# Writing in the Aftermath of War: Literature and Disenchantment in Postwar Central America

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**Abstract**

This article examines the challenges faced by Central American writers during a period of profound cultural, political, and economic change, as Central America transitioned from an era of civil war and revolutionary struggle to one of peace, democracy, and neoliberal state-building, spanning from the 1990s to the 2010s. At the core of this change was a pervasive sense of disenchantment, understood not merely as disillusionment with the failures of the peacebuilding process but as a hollowing out of society's capacity to envision Central American reality on a broader and more meaningful scale. This deeper, more intractable aspect of disenchantment and its implications for the literary enterprise are the focus of this article. I argue that the forces shaping Central America's postwar modernity have profoundly undermined the groundwork of affectivity, imagination, and memory that literature's humanizing potential depends on. As a result, Central American writers face the paradoxical task of upholding their literary vocation when literature's power to produce aesthetic and emancipatory experiences is in decline.

**Keywords:** Central America, literature, postwar disenchantment, neoliberalism, modernity

This essay is an attempt to grapple with what it means to be a writer in postwar Central America—specifically, during that period of transition, from the 1990s to the 2010s, when decades of civil war and authoritarian rule were giving way to a new era of peace, democracy, and neoliberal state-building, and when the promise of progress seemed to be accompanied by a deep sense of cultural dislocation. Some of the questions to be explored here include the following: How did the role and function of the writer change during this transition? What new forms of freedom and adversity did Central American writers encounter? What were some of the socioeconomic realities and political discourses confronting them? And to what extent did the broader cultural, intellectual, and moral climate of the time reshape the prospects of literature in Central America?

It is undeniable that being a writer in Central America has never been easy. Since its earliest colonial history, the Central American isthmus has been viewed as a cultural backwater, an obscure and nebulous region lacking cosmopolitan centers of cultural production and consumption. That it was once officially known as the Real Audiencia de los Confines—a name which suggests the outer limits or fringes of civilization—is in this sense very telling. Since then, writers from the region have been burdened by a sense of obscurity and even irrelevance. As Arturo Arias explains, Central

American writers find themselves at the "margins of the periphery"—at one remove from the cosmopolitan centers of Latin America, and at a second remove from the hegemonic powers of Europe and the U.S. (*Taking* 16).

The matter, of course, has not been limited to geography. In the nineteenth century, the region evolved into a collection of "banana republics," where militarists and oligarchs dominated a small population of landless peasants. In this polarized society, there was virtually no educated urban middle class, the traditional source of consumers and producers of literature. This pattern of authoritarian rule lasted well into the twentieth century, when a wave of armed conflicts swept the region and further thwarted any prospects for a stable and robust circulation of literary culture. From the 1960s to the mid-1990s, broad-based revolutionary movements gained momentum in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador and were met with large-scale counterinsurgency campaigns that plunged the region into a period of civil war and economic devastation.

Faced with this crisis, Central American writers transformed literature into an ideological practice. Through their novels, poetry, and testimonial narratives, figures such as Claribel Alegría, Manlio Argueta, Gioconda Belli, Ernesto Cardenal, Roque Dalton, Marco Antonio Flores, Rigoberta Menchú, Víctor Montejo, and Sergio Ramírez sought to activate and mobilize a collective revolutionary consciousness. Their work was an expression of political empowerment, rooted in a belief in social democratic utopias. Through the aesthetic innovations of the Latin American Boom and the adoption of testimonio as a means of legitimizing the experiences of the subaltern Other, these writers gave voice to new forms of popular resistance and sought to redefine the national-popular as something heterogeneous, as consisting of a multiplicity of discourses and perspectives. They made of literature a form of political praxis, a means through which a new social and political imaginary could be forged for the revolution to come (Arias, *Taking* 10–19; Beverley and Zimmerman 1–7).

By the 1990s, however, all of that would change. With the signing of peace accords in El Salvador and Guatemala and the ending of the Contra war in Nicaragua, Central America entered a new phase of its history. Military forces were demobilized, political structures were reformed, and programs for building up Central America as a modern economy were put into effect. The political landscape had changed dramatically. The threat of political repression no longer loomed as ominously as it once did, nor did the demand for political commitment seem as urgent or imposing. The establishment of social welfare programs, truth commissions, and human rights organizations had largely freed artists and intellectuals from that burden. Central American writers could now experiment

as they wished, without any pressing need to offer a positive outlook on national cultural identity or seek any kind of social transformation.

