the Roman soldiers, and the Salvadoran oligarchy.

### **Epic Poetry**

Dalton's poetry, particularly his historic works, likewise embodied oral and epic traditions. Thus, we must approach his work with an understanding of the historical context and

the social and cultural practices that inform these works. Reading Dalton's work as primarily an expression of the revolutionary period rather than as an outgrowth of syncretic practices, however, limits our analysis and our understanding of death and martyrdom in Salvadoran society. Specifically in *Las historias prohibidas del Pulgarcito*, we see Dalton draw on both hagiography and humor to forge a type of epic poetry that speaks to the Salvadoran experience of the mid-twentieth century.

In the context of the 1931 coup that deposed the first democratically elected leader of El Salvador, Roque Dalton launches a literary trajectory that reveals his intense preoccupation with history. He seeks in the historical rewrite to capture the phantasmagorical existences and national lapse of memory after the events of 1932. In doing so, Dalton creates a type of epic poetry or epic-collage similar to Ernesto Cardenal in his canonical *Hora 0* that reconstructs an alternative or subaltern narrative of the *Sandinista* resistance. Dalton attempts to historicize the censored and forgotten past in poetic form, recuperating the victims' memories through testimonies and newspaper articles. Roque Dalton's poetry engages with three major epic events: the Conquest, 1931 to 1932, and the contemporary revolutionary struggle. In his two major historical texts, *Miguel Mármol* and *Las historias prohibidas del Pulgarcito*, Dalton copiously researches major Salvadoran figures and events. He rehistoricizes these moments to create a martyr *mise en scène* by narrating the stories and deaths of Salvadoran Indigenous resistance fighters, writers, artists, poets, and political activists.

The impetus to Dalton's work were the events of 1931 when General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, in collaboration with the ruling coffee oligarchy, deposed President Arturo Araujo, the democratically elected president of El Salvador. The general then initiated a campaign to exterminate the political left and erase the vestiges of democracy in the country.

After exhausting all democratic channels and attempting to dialogue with the military regime, the Federación Regional de Trabajadores Salvadoreños (Regional Federation of Salvadoran Workers) and Partido Comunista Salvadoreño (Salvadoran Communist Party) launched a popular insurrection in January of 1932. General Martínez discovered the insurgents' plan and responded with the immediate capture and assassination of the leaders and their political associates. Days later, the Salvadoran armed forces and various paramilitary groups attacked the civilian population, arming a counterinsurgency campaign that led to the assassination of more than 30,000 peasants. The Indigenous people bore the brunt of this as villages were emptied and entire regions were depopulated. And even legally, at the municipal level (not the national level), the practices, customs, and Indigenous languages were prohibited (Tilley).

In Miguel Mármol's testimony, recorded by Roque Dalton, the political leader managed to survive the firing squad in 1932, and he emphasizes the unbridled violence of the massacre:

Durante años y años la gente del campo se quedó encontrándose a cada rato con la desagradable sorpresa de ver surgir de la tierra una mano de esqueleto, un pie, una calavera. Asimismo a cada rato aparecían los animales domésticos, cerdos, perros, etc. con una mano podrida o un costillar humano entre los dientes. Los perros hicieron su agosto desenterrando cadáveres cuyos asesinos apenas los habían cubierto con una delgada capa de tierra, ya que no había tiempo de hacer fosas profundas. Había que seguir matando. Los zopilotes fueron los seres más bien alimentados del año en El Salvador, se les veía gordos, con los plumajes lustrosos como no se les vio nunca ni se les ha vuelto a ver, felizmente.

("For years and years the people in the countryside kept being unpleasantly surprised all the time on seeing the skeleton of a hand, a foot, a skull cropping up out of the earth. And

every now and then, the domestic animals, pigs, dogs, etc. showed up with a decayed hand or a human rib between their teeth. The dogs made out like bandits digging up corpses whose murderers had barely covered them with a thin layer of dirt, since there was not time to dig deep graves—they had to keep up the killing. The vultures were the best fed creatures of the year in El Salvador, they were fat, with shining feathers like never before and fortunately, never since.” [162; trans. Ross and Schaaf 308])

Despite the genocide committed during the counterinsurgency campaign, General Martínez consolidated his power, administering El Salvador for twelve years until 1944, when he fled the country leaving in his wake a series of military coups and juntas.

Within this context, Dalton discovers a voice, one that narrates the past by fusing historical resistance with the contemporary revolutionary struggle. The distant past becomes the relevant present, and those figures who sacrificed their lives in his hagiographies become models for the contemporary guerrilla struggle. In contrast to the serious and elevated style of the epic tradition, Dalton, in his work, particularly in *Miguel Mármol* and *Las historias prohibidas del Pulgarcito*, reanimates the past with the use of humor and contemporary vernacular. He creates a contemporary vernacular epic that vindicates Salvadoran history, fusing the past with the Marxist revolutionary struggle in a fragmented non-linear time-frame. In this manner his poetry and prose serve to incarnate historic figures, and through these hagiographies, historic self-sacrifice is made modern in the context of the revolutionary struggle.

The timeframe of the epic, as Mikhail Bakhtin proposes in *The Dialogic Imagination*, represents the absolute past, thus creating a distance between the epic world and the contemporary world of the reader (13). In Bakhtin’s view of the epic genre, the epic constructs a radical separation between the past and the present. The constitutive characteristic of the epic is

the sacred or mythic past composed of distant images outside of contact with the present. He writes, “[t]he epic word is an utterly finished thing not only as an authentic event of the distant past but also on its own terms and by its own standards, it is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it. It is completed, conclusive and immutable, as a fact, an idea and a value” (17).

In the case of Central America, and Dalton’s *Las historias prohibidas* specifically, we see a fragmented epic in which the violence of the Conquest and the brutal postcolonial reality interrupts the development of the nation, creating the phantom nation-state, the *Macondo* of García Márquez. Traditionally, the epic genre formerly constructed out of the heroic deeds of the warrior and warfare combined in national aspiration, as seen in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, cannot play out in the censored Salvadoran landscape. When the military regime censors and represses oral narrative traditions from which the epic conventionally emerges, there is no discursive space for the heroic figures and Indigenous warriors that resist the *latifundismo* and the coffee oligarchy. The national tradition that emerges in the post-independence period is that of the land-owning *criollos*, who are responsible for maintaining the unequal distribution of resources, land, and political power. On the other hand, the Indigenous and mythic voices are silenced in this national tradition, serving the state only as a labor force, peons on vast plantations owned by the wealthiest families. The mythic and the sacred of the Indigenous past do not form part of the national tradition, except as symbolic expression of the oppressive state apparatus. At the same time, the Indigenous past is not an absolute, because it exists concurrently with the memories of colonization, manifested in the traditional practices of the populace. In the case of El Salvador, the military dictatorship promotes a capitalist state based on a feudal agrarian structure that

operates synchronically with the pre-Columbian culture preserved in the regional and oral culture.

Dalton's *Las historias prohibidas* is a fragmented story of interchangeable time that mixes this ancient past with the present. In contrast, Bakhtin's assertion that the "classical" western "epic world is constructed in the zone of the absolute distanced image, beyond the sphere of possible contact with the developing, incomplete and therefore re-thinking and re-evaluating present" (17) is the opposite to Dalton's Salvadoran epic. Dalton creates a type of collage that erases linear narration so that heretofore silenced narratives are resurrected to complete a historical archive that was emptied by the modern military state. Laughter and satire in Dalton's work also subvert the epic tradition to create a fragmented genre that dialogues with national discourse in which the only "sacred" element is the dictatorship and military power. His work seems to confirm Bakhtin's argument that, "Laughter destroyed epic distance" because "it began to investigate man freely and familiarly to turn him inside out, expose the disparity between his surface and his center, between his potential and his reality" (35). Epic in the Bakhtinian construct, "was never a poem about the present, about its own time," it is "the environment of a man speaking about a past to him inaccessible" (15). *Las historias prohibidas*, however, contains the Bakhtinian "multi-linguaged consciousness realized in the novel" opening "the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness" (11). Thus, Dalton's "epic" poetry introduces the sacred and the mythic of the Indigenous past, while simultaneously satirizing the military orthodoxy, creating in *Las historias prohibidas* what Bakhtin labelled a "novelistic zone of contact" (32). Dalton breaks from the concept of the distant past as finished and brings it into a paradoxical present to challenge contemporary political structures. The distinction that Bakhtin draws between the novel and the



epic, Dalton dissolves by dialoguing with epics of the past and recasting these figures in the contemporary reality of the military dictatorship.

*Las historias prohibidas* begins with the narration of the *conquistador* Pedro de Alvarado's arrival to El Salvador titled, "La Guerra de guerrilla en El Salvador (contrapunto), (Informe del conquistador don Pedro de Alvarado, a su jefe inmediato superior, don Hernán Cortés, al volver derrotado de su primer intento de someter a los pipiles de Cuzcatlán)" ("The Guerrilla War in El Salvador [counterpoint], [A Report from *conquistador don* Pedro de Alvarado, to his immediate superior, *don* Hernán Cortés, upon returning vanquished from his first attempt to subdue the Pipiles de Cuzcatlán]"; *Las historias prohibidas del pulgarcito* 9). In this poem Dalton rearticulates the Conquest in terms of Indigenous resistance, relating the opposition of the Pipiles and satirizing the Spanish military campaign. He narrates the continuous rebellion of the Indigenous in the face of the Spanish invasion and the methods the Natives used to avoid subjugation. The poetic voice, representing the Spanish conquerors, is that of Pedro Alvarado, who exaggerates his heroic deeds despite his continual failures with the Nahuat-Pipiles people. Arriving at the first village he narrates, "Hablaban allí otra lengua y eran otra gente, de por sí./ A la puesta de sol, sin motivo alguno ni propósito/ aparente,/ remaneció todo aquello despoblado y la gente alzada hacia el monte" ("They spoke another language and were another people/ At sunset, without any motive or apparent/ purpose,/ the town was completely abandoned in the morning and the people had fled towards to the mountains"; *Las historias prohibidas del pulgarcito* 9). In each village where Alvarado arrives, the inhabitants have disappeared, returning only to attack Alvarado's troops. The Nahuat-Pipiles escape to the mountains, refusing to be dominated by the Spanish. In the text, then, Dalton rewrites the Conquest by inverting its glorified history and narrating it as one of Spanish failures and

Indigenous heroic exploits. In this way, Dalton turns the Spanish Conquest narrative into an allegory by which the Marxist contemporary revolution parallels the Indigenous resistance as both the *guerrilleros* and the Nahuat-Pipiles act as tricksters that outmaneuver violent overlords, finding defense and protection in the vast Salvadoran sierras. The sierras, then, act as a space of both refuge and transformation in the revolutionary imagination.

In the same manner that Dalton rescues the history of Indigenous resistance in his epic poem, he resuscitates the Nahuat-Pipil martyr Anastasio Aquino, the “*rey de los nonualcos*.” The mythic martyrdom of Aquino existed in oral culture and collective memory, but Dalton, expanding on his *Cantos*, introduces the epic deeds of Aquino to a broader public, dedicating an entire chapter to him in *Las historias prohibidas*. He rearticulates Aquino’s infamous act of resistance when he took over the *Iglesia de Santiago*, which had been previously viewed as a disparate and strange act of an *indio bruto*. In the following fragment, we see how Dalton interprets the logic and motivation of the action:

Para demostrar a los indios la falsedad de los castigos con que los amenazaba el cura, para que se convencieran de que ningún rayo celeste los abatiría por sacrilegio, Aquino trepó al camarín que resguardaba una ridícula imagen de San José y, derribándola, se ciñó la corona y se cubrió con el manto de la estatua constituyéndose así, a los ojos de los indios, en el gran demoleedor de la mentira católica, en redentor auténtico de la raza oprimida, en verdadero apóstol de aquel que dijo “Bienaventurados los humildes, porque ellos poseerán la tierra.”

(“In order to demonstrate the false nature of the punishments with which the priest had threatened the Indians, so that they would be convinced that no celestial beam would strike them down for sacrilege, Aquino climbed into the alcove that sheltered the

ridiculous image of Saint Joseph. He knocked it down, taking the crown and covering himself with the statue's mantle, appointing himself, in the eyes of the Indians, the great destroyer of the Catholic lie, the authentic redeemer of the oppressed race, the true apostle of he who said, 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.'" [*Las historias prohibidas del pulgarcito* 38])

Here, Dalton rearticulates the heroic episodes of Anastasio Aquino and identifies Indigenous struggles with Christian martyrdom and Marxist revolutionary struggle. He fuses the Indigenous past with the present epoch, creating a fragmented narrative epic of his nation. He uses satire to transport antiquity to the present, permitting the reader to dialogue with the distant past and recent past, and relate it to the contemporary social structure of his nation. Like Aquino, he takes the sacred, repossessed from the "Atalaya" and returns it to its rightful heirs: *las masas populares*.

As Dalton moves through Salvadoran history to the tragic events of the 1930s in "Hechos, cosas y hombres de 1932," he rescues the collective memory of this genocide, a moment completely erased from the official written history by the continuous military regimes. Using collected oral testimonies and official documents, Dalton reconstructs the events of 1932 by combining various styles, including periodical documents, oral testimony, and poetry. In this way, he reconstructs the horrors inflicted on the Indigenous people:

En Juayúa se ordenó que se presentaran al Cabildo Municipal todos los hombres honrados que no fueran comunistas, para darles un salvoconducto, y cuando la plaza pública estaba repleta de hombres, niños y mujeres pusieron tapadas en las calles de salida de la plaza y ametrallaron a aquellas multitudes de inocentes, no dejando vivos ni a los pobres perros que siguen fielmente a sus amos indígenas.

(“in Juayúa all the decent men who weren’t communists were ordered to report to the Town Hall in order to receive safe passage, and when the public plaza was overflowing with men, women and children, they blocked off the streets and machine-gunned down that whole innocent crowd, not leaving alive even the poor dogs who faithfully follow their Indigenous masters.” [*Las historias prohibidas del pulgarcito* 115-116; trans. Ross and Schaaf 308])<sup>4</sup>

The underlining theme ever-present in the text is Dalton’s desire to redeem the collective memory through a Hegelian dialectic and impel his audience to take social action. In this manner, he challenges the moribund existence of a militarized country, where being “salvadoreño es ser medio muerto/ eso que se mueve/ es la mitad de la vida que nos dejaron” (“Salvadoran is to be half-dead/ that which moves/ is the half-life left with us”; *Las historias prohibidas del pulgarcito* 124). Dalton sees radical engagement with the past as necessary for a populace to identify and dialogue with the present-day society.

Dalton follows up the elegy to the events of 1932 in *Las historias prohibidas* with a simple and anti-cathartic (in Brechtian terms) refrain, “Bueno es Dios, que no nos ha matado” (“God is good, that he has not killed us”; *Las historias prohibidas del pulgarcito* 126). With this line, Dalton confronts the history of Conquest and the military dictatorship with humor. Combining Brechtian techniques of alienation with Central American humor, Dalton obliterates the chasm between the past and the present that generally mark epic narratives. His epic poetry produces the zone of contact that Bakhtin defines as a central element of the novel. At the same time, Dalton creates an epic in poetic form that jostles all of Bakhtin’s categories. It is a modern

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<sup>4</sup> This translation is from Ross and Schaaf’s English version of *Miguel Mármol*, this section appears both in the testimonio and in *Las historias prohibidas del pulgarcito*.

epic that poetizes Salvadoran history, reconnects the audience with the recent and distant past, and juxtaposes history with the lived reality of a totalitarian and militarized society.

### **Syncretic Marxism**

In *Las historias prohibidas*, Dalton attempts to create a syncretic narrative that harmonizes Indigenous resistance with the Marxist revolutions. In this manner, his literary project follows twentieth century currents to integrate Indigenous figures and history into national projects of reform and revolution:

El indigenismo [...] tiene raíces en el presente. Extrae su inspiración de la protesta de millones de hombres. El virreinato era; el indio es. Y mientras la liquidación de los residuos de feudalidad colonial se impone como una condición elemental al progreso, la reivindicación del indio, por ende, nos viene insertada en el programa de una revolución. (“Indigenismo [...] has its roots in the present; it finds its inspiration in the protest of millions of men. The vice-royalty was; the Indian is. And whereas getting rid of the remains of colonial feudalism is a basic condition for progress, the vindication of the Indian and of his history is inserted into a revolutionary program.” [Mariátegui 306-307; trans. Urquidí 274])

Dalton carries out the Indigenous project incorporating the Nahuat-Pipil past in a national narrative and linking it to the armed struggle. However, the link between *indigenismo* and Marxism in Latin America has been problematic as revolutionary writers and thinkers often appropriate the Indigenous experience as if it were an ideology.

This ideological appropriation has continually developed in the Central American political arena. There exists a dissonance between the ideological image that the revolutionary projected onto the Indigenous subject and the cultural and communal lived realities. This

dissonance produced a series of problems that complicated the relationship between the Indigenous people and the armed struggle. As Virginia Tilley examines in *Seeing Indians*, there was a chasm between the revolutionary squadrons and the Indigenous motivations to participate in the armed struggle. One of the repeated deficiencies of the Central American revolutionaries was the inability to incorporate Indigenous movements, leaders, and peasant communities in the political process. The key issue, never addressed, on an ontological level, and in contrasting epistemologies. Revolutionary leaders followed linear Marxist positivist thought and seemed unable to syncretize this struggle with Indigenous cosmovisions and the cyclical pattern of peasant life. In his critique of *foquismo*, in *Los días de la selva*, Mario Payeras synthesizes this conflict of revolutionary theory and Indigenous realities in the political arena:

Cuando llegó la hora de marcharnos y repetir en otras latitudes un ciclo parecido, dejábamos tras nosotros lo mejor de nuestras vidas y las más grandes esperanzas. Con nosotros fue Saturino, el único recluta que logramos para la guerrilla en dos años, pensando encontrar en el monte un ejército del tamaño de nuestras conversaciones.

(“When the hour came to leave and repeat the similar cycle in other latitudes, we left behind the best of our lives and the greatest hopes. Thinking we’d find in the mountain an army as grand as our conversations, with us was Saturino, the only guerrilla fighter we managed to recruit in two years.” [55])

Like Payeras, Dalton explores the dissonant character of the Marxist-Indigenous project in *Miguel Mármol: Los sucesos de 1932 en El Salvador*. In this text, the ontological divide becomes a central narrative force manifested in Mármol’s character. Precisely for this reason, the text reflects the fertile Daltonian technique and his ability to dialogue with the complex reality in which he lived.

In 1966 in Prague, Dalton meets Miguel Mármol, activist and founder of the communist party in El Salvador. In the former state of Czechoslovakia, the two exiled compatriots initiate a project in which Dalton serves as an interlocutor in the collection of Mármol's testimony. Mármol narrates his life, his political activism, and the massacre of 1932. Published in 1972, the text forms part of the testimonial production that emerges in the 1960s and 1970s. The political perspectives framing the testimonial narratives, particularly early testimonios shaped by Marxist, positivist paradigms have served to classify this genre. While this political perspective formed a key part of the literary context of this period, we see that Dalton's rendition of Mármol's life does not present a positivist or linear narration.

The counterpoint, referring to Dalton's introductory poem in *Las historias prohibidas*, is what actually marks this testimony and offers the readers multiple, simultaneous narratives. The obvious approach to the text is to read it as a historical narrative that outlines the history of the Communist party in El Salvador and its involvement in the armed uprising of 1932. But this narrative betrays itself, contrasting the linear Marxist dialectic with Mármol's narrative, which includes the intervention of saints and spirits. These narrative digressions offer alternative ontologies that counter the Marxist paradigms that frame both Mármol's and Dalton's worldviews.

The manner in which Dalton represents Mármol in the text emphasizes his humble origins, and these origins frame the text. Mármol expresses himself in a colloquial manner, and even in the most traumatic details of the narrative, humor is constantly present. However, he narrates the *testimonio* with an astuteness that allows him to analyze the socio-economic structures of the country and the emergence of political activism. At the same time, his Marxist-Leninist perspective contradicts his Indigenous-peasant knowledge, evident in the continual

*cuentos intercalados*, narrative interruptions, and digressions. With Mármol's voice, Dalton produces a polyphonic narrative with multiple realities: that of militarized, modern El Salvador which competes with the Indigenous/peasant reality. In the Central American context, there is a clash between industrial capitalism and *latifundismo*, between Indigenous cosmologies and the modern nation-state. In the twentieth century, modernity coexisted with the agrarian feudal structure that created a distinct revolutionary situation outside of the Marxist historical trajectory—it is an environment that creates a population “entre el pasado y el presente incierto. Entre lenguas y entre sistemas simbólicos” (“between the past and the uncertain present. Between languages and symbolic systems”; Castro-Klaren 242).

Precisely for these reasons, Mármol's testimony possesses a polyphonic character through which the Marxist-Leninist perspective that he uses to narrate his life, his activism, and the events of 1932 are in dialogue with his Indigenous-peasant knowledge evident in the narrative interruptions. In this manner, the Indigenous-peasant knowledge and the oral traditions are in conversation with the Marxist ideologies. Mármol's testimony, then, reflects the paradox of the indigenista project as “una conciencia que percibe el tiempo desde una perspectiva mítica y otra que intenta proponer un punto de vista histórico, basado en la racionalidad del devenir social y humano” (“a consciousness that perceives time from a mythic perspective and another that attempts to propose a historical vision, based in the rationality of human and social progress”; Cornejo Polar 79). Mármol's narrative voice captures his multiple subjectivities and the conflicting national identity of the state of El Salvador.

Dalton represents these multiple, dissonant subjectivities that operate simultaneously. In one of his escapes from military henchman, as Mármol flees, without food or water, he encounters a group of fishermen from whom he begs help. The fisherman reply that they have



been by the side of the river all day and have come up empty-handed. Then, a woman who has lost her way appears suddenly asking for directions, and as the fisherman reply, the woman disappears. And Mármol relates the following:

Casi inmediatamente se oyó una carcajada de loca y un como alarido que nos paró el pelo a todos. Los pescadores dijeron: “Ave María Purísima. Era la Ciguanaba.” Pero uno de ellos cortó el momento de terror, gritando: “Miren la atarraya, se llenó de pescado.” (“Almost immediately we heard a mad-woman’s laugh and a sort of shriek that made our hair stand on end. The fishermen said, ‘Holy Mary, it was the Ciguanaba.’ But then one of them suddenly snapped the terror that had come over everybody, saying, ‘Look at the net, it’s filled with fish.’” [*Miguel Mármol* 179; trans. Ross and Schaaf 338])

Suddenly, the mythic intervenes in the linear narration of Mármol’s activism and negates the validity of his own story. This process becomes a fundamental narrative element in the text:

Yo les decía a aquellos hombres que todo era una pura coincidencia y que no había que dejarse sugestionar. Que lo de la Ciguanaba era un cuento de camino real, una simple superstición. Sin embargo, por si las moscas, decidí no continuar camino en aquellas oscuranas y esperar a que amaneciera para dirigirme a San Miguel.

(“I told them it was all a coincidence, that they shouldn’t be so easily affected, and that that stuff about the Ciguanaba was just a big yarn, a simple superstition. However, just in case, I decided not to go on in the darkness and wait until dawn to head for San Miguel.”

[*Miguel Mármol* 179; trans. Ross and Schaaf 338])

Rafael Lara Martínez describes the narrative as Magical Marxism, the moment in the text where the magical subverts the science, the logical, and the linear. The multiple cosmologies and ideologies—Christianity and Indigenous mysticism, Marxism and capitalism—operate

simultaneously, representing the multiple perspectives and temporalities of the country, all of which fuse the complex historical forces that had created El Salvador's contemporary moment. Dalton takes narrative control of these subjectivities, reflecting them in the character of Mármol. In Mármol, Dalton expresses the Salvadoran reality through dialect-variation by which multivocality emerges from the conflicting counterpoints. In this way, Dalton creates a dialogue between subjective views and the heritage of the mythic past as well as between the objective facts of experience and scientific knowledge (Lara Martínez, *Salarrué*).