**Literary Culture Under Neoliberalism**

While the transition to peace was undoubtedly welcome, it was marked by numerous setbacks. Political corruption persisted, social justice and reconciliation remained elusive, and poverty and inequality continued to plague the region. Rather than celebrate the end of the conflict, many writers chose to delve into the darker side of the postwar era, exploring themes of violence, trauma, corruption, and social disaffection. Their work came to reflect a starker, more "cynical" view of the world, one which Beatriz Cortez describes as "una sensibilidad que ya no expresa esperanza ni fe en los proyectos revolucionarios utópicos e idealistas" (25). Far from echoing official or idealized narratives of peacetime, these writers presented "un retrato de las sociedades centroamericanas en caos, inmersas en la violencia y la corrupción" (Cortez 27).

Among the writers who have gained widespread recognition for this shift are Horacio Castellanos Moya, whose novels portray psychologically damaged characters struggling to survive in a society still reeling from the traumas of war; Jacinta Escudos, whose grim yet playful narratives capture the angst of living in a consumer-capitalist world promising happiness but devoid of spiritual resonance; Franz Galich, whose novel *Managua, Salsa City* (2000) portrays the corruption and social decay that marked the decline of the Sandinista Revolution; and Rodrigo Rey Rosa, whose works examine the violent history of Guatemala and the clashes between its indigenous heritage and the forces of neoliberal modernity.[1]

The freedom gained by these writers in peacetime, however, could not always be taken for granted. A case in point is that of Castellanos Moya, whose novel *El asco* (1997) sparked outrage and even death threats for its scathing critique of Salvadoran society, forcing the writer to go into exile. Proof that many of the old hostilities continued to fester was made brutally clear in 1998, when Bishop Juan Gerardi of Guatemala was bludgeoned to death shortly after publishing a human rights report on the atrocities committed during the Guatemalan Civil War.[2] Even as late as 2015, the dangers persisted, with Salvadoran writer Jorge Galán becoming the target of death threats after publishing *Noviembre* (2015), a novel about the 1989 murder of six Jesuit priests by the Salvadoran military. Such incidents highlight the cloud of violence and impunity under which Central American writers continue to work. And it is chillingly captured in Rey Rosa's *El material humano* (2009), which features as its protagonist a writer whose interest in the archive of the Guatemalan National Police raises suspicions

among former combatants and entangles him in their potentially deadly politics of postwar revanchism.

This climate of insecurity is compounded by the fact that Central American writers no longer have a clearly defined role in their society. Decades of revolutionary struggle had given the literary intelligentsia a certain prestige as the critical consciousness of their society, as advocates for social change. The Cuban Revolution and the solidarity movements it inspired throughout Latin America had provided a narrative in which Central American writers were protagonists in a history that moved inexorably toward the final victory of the oppressed. They were grounded in the belief that it was "el turno del ofendido"—to borrow the title of one of Roque Dalton's poetry collections—and that literature would help to redress the offense.

The reality, of course, turned out differently. Central America's utopian aspirations and revolutions would ultimately remain unfulfilled, and in their place, neoliberalism would take hold as the dominant paradigm. From there, politics would be recast as a purely economic matter, and history would no longer be seen as moving toward social justice and human emancipation, but rather toward economic growth and the expansion of productive forces. By the mid-1990s, the master narrative that had provided warmth, validation, and self-understanding to Central America's literary intelligentsia could no longer be sustained.

The literary culture of postwar Central America thus finds itself disinherited of any sense of orientation or cohesion. Although a great deal of literature has emerged during this period, and new avenues have opened up for its production and dissemination, the cultural field has been so transformed by new technologies of communication that wielders of the printed word can no longer see themselves as a source of cultural cohesion or as the spur of historical progress.[3] The leading writers of postwar Central America do not harbor any glowing expectations or belong to any aesthetic movement or artistic group. There is no manifesto to which they subscribe, no stylistic umbrella under which they can be classified, and no specific trajectory they followed to become writers. Jacinta Escudos once described her fellow Salvadoran writers as "Los Inclasificables" (144). It seems a fitting term for Central American writers in general.

As a constellation of diverse literary styles and experiences, Central American writers can no longer situate themselves within a grand narrative of artistic development, where a vanguard challenges a cultural or political establishment in the faith that its work will bring about an enlightened posterity. This is a narrative that neoliberalism increasingly seems to foreclose. In this context, a writer's only recourse is to write as best as possible. As Castellanos Moya explains,

> el escritor deberá partir de una circunstancia: su hábitat natural será la adversidad y contará nada más con sus propios recursos para hacerle frente. ¿Cuáles recursos? La perseverancia para desarrollar el oficio en condiciones difíciles, robando tiempo al tiempo, y la capacidad de resistencia para sobrevivir ante la indiferencia del medio, aferrado a la idea de que una obra de valor se abre camino por sí sola, aunque sea lentamente. (*La metamorfosis* 50)

Perseverance, language, and freedom of imagination—this is all that Central American writers can really count on. As Castellanos Moya goes on to explain: "la incorporación de mis particularidades en esta lengua [castellana] universal es uno de mis retos; el otro es que la voluntad de libertad con que ficciono a partir de mi memoria corresponda a una voluntad de libertad en el manejo del lenguaje. La aspiración de un estilo, esa es la cuestión" (*La metamorfosis* 22). Still, for all the freedoms that Central American writers have gained, and for all the persistence they have shown in the face of adversity, there is a sense that something even more fundamental about what it means to make art has been undermined by the forces of neoliberal state-building.

The transformations brought about by the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s were profound and far-reaching. Promoted under the banner of peace and prosperity, these reforms entrenched a "free market" ideology that subjected nearly all aspects of human sociability to the demands of the market and transformed Central American society into a "media intense" culture of consumption.[4] This has been deeply problematic for the artistic enterprise. For rather than produce readers, the postwar neoliberal order has created consumers and entertainment seekers. And rather than encourage artistic experimentation, it has pushed writers toward topicality and genre fiction. The absorption of the publishing industry by international conglomerates, whose only interest is profit and the easily consumable literature that generates it, has discouraged and even stifled less market-friendly art forms. As Sergio Ramírez explains, "la dificultad con los libros estriba hoy día en que, gracias al reinado absoluto del mercado, el concepto de literatura de calidad, que no siempre se vende bien, ha venido siendo arrinconado por el concepto de literatura de éxito inmediato" (*Cuando* 202).[5]

State-sponsored publishing entities have had an analogous effect on the literary market. Driven by "políticas culturales" whose aims are primarily economic and political, these entities have sought to promote, in their respective countries, the image of a unified multicultural national identity—the logic being that if a country is to be rebuilt from the rubble of war, modernized as a democracy, and marketed in a globalized economy, it must have a national literature and culture to showcase to the world.[6]

In her case study of El Salvador's postwar cultural reconstruction projects, Ana Patricia Rodríguez noted that the overriding aim of the government—in particular, through the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y el Arte (Concultura)—was to move the nation toward the broader political goals of "reconciliation" and "reconstruction." To achieve this, Concultura's publishing enterprise—Dirección de Publicaciones e Impresos—focused its efforts on promoting literature of folklore and local color over literary works that memorialized the human losses of the civil war or were more transgressive in nature (Rodríguez, "Mozote").[7] For the state, a benign and nostalgic literary heritage was preferable to one that dared to provoke controversy or confront the traumas of war. Essentially, what the state sought to construct was a simulacrum of national identity—an artificial facade that bore little relation to the raw realities of Central American society. Its agenda was not to promote literature as a culturally and politically transformative force, but to advance literacy as a mere aid to economic development.