When General Martínez's henchmen capture Mármol and take him to the site where he will be assassinated, Mármol's Indigenous-peasant thinking intervenes. The cosmological relationship with nature is embodied in the understanding that land is not just a plantation surrounded by barbed wire to produce profit. The land is a living being that sustains us in both death and life. He realizes that he is to be murdered near where he was born. In this passage, he describes the landscape, the connection he feels with the land of his birth, reflecting the strong link between Indigenous-peasant thinking and the land, "Yo pensé que en medio de todo había tenido suerte porque me iba a tocar morir cerca de mi pueblo de donde está enterrado mi ombligo" ("I thought that, in spite of everything, I had been lucky because I was going to die close to my village, close to where my umbilical cord is buried"; *Miguel Mármol* 135; trans. Ross and Schaaf). The burial or placing of the umbilical cord is a regional Central American ritual that continues to be practiced today. It marks a child's ties to land—the place from which they emerge and to which they will return in death.

Later, when he narrates his own assassination, Mármol deviates from orthodox Marxism, emphasizing the role of fortune and coincidence (Lara Martínez *La Tormenta entre las manos* 92) in his escape from the hands of General Martínez, "Un policía me iba a tirar a mí, oí como el

cerrojo de fusil cortó el cartucho, pero el otro dijo ‘Eso es gastar pólvora en zopes [buitres] ¿no ves que tiene los sesos de fuera?’” (“A policeman was going to shoot me, I heard him bolt his rifle, but another said: ‘That’s just feeding gunpowder to the vultures, don’t you see his brains all over the place?’”; *Miguel Mármol* 136; trans. Ross and Schaaf 260]). Only because the brains of one of his *compañeros* were splattered on his face, giving the illusion of death, was he able to survive. In this manner, he escaped the common grave where the military guard were going to bury him: “A duras penas con la sensación de estar naciendo de nuevo comencé a alejarme del lugar. Atravesé con sumo cuidado la milpa tratando de no alarmar demasiado un perrito que ladraba por ahí” (“With great pain and with the sensation of being born again. I started to get out of that place. I crossed through a corn field trying to be very quiet so as not to alarm too much a dog that was barking”; *Miguel Mármol* 136; trans. Ross and Schaaf 261). Mármol’s rebirth occurs as he steps across the *milpa*, the corn field, corn as the symbolic representation of life and rebirth being fundamental to Central American Indigenous cosmologies. As written in the Popol Wuj, Jun Junajpu is represented as symbol of both life and death, embodied in the God of Corn. Upon leaving Xib’alb’a, Jun Junajpu’s twin sons could not revive him, so his head was left buried like the head of Mármol’s *compañero*—also representing both life and death as he died by the firing squad saving Mármol with the viscous liquid of his shattered head.

Mármol’s testimony not only reflects these Indigenous mythologies but includes various intercalated narrations of miraculous interventions that reflect the syncretic Catholicism practiced in El Salvador. Frequently, the saints intervene to rescue Mármol. One intercalated narrative occurs when Mármol’s sister appeals to the Santo Niño de Atocha to free him from prison, asking that death be delivered to the torturers, “[que] se muera quien más lo maltrata” (“that the one that mistreats him most dies”; *Miguel Mármol* 195; trans. Ross and Schaaf 368).

As Mármol tells it, “A los ocho días se murió [el Director de la Policía], entre terribles dolores, generalizados por todo el cuerpo [...] que esté donde esté debe parecer como sapo toreado, echando leche” (“A week later he died, with awful pain all over his body [...] wherever he is, he must look like some raving little toad, swearing like a son-of-a-bitch”; *Miguel Mármol* 136; trans. Ross and Schaaf 369). So, as the narrative asserts, it is due to the graciousness of the Santo Niño de Atocha that the police chief dies and Mármol encounters freedom.

In addition to saints, nature, animals, rivers, trees, and plants serve as intermediaries throughout the text. They help protect and shield Mármol, as he relates in the following incident with one of his jailers:

Yo le dije por broma que si no me daba los diez centavos se le iba a secar una mata de güisquiles que era su mero orgullo y entonces él me mandó al carajo. Yo no sé lo que pasó, porque el tipo la regaba todos los días, pero lo cierto es que tal mata de güisquiles se secó y los rumores sobre mis poderes ocultos crecieron una vez más.

(“I told him as a joke that if he wouldn’t give me ten centavos, a chayote plant that was his pride and joy would dry up on him, and he told me to go to hell. I don’t know how it happened, because he watered it every day, but don’t you know that chayote plant dried up and once again the rumors about my occult powers started to spread.” [*Miguel Mármol* 197; trans. Ross and Schaaf 372])

Of course, the *güisquil* forms a part of one of the plant groups of *las tres hermanas*—*frijol*, *maíz*, and *calabaza*—the basic and traditional Central American diet. Maya myths of creation are based in these foods as generative crops. These same *güisquiles* empower Miguel and rescue him from the misery and torture of prison. Mármol’s narration includes various miraculous and mythical elements, or in the words of Lara Martínez, “el Santo Niño Atocha y la

Ciguanaba conversan con Marx y Lenin” y “El Salvador socialista existe gracias a la suerte y coincidencia” (“Saint Niño Atocha and the Ciguanaba converse with Marx and Lenin” and “socialist El Salvador exists thanks to luck and coincidence; *La Tormenta entre las manos* 92). According to Lara Martínez, the testimony becomes a popular hagiography in which common peasant-Indigenous and oral traditions converse with Marxist ideology. Although Lara Martínez labels these narrative interventions *suerte y coincidencia*, Mármol outlines the complex subjectivities and cosmologies present in the Salvadoran context, offering a fertile polyphonic narrative demonstrated in the competing realities of a militarized nation-state in an Indigenous and peasant El Salvador.

The Salvadoran society of Mármol and Dalton reflects the juxtaposition of complex realities in the postcolonial structure. This is precisely what Dalton attempts to capture in his work. In 1932, when Miguel Mármol confronted the firing squad, the Izalco Volcano erupted as if nature were impelling the people to rise up in arms against the dictator. A few days later, when General Martínez responded with counterinsurgent violence, massacring thousands of civilians in a matter of weeks, ashes covered the earth, serving as shrouds for the thousands of bodies lying in the improvised, common graves. Nature and mythical symbolism appeared to interact with the popular uprising, forming an alternative reality to the industrialized, global capitalist model that arose in the twentieth century. Dalton, in his testimony, does not attempt to simply produce a syncretic history that incorporates *indigenismo* within Marxist teleology. Orthodox Marxism could not possibly explain, analyze, or grasp the postcolonial Salvadoran reality. As the interlocutor, Dalton is fully aware of the limitations of Marxist ideology, which prompts a re-telling of the communist uprising of 1932 as Mármol’s voice contradicts, interrupts, intercalates, and diverges from the orthodox version—with the continual use of Central American humor.

In Dalton's counterpoint, or syncretic telling, competing ontologies intersect and weave a complex and anti-colonial narrative resisting the imposition of Western notions of time and space. As he writes, "Habito el ajedrez de los zompopos/ con agujas de Dios" ("I inhabit the chess game of cutting ants/ with God's spires"; "Animalitos" 81). The chessboard serves as a metaphor for contemporary El Salvador where alternative narratives crisscross along different paths through a contained space, between Catholic paradigms, or "God's spires," and cutting ants or *zompopos*. *Zompopos de mayo*, who generally make their appearance at the beginning of the rainy season, represent the ancient. They appear in the *Popol Wuj*, assisting the hero twins as they overcome their second trial in Xib'alb'a, stealing flowers, or the symbolic *cosecha*, from the Lords of the Underworld. Dalton, as the poet-narrator, positions himself between these alternative narratives that operate simultaneously. However, the complexity and nuance reflected in his work, particularly in *Miguel Mármol*, would conflict both narratologically and personally with the revolutionary doctrine he encountered in the final months of his life.

### **Death and the Poet**

Dalton sought to embody the historical characters that he copiously researched and resurrected on his pages. His obsession with death was not a mere literary flourish but extended into an experiential reality that became an intimate part of Salvadoran revolutionary activity: Friends disappeared in the night; paramilitary forces pursued, captured, tortured, imprisoned, and exiled artists and writers; intellectual pursuits served as the shroud of certain death. Martyr narratives provided a vehicle through which trauma could be organized, archived, and accessed, "because they provide a sense of meaning and context to particular deaths" (Peterson 513). Dalton's martyr narratives make sense of the past and of tragic loss, while also shaping future

political actions. Anne Peterson, in her ethnographic research on social movements in El Salvador, sees narrative as a central political organizing tool:

Martyrdom narratives locate individual and collective experiences of suffering and injustice within a particular historicity. They anticipate the deaths of those who struggle against unjust power, and so anticipate loss, while simultaneously marking death as something other than loss as such. The martyr remains: death is continuous with the life of the martyr. (513)

The death of Otto René Castillo cast a shadow over Dalton's life that he simultaneously narrativized as sacred history. The loss of a poet so profoundly dedicated to the cause of justice at such a young age functioned as impetus towards action and a model to follow. But the loss of an intellectual companion and a friend from one's youth creates in the psyche a sense of impending death. Dalton's son, filmmaker, Jorge Dalton, recalls that his father's obsession with death was an ever-present topic in his childhood:

Sí, mi padre yo recuerdo— lo poco que conviví con él—tenía cierta obsesión [...] y nos transmitió a toda nuestra familia—que en algún momento él iba a desaparecer. Siempre tenía yo esa constante de que nos decía “hay que prepararse porque en algún momento yo voy a faltar” y entonces siempre nosotros tuvimos esa conciencia de que —a mí me molestaba mucho—[...] como yo era el más pequeño de mis hermanos y como asumí más lo cubano [...] entonces no lo asumía como lo asumía mi madre o mis hermanos mayores. Pero no solamente en su vida diaria sino que en su obra está reflejado todo ese asunto ¿no? Hay toda, también, una ironía con toda su obra, su vida ¿no? Incluso su desenlace es fatal.

(“Yes, my father, as I remember—the little that I lived with him—had a certain obsession. [...] and he transmitted this to our family—that at some moment he was going to disappear. He would always tell us, ‘You have to prepare yourselves because at any moment I might not turn up,’ so we were always aware of this—and it bothered me a lot [...] as I was the youngest and the most Cuban [. . .] I didn’t accept it like my mother and my older brothers. It wasn’t only in his daily life, but his literary work also reflected this attitude. There is a complete irony in all his work, right? Because even his own denouement is fatal.” [Personal Interview July 2008])

Having been raised in Cuba, Dalton’s younger son views his father’s obsession with death through a different cultural lens than his siblings. This offers an interesting contrast because Central American revolutions are often cast in the ideological shadow of Cuba.

Jorge Dalton, however, asserts that the revolutionary fervor personified in his father arose directly from the Salvadoran experience rather than from the influence of Cuban socialism. He views his father’s actions and approach to politics as an expression of the Salvadoran vision of death:

Yo considero a mi padre un personaje fatídico. Pienso que hay una fatalidad en su vida, no dejo de verlo así. Vivo en el país, un sitio, donde él no se podía despartar— y empiezo a entender por qué- ¿no? Pero sí considero que mi padre dentro de muchos personajes que pueblan mis documentales y mis trabajos. Mis trabajos [films] están llenos de esos— de algunos personajes que conviven entre la cumbre y el abismo; personajes hasta con cierta fatalidad. Y no puedo dejar de reconocer que mi propio padre tiene un poco de eso y es producto de haber nacido en un país donde no se puede uno deslindar de eso. [...] Y alguna gente [salvadoreños] llega a considerar incluso que



morirse no es tan malo [...]— la muerte es la parte más importante de la vida. Entonces eso para mí— yo que me he criado en el Caribe, donde las cosas se ven como definitivas y la muerte significa que ya no hay más diversión ni más—se acabó todo, ya no puedes ir a la playa, no puedes hacer el amor con nadie, en fin, se acabó todo. [...] Provengo de esa cultura donde la gente te dice que lo peor que te puede pasar en la vida es morirte., [...] que la vida es lo máspreciado, entonces venir a un país donde la gente te dice lo contrario.

(“I consider my father a fateful person. I think there is a fatality in his life. I cannot see it in any other way. I live in the country that was this place he could not remove himself from—and I begin to understand why, right? But yes, I consider my father among the many characters that populate my documentaries and my work. My work [filmmaker] is full of these—these characters that live between the summit and the abyss; people with a certain fatalism. And I cannot but recognize that my own father has a bit of this as a product of being born in a country that is defined by this. [...] Some people consider, even regard dying as not that bad [...]—death is this most important part of life. So for me—since I was raised in the Caribbean, where things are seen as definitive and death means the end of happiness—everything is over, you can’t go to the beach, you can’t make love, basically everything is over. [...] I come from this Caribbean culture where people tell you that the worst thing that can happen in life is death, [...] that life is the most precious is the opposite of what is often heard in El Salvador.” [Personal Interview July 2008])

Here we see that the very concept of martyrdom emerges from a cultural context in which the social denizens share an ethos that recognizes martyrdom as a calling. This draws our attention to

the ways in which a time and particular society understands, views, and observes the experience of martyrdom. Here we have a person who grew up in a different cultural context so that even the martyrdom of his own father is perplexing. Dalton's son views his death as fatalistic.

In contrast, Dalton's literary production is an affirmation of life, or as he affirms in his poem, "Contra la muerte." The poem asks us to postpone thoughts of our own mortality: "Yo no he separado mi sarcófago./ Ya habrá para eso tiempo/ que por ahora basta con ahogar esa risa" ("I haven't separated from my sarcophagus./ There will be time for that/ for now it is enough to drown the laughter"; *El turno del ofendido*, 44). He asserts that we ought to focus on the violence that surrounds us: "Esa/ la del borracho que patea la más pequeña de las lilas/ la del general que no oyó hablar jamás del colibrí" ("This here/ the drunk that kicks the smallest flowers/ the general that never hears the hummingbird sing"; *El turno del ofendido* 44). The brutes that stomp on flowers and generals that ignore the beautiful sound of birds represent the violence that brings forth "muchas muertes/ más importantes que la nuestra" ("lots of deaths/ more important than our own"; *El turno del ofendido* 44). In Dalton's context, social violence supersedes our own mortality, and through our own sacrificial death can we combat this concrete reality.

This contrast between fatalism and affirmation of life is a fitting entryway into a larger discussion of martyrdom for these Central American artists. Jorge Dalton asserts that it was not his father's Marxist ideology that led him to death, but rather his Central American cultural formation which took form in his artistic interpretation of Marxist ideology. For Dalton, this specific ideology became a tool to achieve a more egalitarian and democratic society, but according to his son, Dalton never adhered to a dogmatic interpretation of Marxist theory:

Mi padre había optado por una ideología. Mi padre vivía por la manera que escogió— vivía en un campo minado. Y eso se reflejó durante mucho tiempo de su vida, hasta que

el desenlace. Lo que pasa es que mi padre, irónicamente, nunca pensó que esa muerte pudiese provenir de sus propios compañeros. Yo creo que ahí es donde él se equivocó. (“My father chose an ideology. My father lived—for the path that he chose—he lived in a minefield. And this is reflected in his life, until the dénouement. What happened is that my father, ironically, never thought that his death would come from his own *compañeros*. I think that is where he was mistaken.” [Personal Interview July 2008])

Interestingly, we see here Roque Dalton’s son focuses not only on the moment of his father’s death as a fatal turn, but on the adherence to the notion of martyrdom itself. We cannot say that Dalton sought death, but he certainly welcomed the grace of martyrdom as an inevitable result of political participation. In contrast, his son envisions his father’s death not as a glorious martyrdom but as part of a tragic trajectory embedded in the Salvadoran ethos. In fact, the death at the hands of his *compañeros* confirms, for his son, this fatal element:

Hay que hablar de El Salvador en ese aspecto que tiene que ver con toda esa espiral de injusticia y de impunidad. Porque esas cosas sólo están impunes tanto que en casos emblemáticos como el de mi padre dentro de la izquierda. Porque también el caso de mi padre tiene doble dificultad. Una, porque como no lo cometió el ejército [su asesinato]—acuérdate las masacres que se cometían—siempre el punto de mira era con el ejército [...] nunca había posibilidad de pensar de que el otro bando podía cometer excesos tremendos.

Entonces la familia mía que de alguna manera todos colaboramos con la parte de la izquierda— encontrarnos con una situación de saber que la muerte de mi padre proviene y cómo se cometió también. Porque si la versión de que lo fueron a tirar al Playón es verdadera, tiene una carga de injusticia terrible porque lo fueron a tirar a donde

los escuadrones de la muerte tiraban a la gente para confundirlo entre esos o para echarles la culpa. Entonces es doblemente siniestro todo eso. Por eso es que es más fácil, tal vez, pensar que un general está acusado de matar a, o de masacrar a una población .

“One has to speak of El Salvador in this way that has to do with this spiral of injustice and impunity. Because of this—things go unpunished even in emblematic cases amongst the left, like that of my father. Because my father’s case also has a dual problem. One, because the military didn’t carry out [his assassination]—remember the massacres that were committed—were always seen as [carried out] by the army [...] there was never a possibility that the other side could commit these tremendous excesses.

“Since my family collaborated with the left—we found ourselves in a situation of knowing the origins of my father’s death and also how it was carried out. Because if the version that he was thrown in el Playón is true, there is a terrible weight of injustice because they threw him where death squads threw people to cause confusion and to lay the blame on [the death squads]. This is doubly sinister. Because it is easier, perhaps to think that a general is accused of murder or of massacring a community.” [Personal Interview July 2008])

Jorge Dalton’s discussion of his father and his demise offers a vehicle for understanding and interpreting Dalton’s work. Jorge Dalton suggests that the ideological route his father chose was a consequence of the period in which he lived, but he asserts that Dalton’s adoration of revolutionary sacrifice and martyrdom is an expression of a Salvadoran cultural phenomenon. His son views it as an obsession and reification of death embedded in the cultural mindscape. The appeal of Marxist ideologies is the egalitarian model these set forth, but the participation in revolutionary movements and willingness to expose one’s body to the fusillade is a manifestation

of Salvadoran cultural attitudes transformed into practice. In this way, we see the convergence of two principles that inform our understanding of martyrdom in the Salvadoran context. We return to the concept that martyrdom is relative to time and place. The making of a martyr is collective and embodied in shared resistance to the social order. In this instance, it is also a manifestation of cultural practices that coalesced during the civil war period.

We see this manifestation of practice reflected in Dalton's literary expression. Labelling specific works as *panfletario* or ideological or dismissing the intentional social content embedded in his work overlook his complex vision of the Salvadoran context and intentional use of multiple ontologies. In fact, his foundational text, *Miguel Mármol*, was seen as ideologically problematic in Cuba. As Jorge Dalton affirms:

Mi padre era militante del Partido Comunista—era la visión que tenía [...] [pero] cuando el Partido Comunista mismo vio los testimonios de Mármol estuvo en contra de que saliera el libro. Hubo una oposición. En Cuba el libro no se publicó. Mi padre lo metió en concurso y no se publicó porque el Partido Comunista—o la línea del Partido Comunista no consideraba que un libro en la manera que estaba narrado era justo; que pudiesen tener problemas y por eso no se publicó. Tengo incluso la carta de la editora, de por ejemplo de Casa de las Américas, donde le dice a mi padre que el libro no es conveniente publicarlo. (“My father was a Communist Party militant—it was the vision that he had [...] [but] when the Communist Party saw Mármol's testimonies, [the party] was against the release of the book. There was opposition. The book was not published in Cuba. My father entered it in a contest and it wasn't published because the Communist Party—or a sector in the Communist Party didn't consider that a book in the way that it was narrated appropriate; that it could have problems and for this reason, it wasn't published. I even

have the letter from the editor of Casa de las Américas, where she tells my father that it is not prudent to publish it.” [Personal Interview July 2008])

In contrast, Jorge’s older brother, publisher and journalist, Juan José Dalton, asserts that in El Salvador, the text became essential reading among the politicized (Personal Interview July 2008). It was this text that introduced young activists to the revolutionary cause. Interestingly, the text, which explores the 1932 uprising and the subsequent massacre, serves as a warning about the dangers of revolutionary cadres without a broad based, well-organized peasant movement. In countries like El Salvador, where the army and the government lack democratic traditions and are shameless in carrying out state violence, *Miguel Mármol* offers, through its historical knowledge, an alternative approach to political militancy.

The complexity of *Miguel Mármol*, as Dalton’s sons suggest, is that it functions as a revolutionary manual, a testimony, and an expression of Salvadoran cultural practices. We see that Dalton’s work operates both within and extends beyond the paradigms of Marxist theory, drawing on Salvadoran oral traditions, historical realities, and lived experiences to offer an analysis of history that is not based solely on Marxist doctrine. In essence, in *Miguel Mármol* Dalton creates a novelized testimony that expresses a deep understanding of Salvadoran oral culture and serves as a way to educate and involve the populace in an anti-imperial social movement. The theoretical approach suggested in *Mármol* expands on *foquismo* and seeks to build alliances with non-violent civilian social movements. This approach was advocated by Dalton and perhaps led to the conflicts that emerged within his organization. In Dalton’s essay, “¿Revolución en la revolución?: y la crítica de la derecha” he defends *foquismo* (Arias Gómez 39) but also offers a critique of Debray’s work that reflects the discussion developed in *Miguel Mármol*. This critique was twofold in that Debray “failed to understand the importance of

creating ‘a political revolutionary organization’ able to orient emerging ‘revolutionary actors’ (i.e. social movements) and “did not elaborate a viable politico-military strategy” (Chávez 174).

Precisely because of Dalton’s testimonial work with Miguel Mármol, he understood the inherent dangers of initiating an armed movement without a viable military strategy. Mármol had explained what he understood to be the profound mistakes of the 1932 uprising and the genocide of thousands of men, women, and children. Organizing against a regime without a broad-based political movement and an exigent military strategy would leave the populace unprotected and set the stage for another such massacre, but on broader and more modern scale than the 1932 *matanza*. Due to Dalton’s experience, theoretical study, and active engagement in political action, he explored and pursued complex and nuanced approaches to political organization and militancy.

Dalton’s divergent view uncovers one of the many motivations behind his assassination. Were his assassins infiltrators, or authoritarian purists? We will likely never know the impetus; in war the personal and the political intermingle, and the lawlessness of war allows for personal vendettas and envy to fill these voids. Cruelty does not have a logic. We do, however, know that Dalton was aware that his ideas were challenging the structural order of ERP. His final poems, even those that appear sectarian, offer a pluralistic vision on organizing and mobilizing the *masas populares*. Written in 1974, just months before his assassination, “Lógica reví,” appears with a cursory read to be sectarian Marxist doctrine:

“Una crítica dura a la Unión Soviética  
solo la puede hacer un antisoviético.  
Una crítica a China  
solo la puede hacer un antichino

Una crítica al Partido Comunista Salvadoreño  
solo la puede hacer un agente de la CIA

Una autocrítica equivale al suicidio.”  
 (“A criticism of the Soviet Union  
can only be made by an anti-Soviet.

A criticism of China  
can only be made by an anti-Chinese.

A criticism of the Communist Party of El Salvador  
can only be made by a CIA agent.

A self-criticism is equal to suicide.” [ *Poemas clandestinos* 84; trans. Hirschman 85])

When examined closely, these verses contain a visceral critique of ERP and of authoritarianism embedded in radical social movements. They reflect the critique and rumors that surrounded Dalton, that he was a *revisionist*, a CIA agent, a Cuban agent. The poem begins and closes with quotes, paralinguistic indicators that he was repeating critique launched against his character. The final line clearly indicates that he was aware of the danger of challenging certain paradigms within a structural organization.

Another poem written in the final months of Dalton’s life, “Poeticus efficacie,” attacks the military regime. But this poem also offers a critique of the political struggles within his own organization: “Podréis juzgar/ la catadura moral de un régimen político/ de una institución



política,/ por el grado de peligrosidad que otorguen/ al hecho de ser observados/ por los ojos de un poeta satírico” (“You can judge/ the moral fiber of a political regime,/ a political institution a political man,/ by the degree of danger they consent to/ by way of being observed through the eyes of a satirical poet”; *Poemas clandestinos* 8; Hirschman 9). Written under the pseudonym of a woman, Vilma Flores, the poetic voice identifies with the margins, a subaltern voice within the revolutionary movement. These are the voices that Dalton saw as central to the movement. At the same time, he critiques the rigid, authoritarian, and anti-democratic structure of the movement that models its structure after the regime it seeks to replace. He compares leftist organizations with military regimes as both reproduce structures of power that marginalize dissident voices.

Tragically, these critiques framed the ERP leadership’s justification for murdering Dalton. The suggestion by ERP that he was an undisciplined bohemian adventurer was emphatically rejected by former ERP leader Eduardo Sancho (Chávez 188) and historian Jorge Arias Gómez. Arias Gómez, who knew Dalton from his days in the *Círculo Literario* and who was in the former Czechoslovakia while Dalton interviewed Mármol, attested to his intense work ethic clearly evidenced in his literary production. It is always easier to malign the victim’s character than to accept social responsibility for such a death. As Dalton becomes a postage stamp and a collective emblem for post-war reconciliation, rendering him a chimeric poet out of his element in the battlefield, a symbol of fracture and miscalculated utopias, relinquishes social responsibility for past and present death. As neo-liberal policies unfold in El Salvador and the dollar dominates the market, Dalton’s verses become another artifact to buy and sell in the intellectual free market.

Despite his fatal denouement, the final hours before Dalton's assassination reveal a profound affirmation of humanity that is present in his verse and prose. He viewed martyrdom and death, like many of his generation, as an affirmation of life, as a "semilla de libertad." But he likely did not expect to die as he did. He thought, even in his last moments, that he could "negotiate the end to his unjust imprisonment with ERP leaders" (Chávez 188). He refused the offers of "Eduardo Sancho and Lil Milagro Ramírez to free him with the help of his jailers" (Chávez 188). Betrayed by his own *compañeros*, he was denied in death the soteriology that he rendered so beautifully in his verses.

### **The Death Shroud**

Dalton prepared for his death by weaving his own shroud with the fantastical collection of saints and sinners that populate his texts. According to his youngest son, he imagined in life that he was soon bound for death, a death that would mirror the stories he wrote. As he writes in "El Vanidoso," "Yo sería un gran muerto./ Mis vicios entonces lucirían como joyas antiguas/ con esos deliciosos colores del veneno" ("Mine would be a great death./ My sins would glow like ancient jewels/ with the delicious iridescence of venom"; *El turno del ofendido* 98; trans. Cohen et al. 46). But his final moments were not scripted as expected. He was not burned alive nor tortured in a clandestine prison nor in military barracks by state actors. However, he knew the dangers of satirical poetry. In imagining these moments, he writes, "Tal vez alguien diría que fui leal y fui bueno./ Pero solamente tú recordarías/ mi manera de mirar a los ojos" ("El Vanidoso," *El turno del ofendido*, 98; "Maybe someone will say that I was loyal or good/ but only you will remember/ the way I looked into your eyes" [Cohen et al. 46]). Perhaps the *tú* here is not some memorialized lover, but his assassin who will be tortured by looking into Dalton's innocent eyes as he exhaled his last breath. In fact, his own *compañeros*, rigid Marxist militants, delivered the

*tiro de gracia*. Unwilling to accept or embrace the multidimensional approach to radical social movements that Dalton developed through his experience, he was perceived as a threat by fellow members of ERP.

The writer is not just a creator but a recorder. Even the most vociferous writer embraces silence: to observe, record, and collect the experiences that form our narratives. Dalton captured in his texts, particularly in *Miguel Mármol*, the oral traditions that formed and informed resistance movements in El Salvador. This knowledge perhaps led him to his death as he saw beyond the rigid militant approach to radical social change. The broad-based socio-cultural movement that emerged after his death was predicted and demonstrated *Mármol*—a text rejected by hardline socialism in Cuba and by the *compañeros* of his own cadre.

Dalton is known as the *poeta guerrillero*, but he is still defined by the Marxist era either in opposition to or as a product of this era. The Spanish poetic tradition, the Salvadoran oral tradition, and the Catholic traditions together comprise his literary imagination as did theoretical Marxism. But his work is “[p]rofunda y compleja, es también una literatura cómica, cargada de ironía, que no deja a ninguna figura de pie y afirma el complejo proceso de liberarse de todo tipo de dogma. Se burla de todo y de todos sin pedir permiso disculpas” (“[p]rofound and complex, it is also comical literature, full of irony, that does not leave a single figure standing, setting forth a complex process of liberation from any form of dogma. He ridicules everything and everyone without asking for permission or forgiveness”; Arias “Roque Dalton” 132). As his son, journalist and publisher Juan José Dalton affirms:

Pero los libros de mi padre son los más vendidos en América Latina. Creo que en general mi padre es más conocido como el poeta guerrillero, como el poeta revolucionario que se rebeló y que murió y que fue asesinado. Hay mucha gente que no

conoce la verdadera historia de cómo mi padre fue asesinado. Entonces, tal vez lo encasille un poco dentro de los intelectuales que estuvieron en contra de la dictadura o que estuvieron en la guerrilla. Pero poco a poco la gente va descubriendo su obra completa y se da cuenta de que ya realmente están frente a un poeta grande de América Latina—independientemente de la posición que haya ocupado en el movimiento revolucionario.

[...] Mi padre es un escritor que estaba realmente inmerso en el proceso histórico que se estaba llevando a cabo. Entonces mi padre fue líder estudiantil, después fue la primera generación de escritores que estaban ligados a un proyecto revolucionario, en donde él encabeza ese grupo. ¡Bueno! después de la revolución, que lógicamente fue una revolución fracasada aquí en El Salvador—y yo coincido con mucha gente que dicen que si algo hizo fracasar la revolución en El Salvador también tiene que ver con el asesinato de mi padre. Porque fue un hecho gravísimo que aún después de tanto tiempo ni siquiera se ha querido investigar ni procesar.

(“My father’s books are amongst the most sold in Latin America. I believe that in general he is the most well known as the *poeta guerrillero*, as the revolutionary poet who rebelled and died and was assassinated. There are a lot of people who do not know the true history of his assassination. So he is perhaps, pigeonholed as one of the intellectuals against the dictatorship or in the *guerrilla* movement. But little by little, as people discover his complete work, they realize that they are encountering a great Latin American poet, independent of the position that he occupied in the revolutionary movement.

“[...] My father is a writer who was profoundly immersed in the historic process that was occurring. So he was a student leader, and later he was in the first generation of writers who were tied to the revolutionary project, and this is where he led the group. Well, after the revolution, that logically was a failed revolution here in El Salvador—and I agree with many people, if there was a failure in the Salvadoran Revolution, it also has to do with the assassination of my father, because it was a severe act, and even after so much time has not been investigated or fully assessed.” [Personal Interview 2008])

While Juan José Dalton, views his father’s death as an error in the revolution, he also embraced his father’s path as did his older brother:

Mi hermano mayor cayó combatiendo como guerrillero en el frente guerra—su cadáver no apareció, pero mi hermano cayó en, en combate en una guerra. Pero mi padre no es el mismo caso, fue injustamente asesinado por sus propios compañeros. [...] Este Joaquín Villalobos<sup>5</sup> me dice “la única idea era eliminar a tu padre porque era un obstáculo para la metodología que este militarista extremo”—mi padre estaba en contra de eso. El movimiento revolucionario salvadoreño habían dos vertientes: una militarista y otra que apoyaba la lucha armada, pero que era más política, más de incorporar a la gente, de crear unos frentes políticos, de hacer una lucha política, diplomática, popular, en contra de la dictadura, empuñando las armas, pero los otros eran militarista en extremo. Entonces esas dos realidades chocaron, y bueno, ahí se resultó víctima mi padre, por como muchos otros.

[Mi padre]explicaba las cosas de una manera simpática, contaba muchas anécdotas y tenía un gran sentido del humor. Entonces a la gente le gustaba eso ¿no? Y

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<sup>5</sup> Joaquín Villalobos was one of the principal leaders in ERP and implicated in the assassination of Roque Dalton.

yo creo que eso también chocó con una rigidez— las personas que son extremistas no ven los matices, no ven los sentimientos, no ven diferente, no ven la vida tal como es, sino que la ven de una forma lineal.

(“My older brother fell fighting as a *guerrillero* on the warfront—his body never appeared but my brother fell in combat in a war. But it is not the same case with my father, who was unjustly assassinated by his own comrades. [...] This same Joaquín Villalobos said to me, ‘the only idea was to eliminate your father because he was an obstacle to the methodology of this extremist military group’—my father was against this. The Salvadoran revolutionary movement had two wings: a military wing and another that supported the armed struggle but was more political, and that focused on incorporating people, creating political fronts, creating a political and diplomatic popular struggle against the dictatorship, also wielding arms, but those others were military extremists. So there were these two realities that clashed, and well, my father became a victim of this situation, like many others.

“[My father] explained things in a lovely way, and he used a lot of anecdotes and had a great sense of humor. People liked this and I believe it created conflict, with the rigid leadership— people that are extremists, they don’t see nuances, they don’t see feelings, they don’t see differences, they see life, not as it is, but in a lineal form.”

[Personal Interview 2008])

Perhaps this nuance that Dalton so carefully illustrated in his texts, prevented him from perceiving that his cadre could operate in the absence of nuance. Dalton could have left before his trial and condemnation, but he had faith in his *compañeros* and benevolence of *la lucha armada* as his Juan José Dalton asserts:

Nosotros hemos averiguado circunstancias incluso los momentos antes de morir, antes de ser asesinado. Nos cuentan alguna gente que estuvieron con él que hicieron todo lo posible para convencerlo para que él se fuera con ellos y fugarse de la cárcel, bueno, del lugar donde lo tenían recluido. Él les dijo que no, que él confiaba en sus compañeros, que él sabía que no podían hacer nada grave. [...] Pero en esta oportunidad yo creo que es lo que lo hace todavía más mártir. Él tenía realmente confianza en que sus compañeros jamás iban a asesinarlo.

(“We have investigated the circumstances, even in the moments before death, before he was assassinated. Some people who were there tell us that they did everything possible to convince him to leave with them, to flee from the jail, or, well, the place where they held him. But he refused, because he believed in his *compañeros*, he knew that they would not do anything severe. [...] But, in this moment, I believe he was even more of a martyr. He had trust in his *compañeros*, and never believed they would assassinate him.” [Personal Interview 2008])

Despite the death of his father at the hands of the militant left, Juan José followed in his steps and joined the guerrilla forces:

Yo me incorporé a la guerra, yo estuve combatiendo. Yo estuve con el Frente, una vida militante, mi hermano mayor que hasta murió en el frente. Pero donde a mi padre se le guardaba mucho respeto, mucho cariño. Muchos de los combatientes nos contaban como ellos se habían prácticamente adoctrinado leyendo el libro de Miguel Mármol.

(“I also, joined the guerrilla, I was a combatant, I was in the *Frente*, in the militant life, my older brother died on the warfront. There was a lot of respect and affection towards

my father. Many combatants and many commanders told us that they were indoctrinated by reading *Miguel Mármol*.” [Personal Interview 2008])

Amazingly, this text was almost censored by the *Casa de las Américas*. This irreverent, humorous, and picturesque story of the Salvadoran countryside is the text that inspires and motivates young people to join the *guerrilla*. Dalton in his death strengthened the movement with his words and with nuanced tale of El Salvador. This nuance, the polyvocality, this counterpoint, created the beautiful symphonic production of Dalton’s art and life.

In spite of his father’s death by extremist forces, Juan José participated in the revolutionary struggle:

¿Hasta te puede llevar el extremismo? A cometer un tremendo crimen y una tremenda falta a la moral, a la ética, a la dignidad de lo que aspira una persona que quiere cambiar la realidad en beneficio de la sociedad. [...] Mira, desafortunadamente mi hermano mayor murió, pero eso es un símbolo de hasta donde nosotros nos entregábamos a la guerra y a la lucha en este país. Para nosotros fue muy doloroso. Yo estuve en la guerrilla, estuve herido, a mí me capturaron herido, a mí me torturaron en la cárcel, yo estuve desaparecido. Yo lo que le puedo decir a la gente es, a mí no me hicieron [los militares] ni decirles mi propio nombre. [Es] el sacrificio que nosotros pusimos en esta lucha. Y yo no dije ni mi propio nombre. [...] [Pero] te voy a decir en todo momento para mí en las peores y en las más difíciles circunstancias, mi padre estaba presente.

(“Where can extremism lead? To commit a tremendous crime, a tremendous lack of morals, of ethics, of the dignity that inspires a person that want to change reality to benefit society. [...] Look, unfortunately my older brother died, but it is symbol of how much we committed ourselves the war and to the struggle of this country. This was



painful for us. And I was in the guerrilla, I was injured, I was captured, I was tortured in prison, I was disappeared. And I can say that they [the military torturers] couldn't make me say my own name. This is the sacrifice that we committed to the struggle. And I did not even tell them my name. [...] [But] I want to tell you that even in the worst and most difficult circumstances my father was present." [Personal Interview 2008])

The presence of Dalton in the revolutionary imagination of his son is a footnote to his death. His death reflects the tragic and ironic interweaving of life and literary production. Dalton lives the stories of the historical figures and revolutionary martyrs that he attempted to rescue from clandestine cemeteries and common graves. He dies like the heroes and martyrs with his body torn apart by vultures. The missing element, of course, is the spectacle of glorious death to collectively memorialize the act of martyrdom. Dalton was denied this moment as it was his own comrades that fired the coup de grâce. However, as his son suggests, it is facile to cast Dalton's death as an error of history, a mistake of the militant left. Shall we embrace his son's interpretation of his father's death? That it was perhaps an error, but not one that erases Dalton's commitment to creating an egalitarian society free of state violence.

Dalton writes in "Difunto solo," "*Pobrecitos los muertos—se diría al mirarte—¡Qué cosa más jodida es descansar en paz!*" ("To rest in peace is the most fucked up thing"; *Un libro levemente odioso* 46). The armed struggle, the commitment to this struggle, and the participation of the masses in popular organization is far more complex than *foquista* theories. Dalton's opus addresses the complexities of the social, political, and historical context from which he emerged. He does not rest in peace, because even today, his verses ask us to consider injustices from multiple perspectives, to imagine and embrace conflicting cosmologies and ontologies that generate a polyvocality and heteroglossia. As his son, Juan José Dalton summarizes:

Cuando yo llegué a El Salvador, yo tenía la imagen de una guerrilla más como romántica, en medio del bosque no en champas o en tiendas de campaña. No me imaginaba que un fulano que anduviera descalzo y ahí con sus mujeres y sus hijos y todo en la propia población ¿Ese era mi guerrillero? Los jefes sí convivían con nosotros, compartíamos las mismas cosas, los mismos peligros y eso fue lo que hizo crecer el movimiento revolucionario aquí. Esa cercanía con la gente. [...] Porque la teoría del foquismo—el foco guerrillero en la montaña allá enmontañado, que va creciendo en base al reclutamiento del campesino, pero nunca toda la familia ahí. Para nosotros sí, yo viví eso—yo viví eso aquí. Y a la hora de que habían invasiones había que llevarse a—hasta la gente con sus perros, sus vacas y sus cosas en caravana. Era tremendo a veces por culpa de esas circunstancias se perdieron muchas vidas. Bueno, pero no podía ser de otra forma en este país, con un territorio tan pequeño.

(“Even when I arrived in El Salvador, I had the most romantic image of the guerrilla in the middle of jungle, not in huts or tents. I never imagined some barefoot peasant with his wife, his children, and the whole town. This was my guerrilla? The commanders shared the same things with us, the same danger and this made the revolutionary movement grow. The intimacy with the people because the theory of *foquismo* was to be out there in the mountains, to grow the base, recruiting the peasants, but not the whole family! For us, yes, I lived this, I lived this here. When there were invasions, we had to take everybody, their dogs, their cows, their things in a caravan. It was tremendous and because of these circumstances, many lives were lost. But it couldn’t be any other way in this country, in this *territorio tan pequeño*.” [Personal Interview 2008]

## Chapter IV

### *Ave Muda:*

#### **Decolonial Poetics of Luis de Li3n in *Poemas de Volc3n de Agua* and *Los zopilotes***

*Perhaps there will be questions from the lords of Xib'alb'a about our death. They are thinking about how to overcome us because we haven't died, nor have we been defeated. We've exhausted all of their tests.*

—Popol Wuj

The previous chapters examined the environment, ethos, and circumstances that shaped and determined the choices of the poets of the revolutionary period. I attempted to demonstrate how the literary text acted as a dialogic site that both reproduced and dialogued with notions of martyrdom and sacrifice present in cultural practices, particularly Catholic religious traditions. While, both Roque Dalton and Otto Ren3 Castillo, as well as members of the *Generaci3n Comprometida*, roundly rejected Catholic dogma, their literary imagination was clearly shaped by the Church. Utopian desires present in revolutionary movements reflected both Christian and Marxist influences. At the same time, this Marxist teleology interwoven in literary texts presented a conflict with peasant and Indigenous cultural practices, as seen in Dalton's *Miguel M3rmol*. A conflict, that is mirrored in the concrete experience of the revolutionary struggle, and metaphorically represented in the death of our literary protagonist, Roque Dalton, who had attempted to weave these conflicting paradigms into literary production and revolutionary praxis.

Dalton expresses his notion of counterpoint in the textual space, creating a revolutionary harmony of independent narratives, the Nahua uprising of Aquino and the Marxist revolution. However, in the textual site the unintentional conflict of the dialogic with the Marxist dialectic occurs. While Dalton imposes a narratological order in such works as the "Cantos a Anastasio

Aquino,” this order breaks down in *Miguel Mármol*, where the polyphony is interrupted by conflicting ontologies present in the text. *Miguel Mármol*, as testimonial genre, opens spaces for presenting dissonant narratives as the author/interlocutor’s voice fades, and the testimonial voice emerges. The testimonial genre, as John Beverley originally defines it, is:

a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or significant life experience. (30-31)

Beverley understands testimony as a literature of the margins, a subaltern voice of resistance, narrated by direct participants. While this definition has vastly broadened since Beverley codified it in 1993, the genre as it emerged, had opened spaces for subaltern voices, although mediated through an interlocutor. These subaltern voices expressed Indigenous-peasant knowledges that contested hegemonic notions of time and space.

As the Central American revolutionary organizations in the twentieth century readily adapted Marxist ideologies to the social and political context of the region, other cultural indicators, voices like Mármol’s, that informed and inspired these movements were often overshadowed. Given that the Cold War had a profound impact on the geopolitical climate in the post-World War II era, it is natural that we continue to analyze the revolutionary period through the ideological lenses that shaped the latter half of the twentieth century. However, acknowledging that geo-political forces impacted military intervention and ideological alliances does not deepen our understanding of *agency*. Agency, as it relates to this study, refers to the individual and communal choice to participate in social movements. Relying heavily on macroeconomic or geo-political analyses to parse social, political, and literary movements in the

revolutionary period falls into the same colonial paradigms that shaped the socio-economic and political structures post-Conquest. We continuously refer to Marxist ideologies, guerrilla leaders, and the *foquista* movement as the intellectual force and impetus of the revolutionary period suggesting that “mobilization was the handiwork of prophets, patriarchs, and other inspirational leaders alone and the mobilized were no more than an inert mass shaped by a superior will” (Guha 103). We then see the period through the perspective of the failed *lucha armada* crushed by foreign military intervention and naïve or erred *guerrilla* strategies, rather than through the perspective of the vast Indigenous and *campesino* populace that lent their support to social, political, and/or armed movements.

These historical and political lenses bleed into our literary analysis, as we continue to limit our authors to a particular social role as Marxist *guerrilleros* or cast their literary expression as separate and independent of their political commitments. Kaqchikel writer and *Nuevo Signo*<sup>1</sup> founder, Francisco Morales Santos affirms the centrality of this commitment: “el escritor latinoamericano del siglo XX se convierte en la voz de todos, se vuelve el portavoz de sus sentimientos y planteamientos, es el cronista de lo que le ocurre al subalterno” (“the twentieth-century Latin American writer becomes the voice of the people, representing their feelings and ideas, a chronicler of the marginalized”; Personal Interview August 2010). The tragic disappearance of fellow poet Roberto Obregón profoundly impacted his *Nuevo Signo* group. However, as Morales Santos asserts, although the period “estuvo signada por el miedo, la angustia, el sobresalto, la muerte, [...] nunca dejaron de escribir y su compromiso fue testimoniar a través de la poesía la desgracia de todo un pueblo” (“was marked by fear, anguish,

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<sup>1</sup> *Nuevo Signo* was a literary group founded in the 1960s by Francisco Morales Santos, José Luis Villatoro, Luis Alfredo Arango, Antonio Brañas, Julio Fausto Aguilera, Roberto Obregón, and Delia Quiñónez. They published a series of works between 1968 and 1970, and a collective anthology *Las plumas de la serpiente*. The group was marked by tragedy when Roberto Obregón was disappeared in 1970.

shock, death, [...] they never stopped writing and their commitment was to testify through poetry to the tragedy of a people”; Personal Interview August 2010).

Interestingly, Guatemalan Kaqchikel author, Luis de Li3n, is generally not read as a revolutionary artist, in part, because his writing directly addresses issues of identity and Indigenous subjectivity. Despite his membership in the communist Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajador (PGT) and his direct involvement in political activity, Luis de Li3n is read primarily with respect to identity and subjectivity, and his political commitment has not figured prominently in current literary analysis. At the same time, this has produced scholarship that offers more nuanced analysis of his work. However, Luis de Li3n’s ethnic identity, social and economic reality of impoverished semi-rural/ rural life defined the experience of the majority of Central Americans and the majority of participants in social movements. This is the ethos that informed his writing and that formed the writing of his fellow artists, and the political participation of his compatriots.

In Luis de Li3n’s (born Jos3 Luis de Le3n) poetry and prose the heretofore marginalized voice becomes central, shifting the vision from the Indigenous subject as a trope, to centering the story from an Indigenous experience. Neither is his voice mediated through an interlocutor as in the testimonial genre. K’iche writer and researcher Emil’ Keme asserts, de Li3n’s “decolonial discursive strategy [...] not only challenges Indigenismo but also issues a revolutionary call to defend and reestablish Indigenous sovereignty,” (48) while showing, “the influence of Marxist-Leninist ideology and seek[ing] to understand it and interpret it from [...] [his] own Maya perspectives” (63-64). In doing this, Keme argues, de Li3n develops his “own [Maya] nationalist/emancipatory projects” (64). These emancipatory projects in relationship to the

revolutionary struggle are central to our understanding of notions of martyrdom and sacrifice realized in this era.