This phenomenon has also been studied by Guatemalan scholar Rafael Cuevas Molina, who noted a profound disconnect between civil society, with its pressing political and economic concerns, and the cultural politics of the state, which he describes as "centralistas, burocratizadas, acostumbradas a trabajar 'en las alturas'" (62). The intergovernmental plan to "integrate" Central America into a "region of peace, freedom, democracy, and development," as stated in the Tegucigalpa Protocol of 1991, officially acknowledged culture as a key element in achieving that goal, establishing and coordinating various ministries to promote the arts and cultural affairs of the region. But these efforts, as Cuevas Molina explains, were based on imported discourses of "identity" and "multiculturalism" that ignored the actual "tendencias y necesidades internas" of Central American society (62). This disconnect led him to assert: "Mientras no exista coordinación entre ambos sectores, por muy interesantes y bien intencionadas que sean [las políticas culturales del estado], estarán condenadas a reproducirse en espacios relativamente reducidos, y su legitimidad se verá permanentemente cuestionada" (62). And the reason for his skepticism was clear: "lo que a los sectores impulsores de la integración les interesa no es la integración como tal, sino un espacio que les permita sobrevivir económicamente ante la globalización neoliberal y, eventualmente, acrecentar sus ganancias" (62–63).

Under the new dispensation, the kind of culture that would otherwise humanize and emancipate the individual has been stifled. On one level, the submission of literature to market demands and the imposition of a national heritage and identity have greatly reduced Central America's literary culture to something ornamental—to little more than a palliative for the ills that continue to plague society. Rather than satisfy a genuine need—whether for catharsis, critical dissent, or

heightened awareness—the marketing and administering of culture have merely sought to keep the nation's cultural conscience clear and adapt the individual to the status quo. On this point, Arturo Arias has remarked:

> Undoubtedly, Central American literary discourse has been disempowered politically while, paradoxically, being empowered as a commodity by globalizing trends. We can safely assume that it now aspires more to a different illusory power, that of an exoticized commodity validated in the transnational or postnational space, even though, often enough, it is no more than a copy of its old self, a pastiche, a defanged placebo, ideal for consumption in metropolitan centers for its representation of a certain tropical frisson without the risk of genuine transgression. (*Taking* 25)

At a deeper level, this process has led to a profound neutralization of the imagination. With market forces and officially sanctioned "promotores culturales" now doing the work of envisioning and constructing the Central American experience, there is less and less room for the kind of imagination that can challenge or transcend the status quo. Under neoliberalism, artistic culture has been instrumentalized to serve what are purely economic interests. This has left some writers with the sneaking suspicion that what they do—for instance, when they participate in those literary festivals that have become de rigueur as markers of modernization—is merely, as Castellanos Moya put it, "'bufonear' un rato para cumplir con el rito dominante de la llamada *celebrity culture*" (*La metamorfosis* 51). For the Salvadoran writer Miguel Huezo Mixco, it has led to a similar suspicion—that poetry, having once been "hija de los dioses," is now just a "muñeca inflable," propped up to satisfy the current penchant for entertainment ("Poetas").

**Postwar Disenchantment and the Historical Imagination**

In the years just prior to this neoliberal turn, there was a sense that social conditions were ripe for the emergence of a literature that would have a deeper significance for the reader and could help form a genuine collective cultural heritage. Salvadoran poet Rafael Rodríguez Díaz pointed this out in a 1991 lecture given at the Encuentro de Intelectuales Chiapas-Centroamérica, where he remarked: "Parecería un contrasentido afirmar que en El Salvador, precisamente por estar padeciendo una guerra cruenta y larga, estamos ante condiciones 'ideales' para que surja una nueva y gran literatura; y, en concreto, una nueva y gran literatura épica" (111). He observed that not only in El Salvador but throughout the isthmus there was a growing consciousness of a collective identity—a "nosotros centroamericanos"—grounded in a shared history of colonialism, dependency, and underdevelopment (113).

The official discourses that had long sustained Central America's authoritarian regimes had gone too far in their brutality and were losing ground among the people, who now were increasingly embracing the values and ideals of the "verdaderos héroes del pueblo" (Rodríguez Díaz 114). That figures such as Monseñor Óscar Arnulfo Romero and the Jesuit activist priests who had been murdered in 1989 in San Salvador were being spontaneously celebrated throughout the region and memorialized in the face of potential repression was telling, for it suggested that a more robust and authentic "nosotros" was consolidating itself and pushing back against false and destructive conceptions of nationalism (Rodríguez Díaz 111–18).

Central American society had been inspired by the epic nature of its struggles and its martyrs and was poised to construct for itself a more vital and emancipatory symbolic order.[8] There was turmoil and conflict, to be sure, but there was also a stable and overarching narrative scheme within which all the suffering could be given meaning and significance. Out of the region's dark and violent history, there seemed to be emerging a new collective democratic consciousness. It was as if the dreams of Francisco Morazán, the nineteenth-century liberal visionary, for a unified Central America were finally coming to fruition. This wasn't merely politics—it was an experience of historical unfolding, a feeling that something grand was taking place. It was a passionate, incandescent moment, steeped in mythic resonance and purpose. Rodríguez Díaz suggestively described it as "una atmósfera mágico-mítica" (118). All that was needed was for writers to give it literary form.

Ultimately, however, that fertile relationship between literature and society was not to be. The arrival of peace, welcome as it was, brought with it a great deal of incoherence and disorientation. On the one hand, it brought about positive changes to the region: demilitarization, judicial reforms, increased electoral participation, recognition of human rights, improved living standards, and greater freedom of expression. These changes inspired widespread optimism that Central America was finally entering a new era of peace, democracy, and prosperity. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, it seemed as if the long and embattled march of history had come to an end, and with it the ideological conflicts that had devastated the isthmus. Politicians, government agencies, and NGOs across the region—particularly through UNESCO's Culture of Peace Program—boasted that a democratic utopia was "both viable and historically necessary" (Lacayo Parajón et al. 16). Central America, they claimed, was not only entering a global marketplace but was joining a global society that was moving toward a more perfect humanity.[9] The region's enthrallment to authoritarianism had been shed, and in its place a new paradigm of peace, progress, and economic modernization was taking hold, one which would be

driven not by politics or ideology but by scientific knowledge and solution-focused approaches to governance.

And yet, at the same time, people's sense of risk and precarity seemed to deepen and become more pervasive. The aggressive implementation of neoliberal reforms thrust the region into a harsh form of economic liberalism that reinforced old structures of poverty and introduced new ones. Political corruption remained rampant. Policies and institutions that might have otherwise ensured social welfare were dismantled under stringent economic austerity measures. Rather than "trickle down" to everyone, property and wealth flowed into the hands of local elites, leaving the masses to face increasingly dismal prospects (Booth et al. 18–30).

As a result, the rates of violent crime shot up, reaching alarming levels. Youth gangs and organized crime syndicates proliferated and turned Central America into the most dangerous region in Latin America. In El Salvador, just a year after the signing of the 1992 peace accords, 50 percent of the urban population reported that gangs had infiltrated their neighborhoods (Cruz 140). By 1996, 57 percent of Salvadorans and 67 percent of urban Guatemalans reported that they or someone in their family had been a victim of violent crime (Pérez 637). Murder rates in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras soared, often spiking above 80 and 90 per 100,000 inhabitants. That the average murder rate during El Salvador's civil war was significantly lower—only 16 per 100,000—led one prominent journalist to a stark conclusion: "'Today's violence makes nonsense of the words 'war' and 'peace'" (Martínez xix).

With the promise of peace and progress on one hand, and widespread violence and insecurity on the other, the postwar period became profoundly disorienting. Whatever grand narrative had been taking shape during wartime that could provide reliable structures of meaning had given way to the dissonance and incoherence of peacetime. There was no longer any stable ground to stand on.

Even the very ideals that promoted human dignity and freedom turned out to be implicated in human suffering. The humanistic-liberal values that helped temper political radicalism and secure peace—values such as social cooperation, cultural identity, and the common good—were the same ones that the state used to obscure the social problems that needed urgent repair. The increased recognition of the cultural rights and differences of indigenous groups, though undoubtedly positive, also made it easy for the state to make superficial concessions, addressing demands for language preservation, education reform, and anti-racism policies, while leaving intact the structural mechanisms that perpetuated the economic exclusion of these communities (Hale).[10] Moreover, the institutionalization and protection of individual rights and freedoms that helped to bring Central

America's history of authoritarianism to an end also led to a dismantling of social bonds and collective endeavor, thereby atomizing society into something driven not by altruism or solidarity but by sheer self-interest (Harvey, *Brief* 175–82).