As I stated above, literary research on de Li3n has focused pivotal themes of identity and indigeneity, particularly with respect to his novel *El tiempo principia en Xibalb3*. Following Emil' Keme's direction, this analysis attempts to explore both the alternative knowledges and the Marxist influences present in de Li3n's literary production. As this dissertation focuses on the social production of martyrdom, this chapter examines the imagery of rebirth and regeneration present in Indigenous cosmologies relying specifically on Maya traditions, and the manner by which de Li3n integrated these cosmologies into his literary work. This analysis pays attention to the oral and practiced traditions that continue to be present in contemporary Indigenous communities,<sup>2</sup> and the symbolic embodiment of these traditions as seen in both de Li3n's life and literary production. This chapter will begin by examining Luis de Li3n's formative experiences, his development as an educator, writer, and activist, exploring the social conditions of his upbringing and literary influences. Focusing on *Poemas del Volc3n de Agua* and *Los zopilotes*, we examine the relationship of his political commitment to his literary production, and the intersection of this production with his decolonial project.

### **At the Foot of Junajpu**

Luis de Li3n hails from San Juan del Obispo, Sacatep3quez, a small town a few miles outside of Antigua, the old capital city of Guatemala. Established by Francisco Marroqu3n (1499-1563) the first bishop of Guatemala, he chose this site for his residency. The town was populated by Tlaxcaltecan people that accompanied (or were obligated to accompany) Marroqu3n from Mexico, and Kaqchikel inhabitants who had already populated the area of what is now the

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<sup>2</sup> As, for example, Dennis Tedlock evidences in his translation of the *Popol Wuj*, comparing the written text to oral versions.

department of Sacatepéquez. The town sits under the breathtaking Volcán de Agua or Volcán Junajpu. The stunning environs figure prominently in de Lión's work, particularly in his collection *Poemas del Volcán de Agua*. The inhabitants of the town, in this period, survived primarily on “la agricultura de subsistencia y de trabajos ocasionales. El pueblo se caracteriza porque muchos de sus habitantes tienen sensibilidad artística, buenos carpinteros [y] talladores” (“subsistence agriculture and temporary work. The town is characterized by its artistic sensibility, good carpenters and carvers”; Personal Interview with Francisco Morales Santos August 2010).<sup>3</sup> Agricultural goods and artisanal crafts were not sold as major exports, rather, the San Juan inhabitants sold their goods at the agricultural market in Antigua.

When de Lión was a child, there was no transportation from San Juan to Antigua (Personal Interview with Morales Santos August 2010), and students had to walk to neighboring Antigua to attend school. Transportation continued to be limited into the late nineties. Now buses roar pass to Antigua or to Guatemala City. However, there was a time that one can imagine, when de Lión walked to San Juan, through the quiet Alameda del Calvario underneath the trees, toward La Ermita del Santo Calvario, a yellow baroque-styled church finished in the mid-seventeenth century. The church marks the edge of Antigua and is where the religious processions end during Holy Week. Behind the church, the Volcán Junajpu rises in the background towards the clouds, named for the hero twin brother Junajpu whose head is severed off by a monstrous bat. The Lords of Xib'alb'a threw Junajpu's severed head down on the ball court to his brother Xb'alanque as a sign of their defeat. But Xb'alanque placed a squash on his brother's body to simulate a head and trick the Xib'alb'ans at the ball court. He manages to revive his brother with the help of a rabbit, who retrieves the head when Xb'alanque kicks it far

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<sup>3</sup> Francisco Morales Santos is Kaqchikel poet and *Nuevo Signo* founder. Also from San Juan del Obispo, he was a childhood friend of Luis de Lión.



out of the ball court. Xb'alanque then places the decapitated head back on Junajpu restoring his brother to life (*Popol Vuh* 126-129).

The road between Antigua and San Juan del Obispo, represented a crossroads between the volcano—Volcán Junajpu—the ancient and the present. Luis de Lión attended school in Antigua—*una ciudad letrada*—and in many ways his work represents this crossroads between these worlds—the ancient and the modern, *castellano* and Kaqchikel. Although, we must be careful about understanding this crossroads as a binary. San Juan del Obispo, a town forcibly created through Spanish colonialism and religious imposition, with its rectilinear streets, also represents modernity. The conditions created by the colonial enterprise established the social structures and racial hierarchy in San Juan and these form a central element in de Lión's work. The colonial project set in place a system that dislocated and disordered “natural *economies* [...]—harmonious and viable *economies* adapted to the indigenous population,” where we see, “food crops destroyed, malnutrition permanently introduced, agricultural development oriented solely toward the benefit of the metropolitan countries; [...] looting of products, the looting of raw materials” (Césaire 43).

Luis de Lión's literary production reflects his concern with the economic structures created by the colonial enterprise, but also how these structures disrupted and dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their knowledge. Deterritorialization and linguistic truncation have profoundly shaped the Indigenous experience in Guatemala; these form major themes in de Lión's writing. In describing her father, Mayarí de León emphasizes that de Lión was a school teacher and was deeply committed to education, publishing pedagogical tools and developing techniques to directly confront this experience (Personal Interview July 2010). He was an early proponent of bilingual education and began to study Kaqchikel in order to better serve his

students (Personal Interview July 2010). His own familial structure also represented the alienating experience of cultural disconnection as Mayarí de León narrates in her family history. Her grandmother, “era una indígena kaqchikel que hablaba kaqchikel y dejó de hablar el idioma cuando se casó [...] y hablaba a medias el español, nunca lo habló correctamente” (“was Kaqchikel Indigenous and spoke Kaqchikel and stopped speaking the language when she married [...] and she barely spoke Spanish, she never spoke it correctly”; Personal Interview July 2010). On the other hand, her grandfather “era calzado, hablaba perfectamente el español y sabía leer y escribir. Era un mestizo hijo de una cocinera indígena y de un alemán” (“wore shoes, spoke Spanish perfectly, and knew how to read and write. He was a mestizo child born to an Indigenous cook and a German”; Personal Interview July 2010). As Mayarí de León points out, the effects of dispossession and colonization embedded in the familial structure, reproduced racial hierarchies. In San Juan we see the processes of the colonial enterprise, dispossessing lands, religion, and cultural heritage, creating a situation that Mayarí de León asserts was “castrante y doloroso” (“alienating and painful”; Personal Interview July 2010). De Lión’s work responds to these hierarchies with poetry that is rooted in Indigenous cultural practices that persist despite the mechanisms of the colonial project.

For de Lión, the metonymic mother becomes a crucial literary figure in the process of decolonization, representing the reproduction of culture, but also mother-earth; the land as a living being rather than product to be possessed and harnessed for resources of capitalist production. As Emil’ Keme writes, de Lión “vindicate[s] the Indigenous mother figure [...] offer[ing] us an alternative knowledge that gives authority to Maya ancestral values, in particular, those associated with environmental justice politics who have been threatened by capitalism and state-terrorism” (63). In his analysis of de Lión’s *Poemas del Volcán de Agua*,

Emil' Keme asserts that the collection “presents a pregnant mother who will give birth to a son who, as he grows up and becomes aware of land dispossession in his home community, develops a political social consciousness to change things” (46).

This political-social consciousness, while moored in “Maya ancestral values” also reflects the utopian imaginings present in the political resistance of the period. In “poema a mi barrilete” in the collection *Poemas del Volcán de Agua (Los poemas míos)*, de Lión evokes these values relating them to lived and concrete practices associated with notions of death/afterlife and renewal. The kites, or *los barriletes* form part of a traditional syncretic practice that occurs on *Día de Todos los Santos* or All Saints Day (see figs 1-4). Across Sacatepéquez and other departments, kites are erected and flown in the cemeteries on this day to honor and communicate with the dead (see fig. 1). In Santiago and Sumpango, Sacatepéquez, there are kite festivals that coincide with All Saints Day and All Souls Day. Constructed completely by hand, but in a communal manner, months are spent in the preparation and intricate design of the kites that can measure up to 15 meters in diameter. As the rainy season ends, October and November bring the winds. Children spend the month of October constructing and flying smaller models of the giant kites. The poem references this period from the eyes of a child. The poetic voice captures the winds of October and the thrill of flying and building a kite that can communicate with *el más allá*.



Fig. 1. “Cemetery in Santiago, Sacatepéquez”<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 2. Photo of original painting of San Juan Comalapa of the Día de Todos Los Santos by Salvador Simón.

<sup>4</sup> <[mcd.gob.gt/barriletes-gigantes-lanzan-mensajes-a-las-alturas-en-santiago-sacatepequez/](http://mcd.gob.gt/barriletes-gigantes-lanzan-mensajes-a-las-alturas-en-santiago-sacatepequez/)>





Fig. 3. “Sumpango Kite Festival”<sup>5</sup>

In “poema a mi barrilete” the poetic voice, that of a boy, begins with a description of the kite and its cosmological powers: “era un sol/ construido por las manos de mateo/ que volaba/ hasta abrir un agujero/ al infinito/ era una corola/ que del jardín verde de la tierra/ volaba a florecer/ al jardín azul del cielo/ era una sirena que nadaba/ en un océano de aire” (“it was a sun/ constructed from mateo’s hands/ that flew/ until opening a portal/ to infinity/; it was a corolla/ from the earthly green garden/ that flowered upon flying/ in the blue garden of the sky/ a mermaid that swam/ in an ocean of air”; 16). De Lión renders here, in uncomplicated language with no capital letters, complex and ancient Maya cosmological structures. The structure of the

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<sup>5</sup> <[prensalibre.com/ciudades/sacatepequez/festival-de-barriletes-de-sumpango-horarios-parqueos-rutas-y-recomendaciones/](http://prensalibre.com/ciudades/sacatepequez/festival-de-barriletes-de-sumpango-horarios-parqueos-rutas-y-recomendaciones/)>

universe as conceived by the Maya peoples exists on three conceptual levels: the celestial space, the middleworld or earth, and the underworld or the “Place of the Dead” (Carrasco 51) or the “Place of Fear”; represented in the poem as *el océano*, *la tierra*, and *el cielo*. Supernatural forces and souls of the dead travel through these levels (Carrasco 52). In the *Popol Wuj*, these forces manifest in the hero twins Junajpu and Xb’alanque, whose transfiguration occurs in these three realms, as they move through multiple cycles of time and place. These forces can enter the earthly world “from below and above [...] through caves, fire, sunlight, animals, stones—any place where there [is] a spiral or opening connecting humans with the spaces or temporal cycles of the god” (Carrasco 52).

In the poem the kite serves as a symbolic representation of this spiral, spinning upwards to the sky: “era un pájaro, del cual yo recogía/ solamente las plumas/ olvidadas en la hierba./ porque era ajeno/ y no mío” (“it was a bird/ from whom i collected/ only the feathers/ forgotten in the grass./ because it was someone else’s/ and not mine”;16). Here the spiral functions as both bird and kite, leaving feathers, or strips of paper, abandoned in the grass. Simultaneously, the feathers evoke the ancient, the Sovereign Plumed Serpent; Tepew Q’uq’umatz, “the Maker, Modeler; Bear, Begetter” (Tedlock 356). However, the boy is left with the remnants of the ancient, the discarded feathers of the bird, and a kite that does not belong to the boy, that is from another’s hands. The discarded feathers symbolize the ancient and suppressed cultural heritage and through the symbolic feathers, de Lión calls attention to the dispossession and alienation, as a central experience of deterritorialized Indigenous peoples.

The poem operates in multiple temporal spaces, evoking the dispossession of the past, but also the concrete and continued dispossession of the present. The kites are constructed with colorful *papel de China* or tissue paper, and the boy does not have the few *centavos* needed to

buy this paper—the kite is inaccessible and unaffordable. The poetic voice continues: “todo ocurría/ los domingos/ en octubre y en noviembre” (“all this occurred on sundays/ in october and november”; 16), again evoking multiple temporal spaces, the ancient winds that arrive in October and the present experience of the boy as the narrative voice of the poem. In this manner, de Lión brings the Kaqchikel struggle into present time, contesting national narratives that relegate Indigenous to a vanquished existence. The colonial struggle is embodied in the boy, who like the trickster hero twins, must find a way to vanquish the Lords of Xib’alb’a and access the celestial space.

The boy uses newspaper to construct his kite: “hasta que un día,/ de una hoja de periódico/ pude construir una paloma-barrilete/ que volaba/ que metía su piquito en el cielo/ para aplacar su sed/ y seguir volando,/ y se volvió mío todo el infinito,/ me sentí dueño de todos los arco iris” (“until one day, with a newspaper/ i was able to make a dove-kite/ that flew/ and whose little beak poked the sky/ to sate her thirst/ and keep flying,/ and all of the world, the end and the beginning became mine,/ i felt the power of all the rainbows”; 17). The kite is constructed from a colonizer’s tool—a newspaper—representing *las letras, el castellano y el alfabeto romano*. The boy-trickster takes possession of the colonial tool and uses it in an alternative manner to access his past and his ancestors. The boy follows the model of written transcripts of the *Annals of the Kaqchikel* and the *Popol Wuj*, also maintained in oral traditions, but using the Roman alphabet to preserve Maya-Kaqchikel and Maya-K’iche knowledge, to counter and challenge colonial structures. De Lión’s poetic production, although written in Spanish (the colonizer’s tool), also contests these colonial structures, elevating traditional Kaqchikel knowledge.

In addressing the ancient, the poem never abandons the present historical moment, calling attention to the concrete reality of the dispossessed Indigenous experience of poverty and lack of

access to resources. Mayarí de León discusses the reality of de León’s childhood in which, “[de] cinco hermanos, tres murieron y sólo sobrevivió mi papá que era el más pequeño y una, su hermana” (“[of] five siblings, three died, and only my father, who was the youngest, and his sister survived”; Personal Interview July 2010). Through the kite, the boy is able to communicate with his dead brothers: “mi alegría/ se volvió un carrizo de hilo/ largo, largo,/ y pude enviar a mis hermanos/ que vivían en las nubes/ según decía, llorosa, mi madre,/ todos los telegramas/ que quería” (“my joy/ became a reel of string/ long, long/ and i could send my brothers/ that lived in the clouds,/ as my tearful mother said,/ all the telegrams/ i wished”; 17). The boy sends his telegrams from the middleworld—*la tierra*—while surrounded by the trees, the birds, and the kite that reaches the celestial space: “esto ocurrió/ sobre una alfombra verde,/ la orilla de una alameda de cipreses,/ entre pájaros y pinos” (all this occurred/ on a carpet of green,/ at the edge of a street of cypress trees,/ between birds and pines”; 17). The boy’s power represented by the kite and the mother-earth embodied in the nature that surrounds him, and the oral knowledge of his mother, and his ancestors in the celestial space.



Fig. 4. “Lifting the Kite”<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, de León recognizes that these knowledges are under constant threat, as

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<sup>6</sup> <[viaventure.com/guatemalas-amazing-kite-festival-lively-way-honor-departed/](http://viaventure.com/guatemalas-amazing-kite-festival-lively-way-honor-departed/)>



the colonizing project is continuous. As he writes the Guatemalan Holocaust reaches unimaginable heights, and the poem ends with a warning: “nota:/ los niños que vinieron después de mí/ ya no pudieron volar sus barriletes/ sobre esa alfombra,/ pues un día.../ bueno, ésta es otra historia.” (note:/ the children that came after me/ they could no longer fly their kites/ on this carpet,/ one day.../ well, this is another story”;17). The open-endedness of the poem suggests that boy’s struggle will deepen and he will need to access ancestral knowledge in the process of renewal and resistance.

In de Lión’s more intentionally political poem, “canción para despertar a mi madre,”<sup>7</sup> the ancestral knowledge aligns with the popular struggle, although contesting dominant revolutionary theories and methodologies. The poetic voice calls on his mother/mother-earth, to assist in the process of social renovation: “madre/ ¿sabe, usted, que,/ siendo infinito el universo,/ el cielo está,/ para los pobres,/ cada vez más próximo?” (“mother/ do you know, that/ as the universe is infinite,/ each day/ the sky is closer,/ for the poor?”; December 18, 1979). By calling on his mother/mother-earth, de Lión challenges leftist notions that social renewal had to be mediated through Marxist-ladino social movements. Concepts such as Ernesto Guevara’s *hombre nuevo*, that called for social and cultural renewal through the intervention of the socialist state directly conflicted with Maya cultural and communitarian structures. De Lión, in his work challenged limited notions of the left with respect to Indigenous peoples. His literary and political practice, as Emil’ Keme writes, “vindicate Mayaness” and “question the Left’s understanding of Indigeneity as a problem that can be solved through ladinoization” (64).

Interestingly, the poem, while expressly aligning with the popular struggle, does not directly call for nor elevate, *la lucha armada*. In fact, there are no metonymic representations of

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<sup>7</sup> I received an unpublished version of this poem from Mayarí de León. She indicated that many of her father’s poems were published in pamphlets and magazines (often unpreserved) during the civil war years.

arms, and revolutionary violence does not occupy space within the poem. Unlike Castillo and Dalton, Li3n never took up arms: “de la participaci3n directa en el conflicto armado, el mismo Luis me dec3a que 3l no era capaz ni de matar un pajarito” (“of direct participation in the armed conflict, Luis himself told me that he wasn’t capable of murdering even a little bird”; Morales Santos. Personal Interview August 2010). In the poem, the popular struggle takes place in the streets, but de Li3n ties the struggle to his indigenous roots, using imagery that connects to Maya ancestry: “madre,/ debo contarle que,/ por fin, tenemos bandera/ y que marchamos con ella/ a lo largo y a lo ancho de la calle,/ madre,/ ¿sabe, usted, de d3nde hemos tomado la tela?/ la hemos tomado el arco-iris/ y es su color./ de los siete colores, el primero” (“mother,/ i must tell you,/ finally, we have a flag/ and we march with it/ all through the streets,/ mother,/ do you know from where we got the fabric?/ we have taken the rainbow/ and it is your color./ of the seven colors, the first”; (December 18, 1979). The flag that the protestors raise in the streets is woven from the cloth of the rainbow and the seven colors that emerge from nature. The *tela* evokes the immediate imagery of the embroidered and/or woven *huipil* and its colors, colors that descend from the same infinite celestial space, a space from which protestors construct the flag/struggle.

While de Li3n rejects Marxist teleology in the structure of this poem, he embraces notions of sacrifice and martyrdom present in the revolutionary struggle. The poetic voice calls on his mother who simultaneously symbolizes mother-earth. The mother-earth, in Indigenous cosmology, represents the “source of life” (Keme 33). The poem functions almost as prayer, calling on the mother/mother-earth to participate in the communal project of sovereignty and liberation and to bless the participation that she has inspired:

madre,

¿sabe, usted, que,

por levantar esa bandera,  
muchos compañeros han caído?  
¿sus nombres, madre mía?  
son innumerables  
y basta con que afine bien su oído  
y escuche que todos los días se reúnen  
y planifican su retorno a la vida,  
basta con que ponga atención  
a las voces que discuten  
de estrategia y táctica  
para vencer  
a la muerte.  
("mother,  
did you know that  
by raising this flag,  
many *compañeros* have fallen?  
their names, my mother?  
are endless  
and just tune your ear  
and listen to them meet everyday  
and plan their return to life,  
just pay attention  
to the voices that discuss

strategy and tactics

to overcome

death.” [December 18, 1979])

He asks the mother-earth to listen for those who have fallen, for they will arrive to the underworld and must “plan their return to life.” De Lión evokes those that have fallen in the struggle, but reminds us that they overcome death, as in the “poema a mi barrilete,” the boy’s brothers will return from “el infinito” and this return will strengthen the strategy and tactics of the struggle. Again, de Lión does not issue a call to arms. Rather, de Lión signals that it is the use of strategy and tactics that overcome death, mirroring the story of hero twins that allied with the natural world, using strategy and planning to overcome the Lords of Xib’alb’a.

Unlike the representation of indigeneity in Dalton’s “Cantos a Anastasio Aquino,” the indigenous presence is not mediated through a mestizo voice nor framed within a Marxist teleology:

madre,

usted, la de los pies descalzos

y las callosas manos,

usted, la que obtuvo su pan

de sudar sobre la tierra,

¿se unirá a esos compañeros?

¿formará con ellos,

en el subsuelo,

una sección de la alianza

obrero-campesina?

¡madre-compañera!  
("mother,  
you, of bare feet  
and callused hands,  
you, who received your bread  
from sweat upon this earth,  
will you join these *compañeros*?  
will you shape with them  
in the undersoil,  
a division of worker-peasant  
alliance?  
mother-*compañera*!" [December 18, 1979])

While the socialist agenda is clearly present in the poem, the mother/ mother-earth will not simply join the struggle but shape the struggle from the *subsuelo* or the underworld—the place of transformation and origin. The *subsuelo* or underworld— Xib’alb’a forms part of the “emancipatory project” of Maya sovereignty that is central to de Li3n’s literary production. The poem is a political and cultural manifestation of this project that resists the Marxist dialectic. While de Li3n embraces the socialist agenda that coincides with Maya communitarian values, we see in the poem, that he rejects the imposition of Marxist linear thinking. Rather than drawing on the Marxist dialectic as the impulse of time and movement in the poem, he relies on ancestral knowledge, found in the *subsuelo* and in the mother-earth figure, as the foundational source for advancing the egalitarian cause.

## *Los zopilotes*

Two authors that have written extensively on Luis de Li3n, Arturo Arias and Emil' Keme differ on their analysis of de Li3n's political ideology in his work. Arias writes:

While I do see de Li3n as a self-configuring intellectual who single-handedly reached conclusions pointing in the direction of racialized subalternity and could creatively process them into an emancipatory project. I do not see his literature inscribed within the parameters of political mobilization per se (though I do see his own militancy in the PGT working in that direction). Rather, I visualize it more as decentered experimentation whose plurality of voices, rhythms, and other innovative textual strategies correspond to alternative forms of knowledge inscribed more within affect (literary knowledge) than ideology. (89)

In contrast Keme writes:

It is important to underscore here that, for Li3n, these challenges were not merely relegated to the literary realm. The Kaqchikel Maya author knew full well that, to bring about substantial changes for Indigenous peoples in Iximulew, political action was also essential. He became involved with the PGT, and his activism directly resulted in his forced disappearance. His writings, in this sense, must be thought of as a *performance* that represent his political ideals: he wrote the way he thought, and he lived the way he wrote. He was committed to political change to improve the conditions of existence for Indigenous peoples and to the revolutionary struggle to end colonialism. (45-46)

Both authors offer nuanced and productive, although differing, analytical approaches to de Li3n's literary production. And both emphasize, as Francisco Morales Santos writes, "su preocupaci3n por los despose3dos" ("his concern for the dispossessed"; "Pr3logo" in *Los*

*zopilotes* 12). This concern or impetus for the dispossessed, manifests not only in de Li3n’s poetry and prose, but in his political activism and his commitment to popular education.

In 1981, de Li3n traveled to Senegal to attend a seminar on popular education. His views coincided with former president L3opold Senghor<sup>8</sup> and other thinkers of the Negritude movement. This movement rejected assimilation and the devaluation of African and black diasporic cultures and insisted that this heritage not be “relegated to the past, that its values were values that could still make an important contribution to the world” (C3esaire 92). Like Senghor and Martinican writer Aim3 C3esaire with respect to African cultures, de Li3n saw the affirmation of Maya Indigenous cultural identity as intimately tied to the process of decolonization. Also influenced by Fanon (Morales Santos. Personal Interview August 2010), de Li3n was concerned with the psychological processes of colonization. For deterritorialized Maya, like himself, the psychological process of decolonization was mediated through radical questioning of the intellectual and aesthetic values that had been imposed through the process of colonization.

In his short story “Los zopilotes” in the eponymous collection, this radical questioning becomes central to the narrative. The story begins from the perspective of Julian Coroy, a resident of an Indigenous hamlet, who is running to fetch the midwife for his wife Chepa, about to give birth. As the narrative advances, de Li3n manifests C3esaire’s notion of the “boomerang effect.” This is, as C3esaire defines it, a process by which colonization:

dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in

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<sup>8</sup> L3opold Senghor was the president of Senegal from 1960-1980. In 1935, he and Aim3 C3esaire founded the literary magazine, *L’Etudiant Noir*. Senghor and C3esaire coined the term Negritude, an intellectual and political movement that empowers blackness by rejecting assimilation and promoting African aesthetics and knowledges.

order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal. (41)

Julian Coroy, an expectant father, in rushing to find the *comadrona* violates the *toque de queda* (military curfew) and is stopped at a military checkpoint. The army, in essence, is an extension of the nation-state established by the *ladino* descendants of the Spanish invaders. During the Guatemalan Civil War, the army mirrored and acted as an extension of the Conquest, invading the Indigenous territory and imposing *castellano* and *ladino* cultural practices (see Chapter One). The Guatemalan nation-state sought to impose *castellano* norms and *ladinizar* the populace as a manner by which to bring Indigenous peoples into modernity, so the country could purportedly develop and advance. Based on racist nineteenth-century civilizing discourse, this so-called progress represented the process of colonialism, that is in itself, as outlined by Césaire, a brutal process. The story presents the soldiers as the embodiment of the “boomerang effect.” Although they view their role as a civilizing force, they are the uncivilized brutes of the story that attack and debase Julian Coroy.

Luis de Lión expresses in the story the linguistic and physical brutality deployed by the soldiers and by extension, the *ladino* nation-state. The ordered and so-called civilized world is mediated by the soldiers, who point guns at Coroy and demand his papers, “¿ónde está tu salvoconducto?” (“Where is your permission of transit?” 21). The only conscious being in the story is Coroy, who questions and ponders the ridiculous demands of the soldiers, when his wife is about to bring life into this world. When Coroy responds in his limited Spanish, “No, señor. Yo no sabía ese, señor. Perdoname, señor” (“No, sir. I didn’t know that, sir. Sorry, sir.”; 21). Coroy responds respectfully, although confused by the brutality of the encounter, but acutely aware of



the dangers he faces. The soldiers then berate Coroy, “¡Ah, indio bruto! Tu cédula, tu boleto, en fin todas tus generales, ¿ónde están?” (“Ugh, stupid Indian! Your i.d., your service card, all your paperwork. Where is it?”; 22). And then to each civilizing order of the state, place/ map, age/ identification, marriage/ civil state, Coroy cannot find an answer:

-Mmm...¿cómo te llamas?

-Julian Coroy.

-¿Onde vivís?

-En un ranchite.

-Pero por ónde, en qué lugar.

-Poray nomás.

-¿Cuántos años tenés?

-A saber, señor.

-¿Sos Casado?

-Nomás vive junto con mi mujer la Chepa Chicojay.

(“Umm...What’s your name?

-Julian Coroy.

-Where ya live?

-On a little ranch.

-But where, what place.

-Just over there.

-How old are you?

-I don’t know, sir.

-Are you married?

-I just live with my wife<sup>9</sup> Chepa Chicojay.” [22])

The so-called civilized order the soldiers impose is a brutalizing order that presents the ontological divide between the soldiers and Coroy—the nation-state and the Indigenous populace. The soldier poses questions, to which Coroy cannot answer, not just due to a linguistic breach, but a distinct approach to inhabiting their shared world. The ordered nation-state enacts laws and policies, to control the populace, extract resources, and exploit the land for capital gain.

Notice the brutality embodied the linguistic divide, soldier’s language and use of the *voseo* in a disrespectful and harsh manner with Coroy, and conversely, *tú* with his fellow soldier. The soldier again insults Coroy, “-Mmm...esas son babosadas. Vos con seguridá sos guerrillero comunista. A mi no me engañás-. Y dirigiéndose a su compañero: -Condúzcalo. Y si opone, culatéyelo. Y si trata de huir, ya sabe” (-Mmm...this is bullshit. You’re for sure a Communist guerrilla. You don’t fool me-. And he says, talking to his fellow soldier: -Take him. And if he resists, hit him with the gun. And if he tries to flee, you know what to do”; 22). The soldiers, who are meant to bring order and control to countryside, bring death and destruction, becoming physical manifestations of the boomerang effect—dehumanizing Coroy, they have dehumanized themselves.

Coroy, of course, attempts to flee as he knows his detainment or death will lead to the death of his wife. He is shot in the back and falls, “como aguacate maduro, muerto” (“like a ripe avocado, dead”; 23). The story concludes with the inevitable tragedy of his wife’s death: “A los pocos días, una espiral de zopilotes, caracol de luto, descendía del cielo, penetraba entre el monte y se posaba sobre un aplastado rancho, para iniciar el festín de la carne podrida de una mujer joven y un niño, unidos por el cordón umbilical” (“A few days later, a spiral of vultures, a

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<sup>9</sup> I intentionally translated the word as wife, although *mujer* could possess multiple meanings. However, I wanted to signal that the civil marriage as carried out by the court functions as another imposition of the ladino state that delegitimizes Indigenous rituals as “unofficial.”

seashell of mourning, descended from the sky, penetrating the vegetation, and roosting in the tiny plot of land. The buzzards then began to feast on the fetid body of a young woman and child, united by an umbilical cord.”; 23). The destruction brought forth by the military, modern iteration of the colonial project, is ameliorated only by the knowledge that Coroy’s wife and child will return to the natural world. This regenerative order, is a principal element in this collection, an order that exists outside the oppressive state apparatus, one that empowers and vindicates the dispossessed. At the same time, suffering and critique of this suffering are also central elements in *Los zopilotes*, as de Li3n is unforgiving of the military, the Church, and the institutions that degrade and debase the populace. However, the regenerative order, tied to earth, the elements, the infinite space, of the ocean, land, and sky, is more powerful than the barbed wire that fences in property, on a land, that is a living being and cannot be possessed.

This contrast between Indigenous cosmologies and Central American nation counters the narrative that Dalton presents in the “Cantos a Anastasio Aquino.” Whereas Dalton attempts to draw these narratives in conjunction through counterpoint, in de Li3n’s text these experiences exist in multiple temporal zones. De Li3n does not attempt to fuse the indigenous past with the contemporary Marxist struggle in a linear continuum. Indigenous notions of time and space exist independently, although intersecting with the daily experiences of the modern state, manifest in the exploitation and oppression of the people that form central theme in his work.

In “Xol3,” also in the *Zopilotes* collection, the state repression is the mechanism that impels the plot. A wealthier neighbor accuses the protagonist’s dog, Xol3, of consuming “tres libras de carne, un canastillo de tortillas y una olla de frijoles” (“three pounds of meat, a basket of tortillas, and a pot of beans”; 46). Her husband, Carmelo, is called to the town council and ordered to pay reparations. Since Carmelo does not have the means to pay the reparations nor the

bribe that was requested, he is imprisoned: “a él lo metieron en la cárcel ya que no teníamos ni para pagar la mordida que nos pidieron con tal de dejarlo libre, mucho menos para la multa” (“they put him in jail since we couldn’t pay the fine, or the bribe they wanted to let him go”; 46). Upon Carmelo’s release from prison, and despite the protagonist’s pleas and defense of Xolí’s innocence, he beats the dog to death, stuffs him a sack, and throws him in the same ravine where the smallpox victims were tossed during the plague. The protagonist is unable to bury the dog, as she is about to give birth to her son Víctor, who dies a few days later: “Yo que estaba para componerme del Víctor, mi único hijo hombre y que para desgracia murió a los poco días de nacido” (“I was about to give birth to Víctor, my only male son, who sadly died a few days after his birth”; 47). Luis de Lión conveys, in regional dialect, the intense suffering and pain of semi-rural/ rural life accompanied by state repression. However, central to the narrative is Xolí, the animal world, his death and rebirth. In this way, Luis de Lión inverts the genre of *literatura indigenista*. Indigenous temporality and narration is focal, and the *ladino* state, while violent and powerful, it is simply a plot mechanism that impels the story.

Nine days after being tossed into the ravine, a barely breathing Xolí returns:

Ni pedía perdón porque no había robado, ni pedía justicia porque él sabía que mi corazón no es malo sin suave y bueno como el pelo de maíz en jilote. Yo sabía que quería una buena muerte. Y se la iba dar, aunque fuera una regular muerte. Tomé un leño y un poco con amor y otro poco con dolor de mi corazón le di en la cabeza para que dejara de seguir penando.

(“He didn’t ask for forgiveness, because he hadn’t stolen, he didn’t ask for justice because he knew that my heart isn’t evil but soft and good like the silk of young maize. I knew that he wanted a good death. And I was going to give him that, even though it was

a regular death. I took a piece of wood and with a little love and a little pain in my heart, I wacked him on the head so his wouldn't suffer any longer." [48])

Xolí's second death reflects the regenerative cycles that we see in Maya oral traditions and written texts like the *Popol Wuj* and the *Annals of the Kaqchikels*. Intrinsic in Maya cosmologies is that people, plants, and animals are all interconnected (Keme 141). These "natural elements often serve as metaphorical bridges that lead us through diverse temporal and spatial contexts" (Keme 141) as we see in de Lión's "Xolí." At the same time, de Lión never lets his readers forget about the material circumstances of his characters. Their circumstances mirror the daily realities of living under a repressive military regime. Xolí's first death manifests the manner by which the military tortured and disappeared thousands of civilians.

The violent death of Xolí brought forth through social circumstances created by the state structures of oppression is overcome by the enduring regenerative experience of the earth and animal world. The protagonist buries Xolí in her yard: "Después, abrí un hoyo en el patio de mi casa y lo enterré" ("After, I dug a hole in the patio of my home and I buried him"; 48). But Xolí, returns in another cycle: "Pasado algún tiempo, sembré una plantía de naranja sobre su sepultura para que su cuerpo sirviera de abono, mientras su alma, al crecer el árbol y florecer, se fuera volando en el perfume del azahar y me esperara en el Jordán de allá arriba" ("After some time, I planted an orange tree on his grave so that his body would serve as fertilizer, and his soul, as the tree grows and flowers, would fly upwards in the orange blossom scent and wait for me in the Jordan above"; 48). In Xolí's burial, we recall the regenerative cycle in the *Popol Wuj* whereby Blood Moon or Xkik', is impregnated from the spit of Jun Junajpu as she reaches for the fruit of the casaba tree (Tedlock). The tree had grown from Jun Junajpu's severed head, planted after he and his brother were defeated at the ball court by the Lord of Xib'alb'a. In the next cycle, Xkik'

gives birth to the hero twins, Junajpu and Xb'alanque, who defeat the Lords of Xib'alb'a and ascend, like Xolí, into the sky.

***“Ahorita regreso en media hora”***

For Mesoamerican peoples caves are seen as portals connecting the earth, the sky, and the world of the ancestors. As Keme asserts:

from an Indigenous perspective, caves represent Mother Earth's womb and symbolize the entrance to or exit from the underworld—from where the origins of humanity and the universe are materialized. In the *Popol Wuj*, Xib'alb'a, or the place of fear, is where humanity is created and a new, harmonic order is established. [...] Coming out of a cave, in this sense, acquires a symbolic and religious significance associated with rebirth, re-creation, and renewal. (53)

In Luis de León's yard there was portal, an underground vault that provided creation and renewal. In this vault he kept his books. The army had been to his house twice searching for weapons, and he feared that they would return and confiscate his books. His written word and his books were the weapons that he used to dismantle the regime: “Dejó escrito en uno de los manuscritos, ‘mis armas son mis libros’” (“He wrote in one of his manuscripts, ‘my arms are my books’”; de León Personal Interview July 2010). In order to protect his books from the army he built this vault:

Pero ante el temor de que algo le pudiera pasar a sus libros hizo un depósito de cemento en el jardín, que antes era un sembrado de café. Hizo una bóveda así de cemento y ahí tenía sus libros escondidos y había que venir como familia porque nos enseñó mucho la solidaridad como familia, a sacar los libros, a ventilarlos, a volverlos a guardar para que no los pasara nada.

(“Because of the fear that something could happen to his books, he made a cement depository in the garden where there was once a coffee plot. He made a cemented vault where he hid his books. As family he taught us about solidarity and we would take the books out, air them out, then return them so nothing would happen.” [Personal Interview July 2010])

De Li3n managed to protect his books from the army and his library still exists today, but the regime saw the power of his words and his political activity as threat. On May 15, 1984, at 4:30 in the afternoon Luis de Li3n uttered his last words to his family: “*ahorita regreso en media hora,*” “I’ll be back in half an hour”; Mayar3 de Le3n. Personal Interview July 2010). But Luis de Li3n never returned, becoming one of the thousands disappeared in Guatemala, thrown into clandestine gravesites, tossed in *barrancos*, burned, and dismembered. Under the volcanoes and the mountains, in the forests and the rivers the remains of thousands inhabit unmarked graves. Families await their return home, to mourn their bodies, but the death rite has been denied.

As Luis de Li3n’s daughter recalls, after waiting fifteen years, the first information about his disappearance appeared in the newspaper when the findings of the *Diario Militar* were published in 1999 (Personal Interview July 2010). This document had been smuggled out of Guatemalan intelligence files and contained information about 183 extrajudicial assassinations that occurred during 1983 and 1985. The document clearly indicates the date of his kidnapping, on 15-05-84 at five in the afternoon at 12 Avenida and Novena Calle in Zone 1 of Guatemala City, and the date of his death, June 5, 1984, when he “fue 300,” military code for assassination (see Appendix B). A mere half hour after he left his family, he was kidnapped by Guatemalan military forces, held, and most likely tortured for 21 days until his murder. Luis de Li3n’s daughter Mayar3 states that for years her family:

albergamos la ilusión de que mi papá hubiera muerto inmediatamente, por un coma diabético, [...] lo que uno no quiere es ver sufrir a su ser querido ni pensar en eso [...]. Fue muy doloroso saber, o sea, confirmar que efectivamente se lo había llevado el ejército, pero más doloroso saber que había vivido 21 días.

(“harbored the illusion that my father had died immediately from a diabetic coma, [...] what one does not want is to see or even think of is the suffering of a loved one [...]. It was very painful to find out, that is, confirm that the army took him, and even more painful to know that he had lived 21 days.” [Personal Interview July 2010])

Under the dictatorship of General Mejía Víctores, this celebrated author Luis de Lión, father, husband, son, teacher, artist—was kidnapped and disappeared. This beautiful, ground-breaking, and innovative voice that sang of volcanoes, pine trees, birds, and the sky—that defended the *desposeídos* with his poems and prose, was silenced by the cynical maneuverings of a banal and brutal regime.

When asked for an interesting story from Luis de Lión’s childhood, Francisco Morales Santos offered an account of de Lión’s nickname: “En sus años de estudiante, Luis tenía gusto por la oratoria y una vez que le tocó participar, escogió el tema del quetzal. En el discurso dijo: El quetzal es un ave muda pero que canta. De donde le quedó ‘Ave muda’ con que lo conocíamos sus amigos” (“In his student years, Luis enjoyed oratory. And one time that he participated, he chose the topic of the quetzal. In the speech he said: The quetzal is a silent bird but one that sings. From then on he was known as *Ave muda*. That is how his friends called him”; Personal Interview). In his death, de Lión transformed into this *Ave muda*. His voice is silent, but he continues to sing, through his stories and poems, each word *un hilo*, spiraling upwards towards sky, a dove-kite in flight *al infinito*.



## Chapter V

### The Death of Walter Luna:

#### Interpreting Postwar Violence

*El peso de los muertos hace girar la tierra de noche y del día el peso de los vivos... Cuando sean más los muertos que los vivos, la noche será eterna, no tendrá fin, faltará para que vuelva al día el peso de los vivos...*

—Miguel Ángel Asturias, *El señor presidente*

This project examines the life and art of three major Central American literary figures, drawing a connection between their written work and the ethos that inspired their art. I have attempted to demonstrate that their commitment to political movements reflected the ideological vision of the period but was moored in and in dialogue with the literary traditions and cultural practices that preceded the revolutionary trajectory. At the same time, we must recognize that the disappearances and deaths of these writers left a void in the post-revolutionary period that has challenged the notions for which they gave their lives. The revolution did not advance, and the social circumstances of the postwar period are particularly cruel, marked by seemingly indiscriminate violence and destruction. This chapter explores the aftermath of the civil war period and how it has defined the social structures in Central America for the past two decades. First, I examine the transformation of revolutionary iconography in the post-Berlin Wall period. Second, in discussing the two major mobilizations of this period, immigration, and participation in the narco-economy, we see how these have shaped the Central American landscape. By examining how these mobilizations are articulated and imagined in the fictional realm, we are able to see the transformation of the ethos with respect to sacrifice and death. Finally, I examine the cultural production associated with death that emerges in the postwar period, demonstrating

that while the rise in violence is associated with a dystopian post-ideological shift, in fact, this violence echoes earlier periods in Central American history. What has shifted is not necessarily the violence nor the actions of those engaged in violence, but the manner by which we interpret and narrate this violence.

When I began this project the tensile strength of death did not yet dance around me like the spiral orb of the spider's web. I had experienced death, but was not quite caught in this web, nor did I grasp how death can breach every waking moment, and then—even the dream world. The opposition to death—martyrdom—as explored in the previous chapters, represents eternal life. But a death, senseless, without purpose, can also be eternal. The loss of life, devoid of symbolic meaning, of resurrection, becomes a *haunting*. This is a death that opposes the vision in the previous chapters; it is a death before one's time, but purposeless, devoid of the ideological and symbolic rebirth imagined by the *Generación Comprometida*. This *haunting* is death born out of violence, not in the context of a civil war or a political struggle, but born in chaos of the postwar. The *haunting* does not dissipate but rather multiplies and replicates, fueled by endless weapons, impunity, and the crippled infrastructure of the failed state; it is the absurd, constant, and implacable violence that has defined and shaped the neoliberal era. We cannot seem to make sense of the death that weaves around us, its spinneret glands penetrating every corner of the globe, accompanying the hyper-capitalist expansion of the post-Berlin wall world.

I write about this *haunting* drawing on my personal experiences with death and the unmitigated violence that has marked the first two decades of this century. This chapter serves as a map that travels through time and space, narrating my research as well as my personal encounter with the *haunting*. This project has sought to explore the past, to understand the utopian thinking of the writers and artists in the revolutionary period, the motivation, artistic

production, and political involvement that created the collective martyrdom in a generation of writers. The previous chapters demonstrate how the artistic imagination of these artists was formed by the political context, but also by Catholic and Indigenous cultures, and canonical texts. The emphasis on death and the serenity of martyrdom that these artists experienced starkly contrasts with the discourse on death in contemporary Central America. In examining this contrast, this final chapter seeks to understand the re-articulation of eternal life in the age of neoliberalism. In other words, this chapter is a forensic exploration of postwar violence. How is death reimagined, redefined, and understood in the postwar period? How does this reimagination interplay with our analysis and understanding of the art of the revolutionary period? By doing this, I hope to escape the dangerous narrative of nostalgia, that utopian thinking buried in the clandestine graves of our literary heroes. As tempting as it may be to classify the hyper-capitalist violence visited upon Central America with the introduction of the narco-economy<sup>1</sup> as a unique historical moment brought on by the end of institutional socialism and utopian thinking, more practically, we might examine the cultural production around death and the cult of death and ask how these practices contrast with the past and what they tell us. In doing this, we transform our understanding of the subjects engaged in the practice of death, imbuing with humanity those who practice violence and on whom violence is practiced.

### **Guns and Crosses**

Colombia marked the earliest iteration of the narco-state in the Americas. I use this term cautiously as it implies that the state is controlled by illegal forces connected to the drug trade.

This contains an *a priori* assumption that there exists or existed a legitimate state structure

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<sup>1</sup> Employing the word narco-economy here implies that the criminal forces that operate outside of state institutions are solely dependent on the drug trade. I am using this term to encompass all economic activity that operates outside the realm of the legal economy but with the consent of the state. This includes money laundering, extortion, human trafficking, drug trade, petty theft, larceny, bribery, etc.

operating within the rule of law before the descent into the narco-trade. As outlined in previous chapters, the reality in Central America is that a state structured on the foundations of colonialism with continued patterns of exploitation, coups, military regimes, and extrajudicial forces cannot be defined as such. A state that practices genocide is in itself an illegitimate state. The drug trade, in essence, mirrors not only the free trade practices set in place through agreements such as NAFTA and CAFTA, but the extrajudicial machinations that allow for such economic policies to be carried out. The drug trade reflects neoliberal economic policies rooted in deregulation, free trade, and privatization. A narco-state can only operate within a state structure that already has such mechanisms in place. To understand the structures of violence in the postwar period, we must have a clear picture of its foundations.

Prior to the fragmentation of the two main guerrilla groups and Colombia's descent into the land of *sicarios* and the narco-economy, the emblematic figure of resistance was not embodied in Pablo Escobar, but in our *guerrillero*-priest Camilo Torres. Camilo, who dies in his first encounter on the battlefield, symbolized both in life and death the fusion of Christian notions of sacrifice with the guerrilla struggle. Upon his death, he is immediately immortalized in poetry and song throughout the continent. Most notable is Chilean composer and singer Victor Jara's song praising Camilo's final act ("Camilo Torres").

Victor Jara himself meets a tragic death, rounded up, tortured, and dumped on the city streets in the early days of General Pinochet's intellectual and cultural cleansing. This cleansing sought to erase the socialist political practices and ideologies embedded in the artistic movements of twentieth-century Latin America. The song, written by Daniel Viglietti and adapted by Victor Jara, simultaneously melds the Christian sacrifice with the revolutionary struggle—light representing the resurrected messianic revolutionary: "Donde cayó Camilo/ nació

una cruz,/ no de madera/ sino de luz” (“Where Camilo fell/ a cross was born,/ not from wood/ but light”; lines 1-4). However, Viglietti removes the peaceful resistance present in Christian theology: “Lo mataron cuando iba/ por su fusil,/ Camilo Torres muere/ para vivir” (“They killed him when he went/ for his gun,/ Camilo Torres dies/ so he may live”; lines 5-8). Viglietti represents the resurrection in the barrel of a rebel gun. Death on the guerrilla battlefield is rewritten as stations of the cross: “Lo clavaron con balas/ en una cruz,/ Lo llamaron bandido/ como a Jesús” (“They nailed him with bullets/ to a cross,/ They called him an outlaw/ like Jesus”; lines 17-20). Camilo’s final sacrifice and glory manifests in the pueblo that follows him towards revolutionary victory: “Y cuando ellos bajaron/ por su fusil,/ se encontraron que el pueblo/ tiene cien mil/ Cien mil Camilos prontos/ a combatir,/ Camilo Torres muere para vivir” (“And when they came/ for his gun,/ they found in the people/ one hundred thousand/ one hundred thousand Camilos ready/ to fight”; lines 21-28). Listening to the song with knowledge of Jara’s brutal death, the disastrous end of the Allende experiment, and the descent of Colombian guerrilla groups into narco-taxing and kidnapping to fund *una revolución sin fin*, the utopian spirit of the song hardens. The revolutionary fervor crystalizes as if locked in a nostalgic emerald that we simultaneously admire and envy, a time to which we cannot return, a spirit embodied in the past but impossible to actuate in the present. Deprived of the socialist-revolutionary ideology, we see how the symbols of death and rebirth represented within this ideology continue to be present in the modern state, although devoid of the expiatory nature. And the question remains, what happens in the postwar period when death has been elevated, the symbols of death revered, but the movement surrounding death diminished?

In *Estética del Cinismo: Pasión y desencanto en la literatura centroamericana de posguerra*, Beatriz Cortez explores this question with an analysis of the aesthetics of cynicism

that emerge in the postwar period. She ties the production of these aesthetics to the culture of death prevalent in the literature of the revolutionary period in Central America. She challenges the cult of death in the manner it is replicated both in imagery and the written form:

Esta actitud hacia los muertos los eleva a un nivel supra-humano y heroico, a un lugar privilegiado en el santoral revolucionario. Para ocupar este lugar, la vida, la identidad, la imagen de una persona debe construirse con base en sus cualidades y actos heroicos en relación a su participación en el proceso revolucionario. Mientras tanto, sus cualidades humanas, su práctica intelectual y su visión crítica ante ese mismo proceso revolucionario quedan opacadas, borradas de la historia.

(“This attitude elevates the dead to a superhuman and heroic level, to a privileged place in the revolutionary hagiography. In order to occupy this place, one’s life, identity, and image must be defined by heroic qualities and acts in relation to their participation in the revolutionary process. Meanwhile, their human characteristics, intellectual experience, and critical vision become opaque, erased from history.” [108])

Cortez argues that figures such as Roque Dalton, “cuestionó la estética de la revolución y el culto a la muerte [...] [como] su proyecto literario no tenía cabida en ese molde, particularmente por su compromiso artístico, su sentido del humor, y por su énfasis en la vida y en el futuro”

(“questioned the revolutionary aesthetics and the cult of death [...] [as] his literary project did not have a place in this structure, particularly, because of his artistic commitment, his sense of humor, and his emphasis on life and the future”; 111). The assertion of the subject, according to Cortez, contrasts with the homogenizing project of the sectarian revolution. The assertion of the subject, the individual, becomes a notable aspect of artistic production after the civil war.

Cortez views the assertion of the subject present in Dalton's work as a precursor to the aesthetics of cynicism in the postwar period. In essence, the assertion of the subject as separate from the revolutionary telos gave space for a heterogeneous understanding of freedom embodied in the revolutionary struggle. However, as the socialist project fades, the individual is distanced from the communal project set forth by the revolution. The literary protagonist becomes a symbol disengaged and disembodied from the struggle the individual once represented; the *poeta guerrillero* is stripped of the accompanying hagiography. This leads us to the original question: What happens in the postwar period when the poet as a symbolic representation of resistance fades, when the ritualized symbols of death and rebirth, the gun and cross, continue to be revered, but the life-affirming ideology that accompanied these symbols fades? Just as the almost extinct buffalo is honored on a coin, the anachronistic Indian sewn on uniforms, the revolutionary hero symbolizes an unreachable and buried past. Only now that El Salvador's currency is the dollar and the socialist struggle roundly defeated do we see Roque Dalton honored on postage stamps. Dalton, in the new era, can finally be recognized as a historic icon. He offers nostalgia for the left and fits neatly into the dominant narrative that the socialist dream was precisely that, a dream shattered when his own revolutionary *compañeros* held a gun to his head and pulled the trigger.

We are left with only the guns and crosses, the emblematic symbols devoid of the revolutionary movement they once embodied. The individual subject in this environment continues to struggle against the forces of oppression; the unequal structure of power, the culture of impunity, the lack of infrastructure and civil society, the economic imbalances, military forces, and extrajudicial forces are all elements that prevent a functioning democratic republic from affording its citizens universal human rights. But how is the struggle realized without an

accompanying social movement? How does the subject assert agency and individual choice in a landscape profoundly devoid of choices?

### ***La jaula de oro***

There are two major mobilizations that have marked Central American societies in the last three decades. These mobilizations, immigration, and participation in the criminal economy are deeply interconnected but demonstrate the distinct manner in which individuals have responded to social forces in the postwar period. To understand the practices and rituals of violence that have subsumed Central America in the new millennium, we must include immigration in the discussion as the movement of people and capital across the Meso-American borders have profoundly shaped social structures.

The first wave of immigration occurred during the war when refugees flooded across the border into Mexico. Many Guatemalans settled in the refugee camps in Mexico. But many, mostly young men, walked across the borders from El Salvador and Guatemala towards *el norte*. This first wave of immigrants came fleeing the violence of the Salvadoran civil war and the Mayan genocide. Forty years after the war, many of this first wave and second wave generation have settled in the United States, integrating into communities in their adopted country. There are whole communities in Central America dependent on the remittances from these waves. These remittances have paid for schools, teachers, community centers, and even water systems in remote areas. The contributions both nationally and internationally are immeasurable. Remittances totaled \$4.58 billion in 2016, accounting for 17.1% of the GDP of El Salvador (Voice of America). This number has steadily increased; in 2019, remittances accounted for 21.5% of the Honduran GDP, 13.9% of the Guatemala GDP, and 21.% of the Salvadoran GDP (World Bank). These numbers decisively contrast with the immigration discussion present in



U.S. national discourse. As the numbers clearly indicate, the vast majority of Central American immigrants work to support and assist extended families and even communities in their home countries. This last wave of immigration was driven by multiple factors that include climate change, family reunification, familial and criminal violence. However, in the Trump era, we saw undue focus on the “criminal element” involved in the current wave of immigration, specifically mentioning on numerous occasions the Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13.

The labeling of MS-13 as an international terrorist organization (Mustian) grossly exaggerates the role of MS-13 in the destabilization of Central America. This discourse is not limited to the Halls of Congress in the U.S.; this concept of marauding invaders as a label also forms part of the national discourse in Central America. In fact, General Otto Pérez Molina ran his campaign in Guatemala under the slogan—*mano dura*—and he campaigned heavily under the image of strength that would root out street violence. As a graduate from the infamous School of the Americas and former operative of the feared G-2, Pérez Molina represents the functionary of the failed state. According to Francisco Goldman’s *The Art of Political Murder*, a beautifully written and detailed account of the murder of Bishop Gerardi, General Molina directly participated in the bishop’s assassination plot. Gerardi had worked tirelessly to produce the extensive and in-depth Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (REHMI) report: *Guatemala: Never Again*, which documented the Guatemalan Holocaust, only to be brutally murdered two days after its release in 1998. According to Goldman, Molina and other high-profile military officials methodically planned Gerardi’s assassination, targeting him for refusing to be muzzled in a “culture of silence” and a “culture of impunity.”

Interestingly, the culture of impunity that we see across the isthmus has allowed for gross violation of human rights, genocide, and the continual pardoning of war criminals. That

somehow the violence of the narco-state is an outgrowth of gangs marauding and terrorizing the populace rather than the gross imbalance of wealth, corrupt officials, and a failed state, is a convenient and reliable discourse government officials set forth to fortify their agendas in new democracies. MS-13, an export of U.S. gang culture, started in East Los Angeles by Salvadoran refugees as a form of protection during a particularly volatile period in L.A.'s history (Lovato). The young men were deported back to El Salvador, often for minor drug violations, in the nineties during the difficult transition to demilitarization in the postwar period. The imported gang grew in membership, and the popularity of its insignia and culture became embedded in Salvadoran society, eventually spreading across the isthmus.

There is an accepted notion that these gangs need to be brought under control through judicial intervention and extrajudicial intervention; the participants imprisoned and punished. As former Salvador Minister of Public Security, Rogelio Rivas asserted, “No vamos a tratar con paños tibios a estos grupos terroristas que han sembrado luto y dolor a nuestro pueblo” (“We won’t treat these terrorist groups, who have sown pain and mourning in our communities, with kid gloves”; *Contrapunto* July 16, 2020). We have generally accepted across this hemisphere that those engaged in street violence, human trafficking, and the drug trade are individually responsible for this violence. If we imprison and jail the perpetrators, the violence ends. Except it doesn’t. Because this thinking puts the onus on low-level and mid-level actors in criminal enterprises rather than accepting that the state in and of itself is a criminal enterprise. This approach does not consider the historical factors, the geo-political forces, and the movement of capital and human bodies brought forth by the perils of privatization, free trade, and the failed state.

So how does the individual respond to these social conditions? How does individual agency interplay with a society overrun with violence? How does one respond in the face of unfettered brutality? How does this differ from the response during the civil wars? And how does the symbolic relationship to death and sacrifice reflect this difference? As we see the images of hundreds of individuals crossing rivers, climbing on top of trains, and walking for hours through forests and mountains to cross the border into the U.S., it is clear that migration is a response to the current crisis. This journey, in many ways, parallels the guerrilla path to the mountains without the utopian vision that one's sacrifice will produce a more just and egalitarian future.

The notion that the U.S. is the land of milk and honey has long been relegated to the dust heap of failed dreams. Clearly, the notion of sacrifice is not consigned to the past; instead, it manifests on the individual and familial level. The immigrant knows that crossing the border means back-breaking work, “horarios animales” (*Riding 'The Beast'*: Alt.Latino Interviews Salvadoran Journalist Oscar Martínez). This movement across the hemisphere, as Salvadoran journalist Oscar Martínez describes, is “una comunidad solidaria que mueve en lo más oscuro de los Méxicos” (“a united community that moves through the darkest of Mexicos”), motivated by “un sentimiento humano hermoso que puede ver algo mejor en el mundo” (“a beautiful human sentiment that there can be something better in this world”). Martínez explains the camaraderie developed along the journey as groups band together to protect each other from assaults, prevent falling off of trains, share food, conversation, and emotional and moral support for this journey across a continent.

Interestingly the solidarity expressed and camaraderie of the migrants find no space in popular expression. The narrations of immigration in literature, song, and film tend to address the following themes: loss, nostalgia, displacement, search for identity, and death—the

“aesthetics of cynicism” (Cortez). As realized in literary and artistic expression, the migration north is the symbolic representation of loss and displacement. It is not imagined nor understood as a sacrifice in the revolutionary ethos, although the willingness to risk one’s life and brave this journey requires the self-same effort and focus of the *guerrillero*. Sliding into sleep and tumbling from the train to death or dismemberment, risking almost certain rape and assault, are the realities of the journey that migrants face.

Yet the journey itself is conceptualized as a forfeiture. In the civil war narrative *Voces inocentes* (2004), based on the life of and co-written by Salvadoran refugee Óscar Orlando Torres, the journey north is written as loss and failure. At first, the protagonist’s mother refuses to abandon her home situated in contested territory in El Salvador because she fears her husband will not find her when he returns from the U.S. The grandmother, in an attempt to convince the mother to relocate to her side of the hamlet, turns to the protagonist’s mother and affirms, “No se engaña m’ija los que se van para el norte se marean. Levanta la frente que el jodido es él. Los que se van sufren más que los que se quedan, y los que se quedan, luchan” (“Don’t be a fool my child, those who go north lose it. Keep your chin up, he’s the one who’s screwed. Those who leave suffer more than those who stay, and those who stay, fight”; *Voces inocentes*).

The film, released in the early aughts, more than a decade after the peace accords, cements the immortality and sacrifice of the rebel leaders. The protagonist’s *guerrillero* uncle and the local priest are cast as heroes in the film. Both characters use their physical bodies to struggle against the military’s counter-revolutionary tactics. The film is narrated from the perspective of the twelve-year-old protagonist, Chava, who navigates survival as his town and surrounding hamlets are terrorized, bombed, and eventually burned to the ground. There is a moment where Chava picks up an M-16 and aims it at a soldier, who he then recognizes as his

childhood friend. He throws down the gun, eventually reuniting with his mother, who manages to pay to have him smuggled out of the village and into the north.

In the grandmother's vision of the north, we can observe Jean-François Lyotard's assertion in *The Post Modern Condition* that "capitalism inherently possesses the power to derealize familiar objects, social roles, and institutions" (74). The father, lost to the capitalist realm of the north, is absent from the struggle, deracinated and stateless. The absent father as the migrant can only be written as loss because he simultaneously serves as a metaphor for capitalism or *el norte* and displacement caused by the machinations of the powerful northern state. As Lyotard writes, the "so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery, as an occasion for suffering rather than for satisfaction" (74). On the other hand, *Voces inocentes* resists Lyotard's notion that the meta-narrative form collapses in the postmodern era. Rather, the migrant narrative becomes a meta-narrative self-reflection of *el jodido*. Torres writes his grandmother's words as if this past will predict his future as he flees his home. The child becomes unmoored, lost in the north, separated from and devoid of his place in revolutionary iconography. He writes himself as a revolutionary failure; he is a narrator of this struggle for justice, but his friends and family members are the heroes of the narrative. He only achieves psychological wholeness in narrating a tale of loss that cements his compatriots, *los que se quedan*, as the idols.

An earlier and quite popular film, *El norte* (1983), draws similar parallels to this visioning of migration. The story begins in a K'iche' community in Guatemala; when the village is overrun by the army, a brother and sister flee north after their father is targeted for his organizing. The army disappears their mother, captures and decapitates the father, leaving his severed head as a message to other villagers who might consider following his path. The film,

directed by Gregory Nava and co-written by Guatemalan intellectual and novelist Arturo Arias, narrates the siblings' journey north with intervening scenes that appear as tableaux.

In the first tableau, the last scene before the northern departure, the sister, Rosa, stands for a moment in her *huipil* and *corte*—she then removes her traditional clothing depositing it in a wooden chest. As the chest closes, she is dressed as a *ladina*—marking the death of her past, her Indigenous whole. Her brother enters the scene, and she says, “las cosas de antes se acabaron Enrique” (“our life before is over Enrique”). In the journey out of the village she lights a candle in the church, cementing her new *ladina* identity, Spanish and Catholic. As she leaves, the elders call out to her in K'iche', “Rosa, Rosa, where are you going?”

This is one of the first films to explore Central American/ Mexican border crossing; thus, the vision of *el norte* is presented as a land where dreams are made, where the immigrant can accumulate wealth and remake their reality. Enrique and Rosa quickly realize the patent falsehood of this Americana mythology and the finality of their journey. In the final scene, Enrique is jobless and desperate; he finds work as a day laborer, declaring in the final words of the film, “yo tengo brazos fuertes” (“I have strong arms”). The scene cuts from him digging ditches to his father's severed head hanging on a rope in the distance. There is no redemption nor sacrifice imagined in this immigration experience. The journey is represented as the loss of indigeneity and dislocation, reflecting an extension of the Guatemalan military campaign orchestrated by the government. Immigration almost becomes a parallel act of genocide, and the notion of resurrection fails in the face of genocide. While *el norte* is offered up as a solution, a promised land to escape the political repression, this purported Eden only delivers a second death.

In the forty years since Gregory Nava's film, viewing *el norte* as a site of deliverance has been severely and decisively destroyed in the popular imagination. The migrant lost on the way or in *el norte* has become a trope repeated in song and literature. As early as 1983, the same year that Nava's film appeared, Los Tigres del Norte released their popular corrido "La jaula de oro," singing of the undocumented migrant: "De que me sirve el dinero,/ Si estoy como prisionero,/ Dentro de esta gran nación,/ Cuando me acuerdo hasta lloro,/ Aunque la jaula sea de oro,/ No deja de ser prisión" ("Of what use is money/ if I live like a prisoner/ in this great nation/ when I remember, I cry/ Although the cage is gold, it's still a prison"; lines 13-18). The film that shares the same title, released in 2013, affirms this discarded notion of the American Dream achieved through a migration north. *La jaula de oro* is a stunning epic realized by Spanish-born Mexican director Diego Quemada-Díez. Unlike *El norte*, Quemada-Díez does not indulge the audience nor permit us even to imagine deliverance or freedom in the migrant experience.

The film traces the stories of three Guatemalan teenagers and a Tzotzil teenager as they make their way toward the U.S. The opening scene disassembles any utopian musings as a teenage girl stands in front of a mirror, chops off her hair, binds her breasts, and then takes a birth control pill. She knows she will likely be raped and possibly kidnapped on this journey, so she is safer disguised as a boy. The telling scene is remarkable in that it was one of many stories that the director incorporated into his epic. Over six hundred migrants were interviewed in the making of this film, and it is based entirely on their stories and experiences. There was no formal script. The filmmaker simply directed the actors through the scenes as they invented the dialogue. The dialogue attempts to capture the voice of an experience of those who embark on this epic journey, relying on actual migrants as extras and actors in the film. The structure of the film reflects the experience of migrants fleeing the danger or inequities of a homeland to seek

refuge in another. However, undocumented and outside the legal register, the migrant does not even possess the right to vocalize these experiences. Neither state recognizes the legal existence of the migrant. The Central American refugee, who by the very act of fleeing is defined as “illegal,” embodies Lyotard’s notion of the *differend* as a subject whose “damage [is] accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage. This is the case if the victim is deprived of life, or all of his or her liberties, or of the freedom to make his or her ideas or opinions public, or simply the right to testify to the damage” (*Differend* 5).

In *La jaula de oro*, as the migrants journey north, the film cuts from scene to scene with the brief appearance of snow. The image and magical nature of snow, an anomaly in the Central American landscape, symbolizes this linguistic dissonance, this *differend*. The Central American migrant is the subject of a state that does not recognize the indignity of the implacable violence in which the subject resides. As the state offers no protection, the migrant flees, a refugee without refugee status—as the violence is not committed by the state but by the state’s refusal to recognize or intervene to protect the victim from the violence. The migrant seeks refuge in the north but is deprived of legal recourse as an undocumented subject.

Guatemalan-American poet Maya Chinchilla writes: “They want us out of this country/ they say we don’t belong here/ vamos pa’el norte/ They tell us the American dream is truth/ but that our stories of escape from horror are not./ When can we rest from running?” (“Central American-American” 21-22). Her poem articulates the dual nature of Central American migration; one must flee to survive, but in flight, the journey never ceases. Immigration offers a possible, albeit elusive, alternative to death. The self is sacrificed to the margins, undocumented, invisible, and voiceless. In contrast, the *guerrillero*, the revolutionary, demands a narrative and writes a narrative that attacks, interacts, and directs its immolation toward the centers of power.



The migrant, on the other hand, lives in the shadows, avoids confrontation, slipping through barbed wire, under fences, hiding in the back of trucks, always running.

As the migrant children in *La jaula de oro* journey through Mexico, they encounter this snow that offers a brief moment of escape and intrigue. The children peer through a shop window at a toy train traveling amidst a snowy landscape. The fake snow drifts down, simulating a gentle midwestern snowfall as the train moves through the mini-tunnels and across the tracks. The children peer in, wondering if they will witness this peaceful marvel of nature. The shop window functions as a *mise en abîme*, reflecting their own train ride through the frigid reality of border crossing on *la bestia*, where lives and limbs are lost to tumbles and assaults. In the film's final scene, the lone survivor completing the journey north sweeps up raw and discarded meat at his job in a processing plant and then strolls into a snowy winter night, an infinite reflection of this abyss.

### **An Immigrant Dream Deferred**

When we see this abyss represented in film, song, or literature, we imagine fictional characters that reflect lived realities. As outlined in the previous chapters, contemporary Central American art and literature are intimately tied to these lived realities. *Testimonio*, trauma narratives, testimonial novels, and poetry drift between and beyond the boundaries of literary genres to capture the astonishing and alienating experience of the dictatorship and postwar periods. The intersection between *thaoumaston* or *lo maravilloso* produced in a text embodies life in a war zone, where one never escapes that sense of dislocation and alienation. Precisely for this reason, this chapter draws upon personal experience, providing, in a sense, a witnessing to underscore fictional representation. The imagined and *lo maravilloso* exist in this *mise en abîme*, mirroring and multiplying the concrete and lived realities. This story that I narrate here

represents a tangible experience that reflects the major mobilization—immigration, discussed above. As such, I attempt to demonstrate the intersection between fictional representation and actuality. Stepping beyond narrative interpretations allows us to explore and understand individual agency in the context of limited choices while simultaneously expanding our analysis of the cultural production associated with death.

The central theme of this project explores the phenomenology of martyrdom in the Central American context. As we move beyond the social movements of the revolutionary period and examine the current socio-political context, we are able to see how the phenomenology of martyrdom shifts, but the actions and sacrifices of the individuals are actually remarkably similar—although devoid of the political ideology and conviction of the revolutionary period. This final chapter examines the dynamics of the shift to contrast the revolutionary icons and martyrs with the current state of violence seemingly devoid of political purpose. These individual actions oppose social forces but absent an ideological impetus, they are not cataloged or archived as revolutionary acts of bravery.

Returning to this notion of witnessing, I want to recall a day on March 21, 2003. A face I recognized flashed on the news, only hours after the U.S. began the invasion of Iraq. There he was, his photo plastered on CNN, the first soldier killed there, José Antonio Sirín Gutiérrez, a Guatemalan-born private in the Second Battalion of the First Marine Regiment, First Marine Division, shot down in the Iraqi port city of Umm Qasr. Numerous media reports ensued about José, his history, his family background, his immigration to the U.S., all repeating the same basic narrative: José was a hard-working immigrant who had struggled to overcome his past and felt compelled to join the Marines so he could repay the U.S. for the opportunities this country had afforded him and aid the children living under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. The news

media continued to propagate José's story, discussing his life before enlisting in the Marines beneath news headlines such as "Fallen Marine Wanted to Give Back to Adopted Country," or "José Antonio Gutiérrez: He was an American hero. Now he's an American," continually misreporting basic facts about his age, his birthplace, and when and how he arrived in the U.S. According to the narrative produced by major media outlets, newspapers, and television, José was a Guatemalan orphan who struggled to make a new life in the U.S. and wanted to serve the country that gave him a chance by fighting to bring justice and democracy to Iraq.

Ironically, José was born during the Guatemalan Civil War, a story dropped from the headlines as it has failed to hold interest across the continent and even within the borders of its own nation-state. This fallen U.S. marine, José Antonio Sirín Gutiérrez, grew up during this period of heightened violence in Guatemala, one of the many children orphaned during the 1980s who lived and survived on the streets of Guatemala City. He was later brought to an orphanage in Ciudad Vieja, just outside Guatemala City. I first came into contact with José—or Tono or Sirín, as we called him—in the 1990s while I was in Guatemala working in an educational project<sup>2</sup> for children and young adults. I was sent to the Chimaltenango Prison, where Tono had been detained for stealing bicycles. He had gone days without eating, so desperate and hungry, he and the members of the street gang, *los Pulpos*, decided to steal some bikes for quick cash. He was caught by the military and turned over to the police, only to end up in an adult prison at age eighteen. Over the next year, I worked to help get Tono out of prison, enrolled in school, and (unsuccessfully) stay clear of gangs, drugs, and alcohol.

Tono's life offers a window through which to view his choices. His actions reveal the bifurcation of individual choice in the postwar period. The dichotomy of participation in the

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<sup>2</sup> Asociación Nuestros Ahijados

narco-economy or exit, i.e., migration north, came to be understood as the only viable option for young men displaced or orphaned by the war. Of course, Tono was offered intervention through an academic scholarship, but weaving one's way out of criminal activity is a complex social process. This process is further complicated by a combination of factors such as lack of state infrastructure, familial support, pressures from criminal elements, and postwar trauma.

Tono's death came only two years after my sixteen-year-old brother-in-law was shot down in gang warfare in Guatemala City. Thousands of deaths and billions of dollars later, it is impossible to escape the irony of Tono's death, a child of war dies in a war that would produce yet another generation of children of war. However, there is a part of Tono's story that has never been narrated, one of many parts that would never be told because he is not here to tell his story. But I want to bring Tono's story to the page now, so we may perhaps deepen our analysis of postwar violence, begin to think creatively about social phenomenon and see the complex choices that individuals confront in the context of this violence. After Tono was released from prison and enrolled in school, his foster mother called the office. She was concerned about his behavior and thought perhaps he was using drugs. My supervisor sent me to search his room, something I initially refused to do until I was coaxed by the following words: "What if that was your brother?" This struck a personal chord with me as I recalled my own mother combing the streets of the Tenderloin in San Francisco in search of my brother, going to the single room occupancy hotels, up and down the streets, to find out where the drugs were sold, desperately searching for her son.

I did not do a complete search. I went out to the house, looked around the room, saw an open notebook, and peered down at this precise handwriting. Tono had written pages and pages of love poems, poems that he envisioned lyrically to salsa music. I was stunned by the creativity

and reminded of the complexity of the self. Despite this talent and depth, Tono did not finish school and instead embarked on a journey migrating north, where eventually he would enter the foster system in the U.S., pretending to be substantially younger than his actual age.

There is another story in this tale of travel to the north, one that speaks to profound courage and selflessness, the same characteristics displayed in the hagiographic traditions of our authors. Tono begins the northern trek with a friend. They cross all the way through Mexico, riding *la bestia*, avoiding assaults, managing to make their way to the border. At the border, Tono's friend experiences a psychotic break and cannot continue the journey. Tono looks after him, feeds him, and returns with him to Guatemala so his friend can receive help. After assisting his friend, Tono returns north, determined to successfully cross the border. A few years later in Iraq, Tono dies in his first military confrontation mirroring the life of Camilo Torres. Unlike Torres, he is not part of a revolutionary movement but an imperial war. His narrative is that of tragedy and death without purpose or resurrection.

### **Walter Luna's Funeral**

There is a moment I recall, I don't remember the year, but the memory is of an exchange between José Antonio Sirín Gutiérrez and Walter Luna at the central office in Guatemala where I worked. Walter, who had studied with academic support from our organization, would drop by from time to time like many former students. That afternoon, Walter was helping me with some kind of art project I was developing. He hung his jacket up, rolled up his sleeves, and set to work. A couple of hours later, he put on his jacket, and as he readied to leave, he discovered the money in his pocket was missing. He immediately turned to Tono and confronted him. In seconds, the conflict heightened, with Walter preparing to lay his hands upon Tono. Then Tono magically produced the money, laughing and joking with Walter—the tension dissipated.

I point to this story because, within it, we return to the bifurcation of choices in the postwar period represented in the two major mobilizations: migration or participation in the narco-economy. In certain zones and specific urban communities in Central America, for sectors of this population displaced by the war, there appears to be this bifurcated dilemma presented. For an individual like Tono, who consistently evaded violence, migration presented an optimal choice. The tragedy is that in this migration, he met death. He had not perhaps imagined that he would be shipped off to war; instead, he was simply searching for a manner to help his sister and her family. Like Camilo Torres, he died on the battlefield before even reaching for his gun. The obvious difference being, he had no ideological allegiance to the battle; he had joined the army to fast-track citizenship, not to die in a foreign land.

Walter Luna presents a contrast, a shadowy figure who engaged in the criminal underworld. He did not choose to flee but rather chose to become fully engaged in the narco-economy and met his death shortly thereafter. Walter hailed from La Limonada, a neighborhood located around a ravine in central Guatemala City with about 60,000 to 100,000 inhabitants (Ademuz Hortelano; *El Pais*). The neighborhood formed shortly after the coup in 1954 when displaced rural migrants squatted on the lands. The area is now one of the most densely populated shanty towns in Latin America, without paved roads or legal access to water and electricity (Ademuz Hortelano). The stream that runs through the ravine has become an open sewer as there is no sewage system or garbage collection in the sector. An estimated 19,000 to 38,000 of the inhabitants are active participants or associated with *clicas*, subgroups associated with gangs and cartels (Ademuz Hortelano). In a community bereft of options, the narco-economy provides, at times, the only means of survival.

At some point, Walter Luna was a major player in La Limonada, long before the violence escalated to levels that we see today. In many ways, his death was a precursor to the two decades of relentless violence that would mark the new millennium. Those of us on the ground working in community organizations saw this moment approaching. We knew it was only a matter of time before potential violence would erupt if an effective intervention was not set in place. The postwar period called for social programs to combat the disenfranchisement and marginalization in impoverished sectors, rebuild infrastructure, demilitarize and disarm. Walter's death in the nineties served as an omen, a predictor of the violence that would shape the panorama for the next two decades.

On the night of Walter's death, he called my friend to confess, to ask for forgiveness for everything he had done wrong in his life. As she held the phone, she heard gunshots in the distance and a car crash—then the phone went dead. Minutes later, Walter's friends called to say they were on the way to Roosevelt Hospital. The subsequent days inhabit my memory like the half-dream I walked through after Walter's call. Our tight-knit staff huddled the next morning, trying to figure where to go and what to do. We decided to drive to Guatemala City to the hospital. At this point, we did not know Walter's status. We waited hours in the line that wound around the block for visitors' hours. When the doors finally opened and we had been screened for weapons, we ran with hundreds of others across the safe zone periphery into the hospital. We wandered up and down the stairs of the embattled hospital, in and out of the dilapidated rooms with leaking ceilings, searching for Walter. Finally, one of the dedicated staff directed us to the emergency room, a separate entrance at the other end of the hospital.

The emergency room outlined the edge of a precipice upon which death hovers as a constant and defining experience for so many in Central America. Hundreds of individuals

crying and screaming stood outside the main doors of the emergency sector protected by numerous soldiers armed with M16s. They were not allowed to enter the room. They would not be afforded the opportunity to hold the hand of their son, their father, their lover as he passed into the next life. As we made our way to the front, we were pushed back by the soldiers until somehow the doors magically opened when a soldier was blinded by the blond hair and blue eyes of one of our volunteers who grabbed my arm and pulled me in with her.

There in the crowded emergency, soaked with blood and medical waste, we found Walter. Life had already left his eyes. The doctor, obviously forced to do his residency in a place and with a people he considered far beneath his dignity, told us, “Oh, he is definitely going to die, but you can do some blood tests if you want.” There were no nurses, no attending physicians, no apparatuses monitoring his breathing. Walter was covered with a sheet crowded in a corner with twenty other patients suspended between life and death. Walter died later that evening. Our agency had a strict policy of not paying bribes so the morgue would not release the body. Finally, with cajoling and an official seal, Walter came to us for his burial. There are defining moments of his burial that indicate and allude to the subsequent carnage in La Limonada, carnage replicated and multiplied across the isthmus. Hundreds of mothers and children that our agency worked with attended the funeral with arms full of flowers. They had no relationship with Walter and did not know him. They surrounded us and followed the funeral procession through the streets, almost as if in protest, as if to say, “This is what happens to children who are forgotten.” While I cannot vocalize nor assume the motivation for this ritual participation, I can affirm the sense of solidarity embodied in hundreds of women walking through the streets in mourning for an orphaned child.



The other two moments occurred the night of the wake. My brother-in-law, Eric, nine at the time, would not look away from Walter's face. I remember another child tugging at my sleeve, warning me that Eric would have nightmares if he kept looking at the dead. Did Eric see his future? Did he know that he would stare up from a casket at sixteen? Certainly, the tenor of the evening predicted violence. Walter's friends, his *clica*, had travelled in from the city, the escalation of tensions multiplied throughout the evening. At one point, two members started going at it. As I stepped in between the fight, I remember the words, *ahora soy el jefe de La Limonada*. Two decades and thousands of homicides later, we might ask who is the *encargado*, who carries the responsibility for this violence?

### ***Los pozos más negros***

Walter's senseless death still haunts me. We never found the perpetrator nor deciphered the motive. His death counts as one of the many in the postwar period, an epoch marked by violence, increasing at a feverish pace year by year, edging out civilian peace, threatening democratic institutions. Tijuana activist intellectual Sayak Valencia suggests that this violent trend is endemic to this era of "gore capitalism." We have entered an era of "the undisguised and unjustified bloodshed that is the price the Third World pays for adhering to the increasingly demanding logic of capitalism" (*Gore Capitalism* 19). This violent reality is unmistakable in Mesoamerica, particularly Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, three countries that consistently have accounted for the highest global homicide rates in the last decade. Valencia writes that this gore capitalism "refers to the many instances of dismembering and disembowelment often tied up with organized crime, gender, and the predatory uses of bodies. In general, this term posits these incredibly brutal kinds of violence as tools of *necroempowerment*" (20).

Necropolitics, as Achille Mbembe describes, emerge in the neoliberal era as places where “the collapse of formal political institutions” have led to “the formation of militia economies.” He writes: “Increasingly, war is no longer waged between the armies of two sovereign states but between armed groups that act behind the mask of the state against armed groups that have no state but control very distinct territories with both sides having as their main targets civilian populations that are unarmed or organized into militias” (*Necropolitics* 87). In the case of Central America, due to the negotiated peace processes in Guatemala and El Salvador, we generally do not perceive these as countries at war. In fact, the structure of narco-controlled territories acting in tandem with local and state authorities reflect the necropolitical structure that Mbembe describes. The distinction in Central America is that violence is interwoven with state structures. The state consents, collaborates, or is complicit in the violence but does not provide the supportive infrastructure that citizens of a democratic republic ought to expect. Because of the gang insignia, the drug trade, and street violence, it is both easy and convenient to confuse the violence in Central America as operating outside of state forces. Narco-terrorists, are, in fact, state terrorists, often operating in tandem with state and local forces.

If we are to understand these forces as sanctioned by local, state, and national forces, the cult and culture of death that has emerged in the postwar period among narco-operatives reflect the same senseless violence employed by the state through extrajudicial, military, and paramilitary forces during the civil wars. This “senseless violence” is, in fact, purposeful and directed, as we have explored in the previous chapters. Valencia asserts: “Violence and criminal activity are no longer seen as *ethically dystopian* path, but as strategies” (74); this “ethically dystopian path” has been employed by Central American armed forces throughout the twentieth century but framed in the ideological narrative of the rule of law, and later as the necessary

suppression of “communist” insurgencies. As discussed in earlier chapters, the Salvadoran Indigenous genocide of 1932 and the Mayan Holocaust of the 1980s are examples of dystopian military strategies with the dual purpose of genocide and instilling terror in the population.

This use of senseless violence present in the Central American landscape for the last century continues to be a method for terrorizing and maintaining control over the populace. This is the usefulness of useless violence; it appears ornate, excessive, even baroque, but operates with an express purpose. As author Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor, writes on violence in the context of the gulag: “The human ashes coming from the crematoria, tons daily, were easily recognized as such, because they often contained teeth or vertebrae. Nevertheless, they were employed for several purposes: as fill for swamp lands, as thermal insulation [...] they were used instead of gravel to cover the paths of the SS village located near the camp (*The Drowned and the Saved* 110). Levi continues: “In other words: before dying the victim must be degraded, so that the murderer will be less burdened by guilt. This is an explanation not devoid of logic but it shouts to heaven it is the sole usefulness of useless violence” (110). The degradation of the body, “the spectacle of the scaffold” (Foucault), “the lacerated and violated body is itself the message” (Valencia 163).

Michel Foucault’s “spectacle of the scaffold” that dominates the Medieval period is not transformed in modernity as Foucault asserts in his analysis of the modern penal system. This spectacle, rather, becomes an organizing force to prevent political activism and social engagement and maintain control over the populace. The modern Latin American state denied and denounced the scaffold while readily employing it through paramilitary forces in urban areas and with armed forces in the rural areas. The violence of the Conquest that begins with Hatuey tied to a stake and burned, did not end with the modern state. Rather, “the spectacle of scaffold”

has been employed repeatedly as a means to control and terrorize the Indigenous, the enslaved, the working class, and the rural poor in Latin America. What is distinct in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the scope and level of the violence embedded in communities across the isthmus in criminal entities operating as de facto state and local authorities.

I insist on not drawing a distinction between the violence of the past and the violence of the present in Central America. We should understand this violence as a continuum that emerges through the process of colonization, a process that is unfinished, continual, that reemerges and restructures—one that waxes and wanes depending on economic and geo-political circumstances. The current discussion that Latin America has entered a post-ideological phase is dangerous in that it denies that there is a dominant ideology functioning: neoliberal economic policies rooted in deregulation, free trade, and privatization. The narco-operatives embody the metaphoric hydra-headed monster that is unbridled capitalism. They operate in the ideological space of the free-market system that was imposed on Latin America through a series of coups, military interventions, and free trade pacts, supported by North American economic theorists like Nobel Prize Winner Milton Friedman and those of the Chicago School. The narco-operatives are free enterprise entrepreneurs who have opened and explored new markets in drugs, human trafficking, and extortion, “making violence into another market niche, recontextualizing the position of the *body as a strategy for accumulation*” (Valencia 161).

The body, particularly the female body, has been manipulated as a strategy for accumulation since Hernán Cortés disembarked on the Yucatán shores. Malintzín or Doña Marina, the principal translator and concubine of Cortés typifies the use of the female body and knowledge as a practice in accumulation. Returning to this notion of “violence as a continuum,” a process that responds to political and economic pressure, the rape, murder, and violation of

women during the period of the Conquest paralleled the violence of the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador. While the word femicide has been introduced into the national discourses on the isthmus, the violation of the female body, the marking, the mutilation is not outré in the postwar period rather it is an orthodox expression of the Central American state. The rise in feminicides in the postwar period that escalated in the mid to late aughts may contrast with the relative calm of the initial postwar period. However, violence against women is not unique to the neoliberal era. Guatemalan Bishop, Monseñor Gerardi's report, *Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (REMHI)* documents 55,000 rapes in the period between 1978-1985. These rapes were concentrated in the highland areas and employed as methods of psychological torture to dominate and terrorize the Maya population.

The distinction that we see in the postwar period is that the violence is not consistently and directly perpetrated by the state as a tool of torture. The national discourse and the daily anecdotes suggest that the current violence is perpetrated by neighbors, community members, participants in the criminal economy—narco-operatives or the *maras*. However, the culture of impunity at the national level coupled with the rise in armed militias gives the appearance that violence is an endemic cultural phenomenon rather than one perpetrated by institutional structures as the root cause. There is a direct connection between state actors and the narco-economy as evidenced in the recent arrest and extradition of former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández on drug trafficking charges. We see state-sanctioned violence as a practice and profit at the highest levels. In fact, as El Faro journalist Óscar Martínez documents in *A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America*, corrupt and complicit military, police forces, judges, banking officials, and politicians are fundamental to narco-operations and the incremental violence of the last two decades.

We must pay particular attention to the level and scope of violence visited upon the female body. In 2018, there were 232 feminicides in El Salvador and 235 in Honduras. El Salvador and Honduras accounted for the highest rates of feminicides, respectively, 6.8 per 100,000 and 5.1 per 100,000. And Guatemala accounted for 2 per 100,000 (CEPAL). We must take into consideration that even these statistics are grossly underreported and do not count disappearances but only confirmed feminicides. Beyond the statistics is the relentless brutality exhibited upon the female body. Martínez interviews the only forensic investigator in El Salvador at the publication of his text, Israel Ticas. The detailed accounts of rape and torture in *A History of Violence* mirror U.N. reports produced in the postwar period that documented human rights violations during the military regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala. In the various interviews Martínez conducts with this forensic investigator, Ticas relates the following interaction with a witness who murdered his wife:

His wife was the last body he threw into the well. I asked him, ‘So you killed your wife?’ ‘Yep,’ he said to me, ‘the Maras told me she knew too much. I told her she had to die. She got on her knees and asked me if she could please say good-bye to our three kids. We went to the house and she kissed each kid on the forehead. Then I brought her back here, she was begging, telling me I could tell the Maras I already killed her, that she could flee the country. I told her that an order is an order. I beheaded her [...]’ That’s how I found her, on top of nine other bodies. (118)

I highlight this gruesome depiction of violence, unwillingly, but to draw attention to the lived reality that females continue to navigate in the postwar era. As the *mareros* take hold in specific urban zones of Central America, we see a pattern that reflects the military’s relationship to the populace in the dictatorship period. As documented in Chapters I and II, during the civil wars,

the military, specifically in Guatemala and El Salvador, were trained to attack civilians. They were inculcated with the concept that certain communities harbored “subversive” forces. Attacking the general community, as the soldiers were trained, would root out subversive forces that threatened national structures. Dead and lacerated female bodies populate the *zonas rojas* in the same manner that community activists and Maya leaders’ mutilated bodies populated the countryside during the war. The spectacle marks the victim, sends a message of terror, affirming and consolidating power and control in a contested territory. As narrated above, *mareros* are trained to root out subversive forces that might threaten a gang’s hegemony, focusing on the female and familial structures.

Uxoricide and its accompanying spectacle act as a pronouncement of power, a public crucifixion although devoid of hagiography. The female victim is staged in newspapers, television, and film as the symbolic expression of the dystopian streets. Meanwhile, the female, in these *zonas rojas* represents Julie Kristeva’s notion of “the abject” (*Powers of Horror*). Because the *marero* self is identified with the *clica*, when the female or the object of desire, becomes a lover or a mother, she threatens the stability of the self that has identified with the hegemonic and masculine *marero* structure. Much like the soldier in the civil war, formed through the process of intense military training, the individual identity is erased, and the self is identified with the state. Violence towards the *other* and dehumanization of the *other* affirm the new sense of self developed by the state through military training. When the *marero* experiences love and family with someone outside the *clica*, this threatens the strength and hegemony of the *clica*. Identifying with the *other*, in this case, the female and the mother of one’s children, threatens the sense of self developed in identifying with gang culture. As in the vignette related above, through “her dead body, cultural norms are reconfirmed or secured [...] because a

sacrifice of a dangerous woman reestablished an order that was momentarily suspended due to her presence” (Bronfen 181).

How does this reality intersect with our discussion on death and martyrdom in the previous chapters? As asserted above, the scope and level of violence are not necessarily greater or more horrific in the postwar period. The perception and symbolism surrounding the violence have dramatically shifted. We have shifted from a narrative of resurrection to the *haunting* in the way we perceive, write about and discuss violence in the contemporary era. The contrast is not that the current manifestation of violence is singular on the isthmus but that it contrasts sharply with the death images/ resurrection of the revolutionary period.

As a young man at the University of El Salvador, Dalton writes a poem, “Canto a nuestra posición,” arguing for the necessary engagement of intellectuals and artists “en el lugar/ *en que los pozos más negros se sumergen en el hombre*” (in the place/ *where the darkest wells drown men*”; qtd. in Taracena). Dark and foreboding *pozos* of the past were rewritten and ascribed into hagiographies. Dalton’s obsession with researching, rescuing, and reasserting historical figures into the revolutionary narrative served to combat the vision of *el pozo más negro*. Through his work, most notably in *Miguel Mármol* and *Las historias prohibidas del Pulgarcito*, he transformed the hidden waters of death into a baptismal fountain. The figurative *pozo* became a place of rebirth and death for fallen rebel leaders, like Anastasio Aquino, rather than a graveyard that simply collected the dead.

This does not negate the reality that a firing squad shot down Aquino, his decapitated head placed in a cage and paraded around the country on display under the sign “ejemplo de los revoltosos.” Clearly, senseless violence, rooted in colonial history, on the levels that we see today, existed previously in Central America and extend to the present context. The notable



distinction is how these symbols are interpreted and transcribed. As asserted in the introduction to this project, martyrdom is not a private act but a public spectacle. Religious martyrdom, dying for God, like the Crucifixion, is a spectral event in which murder victims occupy public spaces to become deaths that are seen (Boyarin 21). These deaths are remembered in their visual and literary representations in the same way that politically inspired martyrdoms are spectral events memorialized in art. Just as torture is an intentional spectacle to strike fear in the masses, the deaths that emerge from this torture create symbolic martyrs while representing social dissent. In other words, could Jesus be a martyr without the gospels? Can martyrs exist if their essence is not written into history or recorded in oral traditions? Martyrdom is “a public and political spectacle” (Smith 10), intentionally challenging the hegemonic order. The making of a martyr comes into being only when there is a collective acknowledgment of the spectacle connected to a social movement that becomes embodied in the symbolic sacrifice.

Achille Mbembe writes of the “suicide bomber” in his ground-breaking “Necropolitics” that “Resistance and self-destruction are largely synonymous. To mete out death is, therefore, to reduce the Other and oneself to the status of pieces of inert flesh, scattered about everywhere, and pieced back together with difficulty before burial [...] war is the body-on-body war” (89). Here, Mbembe makes a distinction from the traditional religious notions of sacrifice also embodied in revolutionary traditions, writing, “Death here achieves the character of transgression. But unlike crucifixion it has no expiatory dimension.” In other words, Mbembe argues the death of the suicide bomber is not a sacrifice that will be reborn in others, or what Otto René Castillo describes as “el eco de tu voz comprometida.” In contrast, in the contemporary state, Mbembe asserts, “Death in the present is the mediator of redemptions. Far from being an encounter with a limit, boundary, or barrier, it is experienced as ‘a release from

terror and bondage” (91). Death liberates, but not as in the Latin American revolutionary tradition, where the act of death is part of a political movement with the intention to liberate future generations. In this paradigm, death is meant to bring forth life. In contrast, like the suicide bomber, death in the narco-state liberates, but liberates one from the bondage life, life of the walking dead.

As outlined above, the two major mobilizations in Central America are ascribed in the artistic imagination as dystopian loss, the migrant, and in contrast, the *mareros* are understood as participants in the bondage life. However, the migrant affirms life in the journey, carving a space for survival outside the realm of state structures. Although this narrative is understood as a narrative of loss and displacement, the journey, much like the *guerrillero* path to the mountains, contains discipline, abnegation, and bravery—yet absent of the ideological markers that form a revolutionary epic. The *marero*, on the other hand, partially accepts the fate handed to him, carving out an existence in the bondage life.

***Solo Dios puede juzgarme***



Fig. 1. “Solo Dios puede juzgarme”

Philippe Ariès writes in *The Hour of Our Death*, “An attentive visit to our imaginary museum of tombstones and graves would probably tell us more about collective attitudes toward death and beyond than a library full of scholarly works on theology and religion” (292-293). Certainly, the dominant concepts explored in biblical scholarship reflect shared notions of resurrection and condemnation (293); however, much is divulged in cultural practices. As Ariès asserts, funerary décor reveals “evidence of certain beliefs that are rarely expressed elsewhere and we would have no other way of knowing” (293). For this precise reason, the final section of this project examines the physical evidence presented on the body of many *mareros*. This physical evidence, in the form of body tattoos, acts as the imaginary museum of tombstones described by Ariès, revealing both the cultural production and the shifting narrative surrounding death in the popular imagination. In exploring tattoos as cultural artifacts, we see in this body art the physical manifestation of postwar violence and the rearticulation of death in the new millennium. Honoring the dead continues as a dominant functioning narrative in this era, although devoid of utopian objectives and revolutionary ethos.

These tattoos offer a window into the popular imagination of a large portion of the urban population in *las zonas rojas*. This population of narco-operatives or *mareros*, or what Sayak Valencia defines as the *endriago* subject, embody the monster world (132). While many narco-operatives avoid tattoos as a form of protection, others proudly exhibit tattoos that mark them as outcasts or monsters living on the edge of the city streets, distinguishing them from civil society. They are seen as undesirables, destructive forces that prevent the functioning of civil society and the state. Valencia writes, “Using extreme violence, endriago subjects create a lifestyle, work, socialization, and culture. They remake work culture into a kind of dystopian Protestantism [...] completely replacing the deity of Protestantism with money.” (138). Valencia argues the

*endriago* subject is driven by the forces of accumulation, adopting the structure of neoliberal capitalism as a lifestyle mired in violence and accumulation.

The *endriago* subject is certainly the result of economic austerity coupled with a crippled infrastructure that privileges the private sector over social programs. However, agency is more complex than the sum of an individual's actions. The motivations and decisions of an individual alter through time and place. The subject's actions are not always realized with the express purpose of gains. If we argue the sole ideological impetus of the contemporary era is capital accumulation of resources and power, we fall into the same missteps of categorizing the uprisings of the mid-twentieth century as driven purely by Marxist ideologies. The project, from its inception, has argued against the limitations of these taxonomies in artistic expression and cultural production.

What does the body of the *marero* tell us? The tattoo art expresses the profound experience of street life and prison life formed in communities like La Limonada. Their bodies are a canvas, and the indelible images narrate experiences not captured in the sensationalized articles and television programs. The body itself is a spectral event, a hagiography of the *marero*. And the tattoo, violent in nature due to its production in pain, narrates the suffering of its patron. These images reveal the bondage life and express the tragic relationship to death as imagined in a post-revolutionary ethos. The specific images presented here are several of about fifty images that were gathered from La Granja Penal Cantel in Xelajú (Quetzaltenango), Guatemala. The prisoners collected multiple photographs for me with disposable cameras as I could not bring my own camera into the prison. Many wanted the art on their body to be documented but their faces hidden. This is visible in the manner and production of the photographs produced by the

incarcerated themselves—who wanted to share the stories on their bodies, a testament to their existence.



Fig. 2. “Che’s Descent”

This first image, “Che’s Descent” (see Fig 2.) is stunning in that it captures the social transformation of imagery related to death in the post-Berlin Wall era, as if documenting a passage in time as guns and crosses cease to represent emblems of revolutionary sacrifice. The upper arm is decorated with the image of Che Guevara, clearly, an earlier tattoo as it is on the shoulder, and tattoos are generally added in descending order. Revolutionary iconography adorns

the upper arm but is marked by the descent into *inferno*. A devil sits at the right side of Che's altar and underneath it is the *homie* image, a *marero* youth. As a child of the revolution, the heritage is dispossessed and transfigured, becoming an emblem not of purposeful violence but purposeless violence. A specter stands behind the *marero*, as if to represent the past, the violence of the war that haunts both the individual and the social construct in which the individual resides. Underneath, we see a clown, symbolic of the *marero* experience, an expression of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, in which sacred images are nullified. As the revolutionary icon delegitimized, the tragic clown emerges. I asked one of the incarcerated at La Granja to explain to me the repeated motif of the *payaso*. He said the clown represents the experience of the *mara* life, as the *mareros* are viewed by society as ridiculous and something to be laughed at, and the *mareros* make themselves in that image. But, he related, the clown who ridicules and is ridiculed, a symbol of laughter and derision, weeps inside.

The pain of the *marero* manifests in the eyes of the image in "Waiting on the Inside" (see Fig. 3), as he stares out from behind prison bars, exhibiting on the body the emotional experience of incarceration. Reductive reasoning reduces the experiences of narco-operatives to actors that engage in the practice of death as an act of accumulation. This annuls other motivations and realities that have shaped their decisions. The *sicario* and the *marero* must be held accountable for their crimes, but perhaps the society that has shaped and created these conditions holds greater responsibility. We see in "Waiting on the Inside" (Fig. 3) the child or grandchild of the civil war, who dons *una boina revolucionaria* but does not seek or expect his fate to change. He is trapped in the web of crime (see the spider web to the left of the figure), wound in the web of time (see the clock below), manacled by the limited choices, and incarcerated by social structures that impound opportunities. The female represented to the left and below the incarcerated in

“Waiting on the Inside” (Fig. 3), awaits her beloved on the outside. She is honored with a dedication for her fealty to her incarcerated lover.



Fig. 3. “Waiting on the Inside”

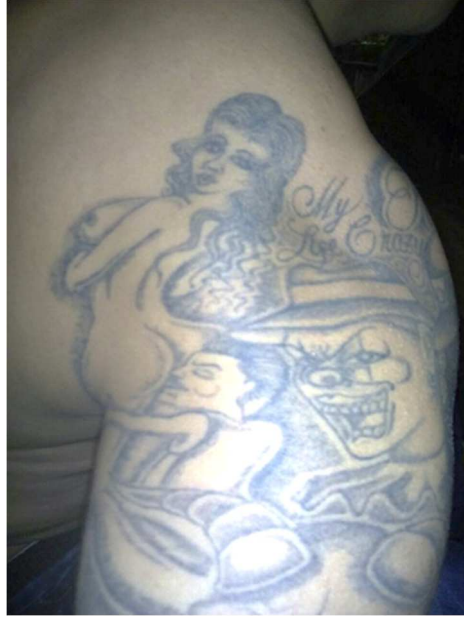


Fig. 4. "Las muertas 1"

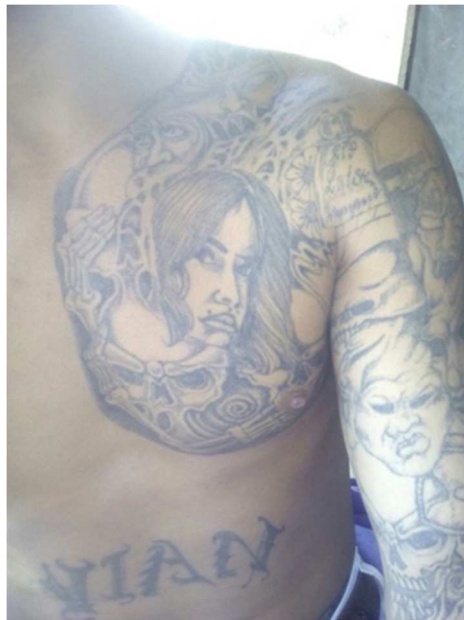


Fig. 5. "Las muertas 2"

Astonishingly, female companions are as common in these tattoos as clowns and devils (see Figs 4 & 5). But many of the females are represented as deceased, often murdered by rival *clicas* or by the leadership within a *clica* because their presence was viewed as a threat to



established hierarchy. Several of the prisoners confessed to me the death of the mother of their children was intentional and expected after their incarceration. Conversely, these women are represented as beautiful angels on the bodies of their lover. Their death brought forth pain, but at the same time, death was viewed as a necessary social act. The female lover symbolically embodied a “site of danger and/ or healing, of a disturbing double” that had to “be purified by being recuperated into a clear social status—as the biologically dead body is replaced by a tomb and socially reborn” (Bronfen 200). The tattoos serve as a shrine to these women, but also as a public sign of recognition and responsibility. The pain of the ink represents the duality of love and violence, sin and pardon. As we see, in “Perdón madre” (see Fig. 6), a woman’s name is adorned with stars, and underneath, he asks for forgiveness from his mother. However, the most disturbing of these images is the dead woman in “El hogar” (see Fig. 7), posed nude and beautiful, with blood dripping from her mouth. She holds her hand over her stomach, representing the fertile womb, the hearth; through her we enter into a home, neat with tiled floors (a symbol of stability in the urban landscape of shanty towns). But to the right of the safe place represented inside the female body, a specter flees, indicating the disaster that her death has evoked in this once stable home.



Fig. 6. "Perdón madre"

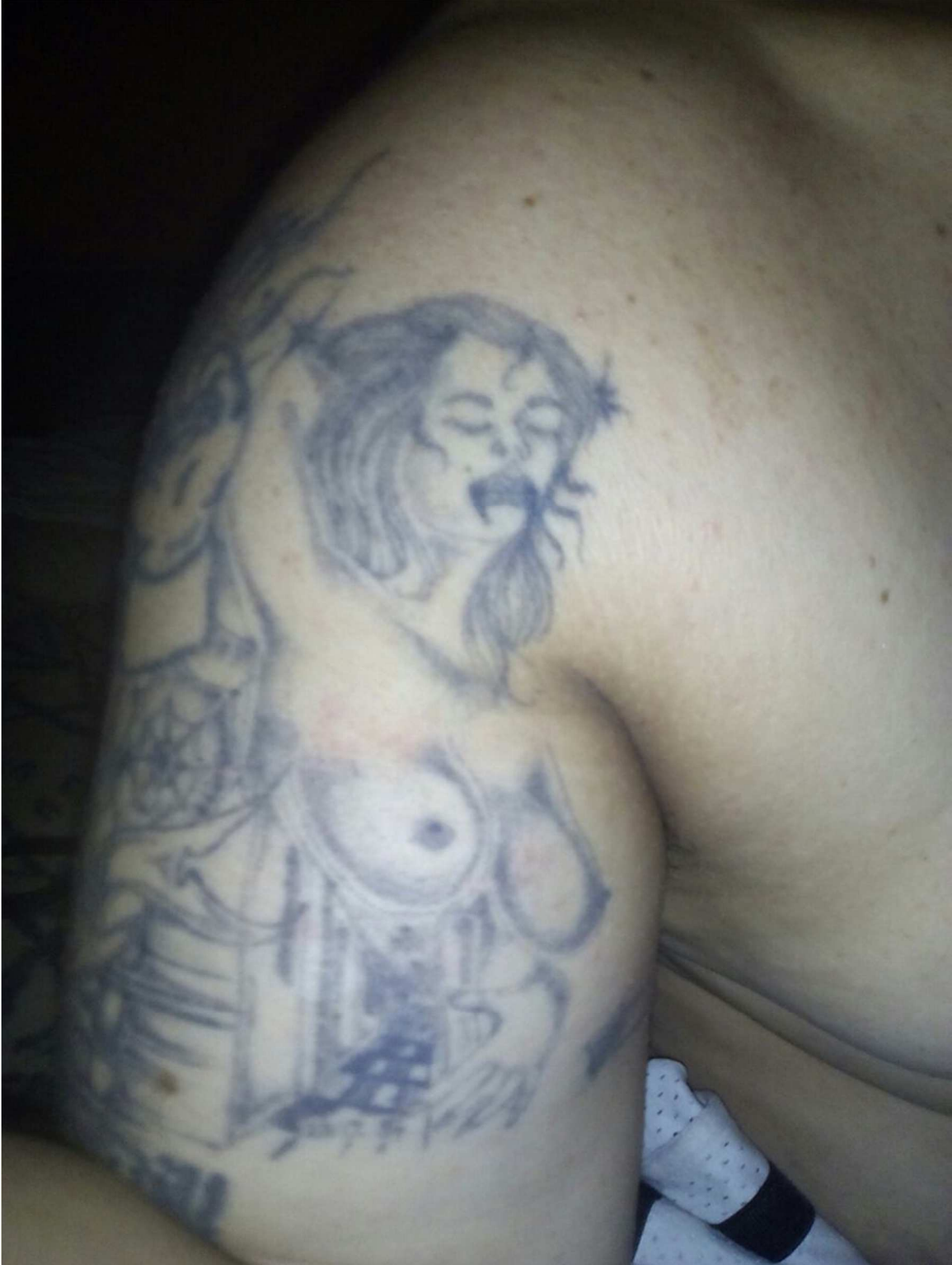


Fig. 7 "El hogar"

We might view these tattoos as a macabre expression of a dystopian realm defined and ruled by the chaos of the streets. Santa Muerte and San Pascual, figures associated with death and graveyards, populate the arms of the incarcerated of Granja (see Figs. 8 & 9). These tattoos seem to be a tragic reflection of the life that these men lead, the bondage life, constrained by limited choices of their environment. They represent *los pozos más negros* that Dalton sought to transform through the process of writing. We see a poignant example of the metonymic *pozo* in the images in Figure 10. There is no release from bondage life even in death; the imprisoned individual imagines the other world the eternal, where upon he is delivered into the devil's hands, swooped up, and carried off to hell. Humanity appears tragic and lost in the imagery of these tattoos. Even the afterlife offers no redemption or reward. However, I suggest we might interpret this art in another manner, one that expands beyond the canvas of the body and views the tattoos as a metanarrative reflection mired in the history from which it emerges. As Merleau-Ponty asserts in his essay dedicated to Jean-Paul Sartre, "Indirect Languages and the Voices of Silence," that art, while subjective, is the "coherent deformation" of historical traditions (91-92). The tattoo, by nature, is art built upon shared signs. The tattoo artist collaborates with the canvas, the body of the tattooed, to deliver the message. As seen in the images presented, the tattooed body of the *marero* relies upon and reorders sacred iconic images in order to present a coherent narrative of his present reality.

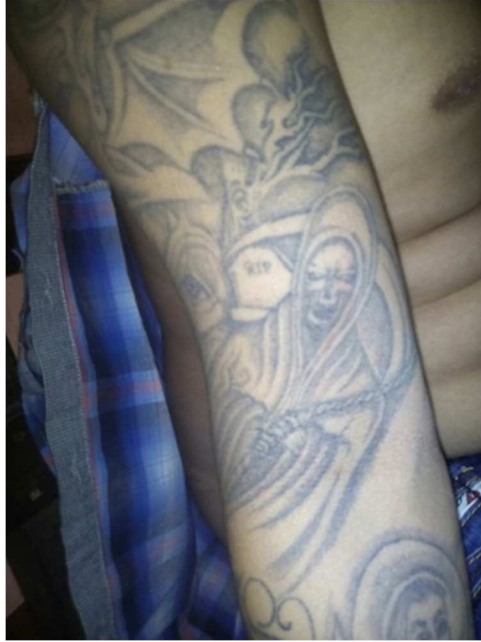


Fig. 8. "Santa Muerte 1"



Fig. 9. "Santa Muerte 2"



Fig. 10 “Bondage life”

The act of this artistic production, the tattoo, is an affirmation of life. In this affirmation, the *marero* says, “I have a story to tell,” and “I exist.” When we imagine the difficulty of imprinting these tattoos upon the body, both logistically, as often done from inside prison walls, and physically, the pain involved in the imprint, we must recognize the commitment of the *marero* to narration represents the only medium available to him. I am not surprised that the incarcerated of the La Granja searched and organized photographic sessions to document their tattoos. They smuggled the cameras in and out of the prison walls because they know their bodies tell a story. If we attempt to understand these tattoos as stories that narrate the experiences

of the “bondage life” within the context of limited choices, we might avoid the narrative of tragedy and cynicism that seems to have occupied the collective psyche in the postwar period. Conceptualizing narration as a testament to one’s existence is, in essence, an affirmation of life and one’s own humanity. As the current Salvadoran president, Nayib Armando Bukele rounds up 6,000 suspected *pandilleros* in less than a week without due process (Avelar & Lakhani), we are reminded of the dangerous violence that occurs when regressive regimes label and dehumanize whole sectors of the population. Just as the military dictatorships attacked the “subversive” poets and artists during the revolutionary period, the *mareros* are targeted, forced to bear the burden of social ills caused by the state. More importantly, the absolute innocents with no narco affiliation, who happen to inhabit these communities, whose only crime is poverty, are also imprisoned without due process.

This last tattoo (see Fig. 11) represents the Guatemalan saint, Maximón, worshipped in primarily in Maya communities. Also known as San Simón or Kilaj Mam (Venerable Grandfather), he is associated with Maya ancestors and Judas Iscariot (Knowlton, “Ethnicity, God Concepts, and the Indigenization of a Guatemalan Popular Saint” 223). Identified as a trickster and defender of the people, he is venerated with cigarettes and alcohol. Maximón operates as a non-condemning saint, one that embraces all people. He neither judges nor condemns the prisoner for his choice but intercedes on his behalf. We might well learn from this saint that inhabits dual worlds as a reflection of ancient Maya cosmology imprinted on the body in modernity. Maximón’s devotees understand that this saint accepts both their sins and circumstances; he does not condemn but provides consolation and intervention for those suffering inside prison walls and the bondage life.



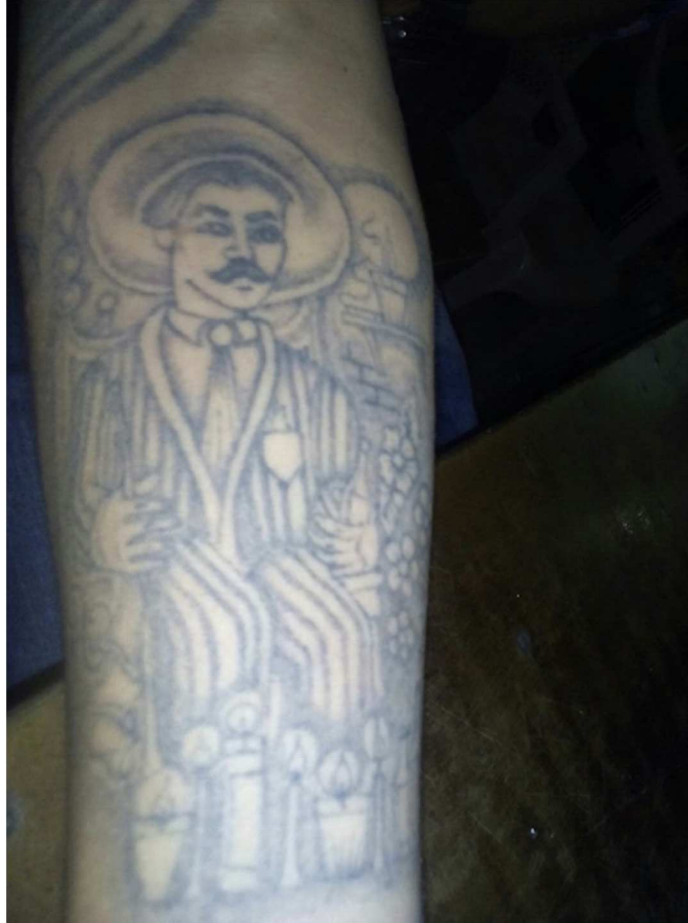


Fig. 11. “The Guatemalan saint Maximón”

## Conclusion

Having spent many years in community development and social work, I often heard about dangerous communities—places on the edge of the abyss. Yet, in all my work, even in some of the darkest prisons, I never encountered this abyss. In the marginalized corners, in *los pozos más negros*, I always managed to find profound expressions of love, friendship, and solidarity. I do not want to negate the very real economic realities and struggles of the denizens in places like La Limonada. At the same time, if we continue to understand these zones of violence as controlled by monstrous and *endriago* subjects, we will never address the root cause that impels such actions. Roque Dalton, the *Generación Comprometida*, Otto René Castillo, and Luis de Lión did not turn away from the violence that plagued their countries but demanded an



audience for the undiscussed. Dalton, in particular, rescued and archived marginalized historical events and injected this narrative into the national discourse. The process of transcribing the stories of the marginalized imbued these stories with a narrative power that fueled the ethos of martyrdom during the revolutionary period. Through visual and literary representations, martyrdom became a spectral event that birthed and fed a political movement in Central America. The individual actor was transformed into a martyr through the spectral event and accompanying hagiography.

When I began the research for this project, I sought to understand the phenomenology of this martyrdom in the revolutionary period of Central America. I was interested in the ways that the ethos of the era influenced literary production. Moreover, I was interested in exploring how political convictions and poetic imagination interacted with cultural artifacts. I wanted to explore how Spanish lyric and literary traditions, the Christian imaginary of martyrdom, Indigenous cosmologies, and the social-political realities of Central America coalesced in the written texts of this period. These texts and this period are often understood within the messianic framework of Marxist utopian thought. Through textual analysis and oral interviews, I sought to demonstrate the diverse cultural and religious traditions that converged in the artistic work of the period. The text served as a dialogic site where modern ideologies interacted with ancient cosmologies and conflicting ontologies. These conflicting ontologies expressed in the texts reflected the social realities experienced during the civil war period, as evidenced in the death of Roque Dalton at the hands of sectarian forces.

The many interviews I conducted and my research on this period revealed a revolutionary period recalled equally with nostalgia and disillusionment, perhaps a reflection of the current political environment on the isthmus. There exists a defining narrative that the revolution failed,

and the present violence is a post-ideological result of this failure. For this reason, I felt it necessary to add the final chapter on postwar violence, to examine the shifting ethos in relationship to death and sacrifice. In this research, I came to understand the relationship between self-sacrifice and *compañerismo* present in the revolutionary ethos was still a defining motivation, especially for migrants. The bravery and willingness to offer oneself up for a better future had not disappeared. However, there exists no cohesive political movement and narrative structures that serve to reproduce martyrdom.

The more I researched martyrdom, I came to understand that the narratives surrounding martyrdom, the *logos*, formed a dialectical process that produced both the martyrs and their stories of martyrdom. The transformation of violence, in a sense, began in the artistic arena. The page, like the mountain for the *guerrillero*, is the site of transfiguration and rebirth. The page then demanded, like the *guerrillero*, a space and a voice in the national discourse. The migrant and the narco-operative whose stories are whispered under wires and in desert crossings, or inked on bodies, have no such narrative representation. When these sectors begin to direct their voices to the centers of power, the *haunting* may well transform into an age of political action.

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## Appendix A: *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico Case 772*

1680

<p>Año: 1977 Caso: 8303</p>	<p>Certeza: *</p>	<p>Víctimas identificadas: Jesus Tax</p>
<p>TOTONICAPÁN GRUPOS ARMADOS DESAPARICIÓN FORZADA</p>		
<p>Año: 1983 Caso: 8288</p>	<p>Certeza: *</p>	<p>El 15 de junio de 1983, en la aldea Santa Ana, municipio de Momostenango, departamento de Totonicapán, grupos armados capturaron a Juan Ixcoy Baten, quien era miembro de la ORPA. Desde ese hecho nadie volvió a saber más de la víctima.</p> <p>Víctimas identificadas: Juan Ixcoy Baten</p>
<p>TOTONICAPÁN SIN IDENTIFICAR EJECUCIÓN ARBITRARIA</p>		
<p>Año: 1983 Caso: 8296</p>	<p>Certeza: *</p>	<p>El 10 de mayo de 1983, en el caserío Canquixjá, municipio de Momostenango, departamento de Totonicapán, Juan Acabal Ramos no llegó a su casa. Al día siguiente se encontró su cadáver mutilado y degollado. La víctima era un líder comunitario, catequista, miembro de la ORPA y jefe de las PAC.</p> <p>Víctimas identificadas: Juan Acabal Ramos</p>
<p>ZACAPA EJÉRCITO EJECUCIÓN ARBITRARIA</p>		
<p>Año: 1967 Caso: 772</p>	<p>Certeza: 2</p>	<p>El 15 de marzo de 1967, en la aldea Los Achiotes, municipio de Gualán, departamento de Zacapa, miembros del Ejército de Guatemala capturaron a Nora Ileana Paiz Cárcamo y a Otto René Castillo, quienes eran militantes de la FAR. Las víctimas fueron trasladadas al destacamento militar de Los Achiotes, en donde fueron torturadas durante cinco días y posteriormente ejecutadas. Nora Paiz, antes de ser ejecutada, fue violada por los soldados.</p> <p>Víctimas identificadas: Otto Rene Castillo Nora Ileana Paiz Carcamo</p>
<p>ZACAPA EJÉRCITO EJECUCIÓN ARBITRARIA</p>		
<p>Año: 1968 Caso: 10080</p>	<p>Certeza: 1</p>	<p>En 1968, en la aldea Santa Lucía, municipio de Zacapa, departamento de Zacapa, miembros del Ejército de Guatemala capturaron, torturaron y ejecutaron a Jesús López Juárez.</p> <p>Víctimas identificadas: Jesus Lopez Juarez</p>
<p>ZACAPA EJÉRCITO EJECUCIÓN ARBITRARIA</p>		
<p>Año: 1980 Caso: 12006</p>	<p>Certeza: 1</p>	<p>En 1980, en la aldea Colmenas, municipio de Jocotán, departamento de Chiquimula, miembros del Ejército de Guatemala capturaron a Guillermo Díaz y a sus hijos Marcos y Pablo cuando estaban trabajando en la parcela y los trasladaron a su casa. Allí violaron y torturaron a la esposa e hijas de don Guillermo delante de los capturados. Mientras tanto, otro soldado ejecutó a don Guillermo, degollándolo delante de su familia. Posteriormente, los soldados obligaron a los hijos a abandonar la casa y la quemaron junto con el granero. La esposa e hijas de la víctima fallecieron poco después, a causa de los hechos.</p>

Appendix B: *Diario Militar* #135

135. JOSE LUIS DE LEON DIAZ  
(s) GOMEZ  
Comité de Base Organo Medio  
15-05-84: A las 1700 horas, fue capturado en  
la 2da. Avenida y 11 Calle, Zona 1.  
05-06-84: 300