One can also cite how Central America's acquisition of new technologies, foreign goods, and expanded export markets through its entry into the global marketplace has reduced the region to a source of cheap and flexible labor, benefiting rich industrialized nations. Even the growth of technical and specialized knowledge, which has helped to modernize Central America, has given cause for despair. Generated by countless NGOs, government agencies, and academic institutions, this body of knowledge, with its precise empirical procedures and its constant accommodation of more and more variables, has gotten mired in a cycle of endless revision—a relentless piling up of facts, statistics, and theories that lacks any focusing purpose and has yielded contradictory lines of procedure that undermine the promise of prosperity.[11] As one Guatemalan peasant put it, "Hoy, proliferan las ONGs. Gastan mucho dinero en estudio tras estudio, pero hay poco desarrollo real" (Rey Rosa, *La cola* 76).

This jostling between two contrary modalities—of progress and regress, of optimism and disillusionment—has not only undermined the coherence of social life: it has stripped everyday experience of any firm sense of historical grounding and orientation, extinguishing the possibility for any kind of epic, unifying vision. Under these conditions, a new kind of poverty has taken hold—a poverty of a perceptual sort in which it is no longer possible for the postwar subject to assimilate or decipher any meaningful continuity from all the events that have shaped the Central American experience.

To understand this, consider the mode of optimism and progress. This mode rests on the pretense that peacebuilding and modernization owe their success solely to intelligence, to the application of technocratic expertise and efficient administration. Any setbacks in these efforts are attributed to cultural and scientific lag, to a failure to keep pace with the latest social scientific knowledge. Newness is the defining feature of this mode. Here, there is little sense of connection to the past or to the hopes and struggles that have shaped it. The past is merely an aggregate of information, something academicized and embalmed, not something that lives on in the present.

Now consider the mode of disillusionment, which takes a comparable stance on the past but from a different perspective. By dismissing the dreams of revolution as now irrelevant and futile, the disillusioned mind treats the past as if it were over and done with and were sealed off from the present. In doing so, it denies the ongoingness of history, and with it the possibility that those dreams could still be realized. Resigned to the loss of those dreams, the disillusioned mind fails to see the utopian

potential that may still underlie current forms of life. Here, there is no sense of obligation to the hopes and aspirations of the past; they are merely relics of a bygone era.

Thus the fact that postwar violence is now perceived as being individualized and random, a product of "common crime" (*delincuencia común*) rather than part of a long and unfinished history of social struggle, has made everyday experiences of violence and risk feel unrooted, disconnected, and bereft of any coherence. If people once understood violence to be a matter of military deployment and revolutionary resistance, now they perceive it as the product of individual and willful deviance, not realizing that it remains part of Central America's long history of social inequality and structural violence—which in the postwar context has merely assumed a neoliberal guise (Moodie 51–82).[12] Disembedded from the larger arc of history, violence is no longer seen as having any broader meaning or significance.

There has been a washing out of the historical imagination. Affectivity, imagination, and memory no longer function in an integrated, cohesive manner. If writers had once counted on a social dynamic that was fertile ground for the construction of a collective cultural and political imaginary, that fertile ground has been extinguished. The rug, so to speak, has been pulled out from under them. As a result, it is no longer possible to invoke the struggles of the past and the realities of the present as part of a coherent totality, much less one with an implicit utopian telos. The ability to perceive any such truth has been lost.

Central American writers are now confronted with a society marked by a profound sense of fragmentation and disintegration, where the self, in order to survive a hostile and confusing environment, has had to take refuge in self-defensive strategies—of emotional disengagement, indifference toward others, and a narrowing of vision to the immediate demands of survival.[13] Within such a context, it has become difficult to fathom the full meaning of things or the possibility that there might be something "more" to them—that they might harbor a richer significance, an otherness, beyond their immediate empirical face value.

This phenomenon is vividly portrayed in the opening scene of Rey Rosa's *Piedras encantadas* (2001). There, Guatemala City is presented as the "prototipo de la ciudad dura," a violent and balkanized place "donde el linchamiento ha sido la única manifestación perdurable de organización social." Spanning "doscientos kilómetros cuadrados de asfalto y hormigón" and inhabited by people with "corazón de piedra," it is a city devoid of human warmth, where everything is reduced to a crude form of materialism. While the wealthy, "una de las clases adineradas más ostentosas y burdas del planeta," live securely in their "fortalezas," the poor struggle to survive in their "arrabales" and

"chozas," which, due to torrential storms and earthquakes, sink progressively deeper into the ravines (209–10).

Dominated by capitalist values that disregard collective memory and cultural tradition, Guatemala City emerges as a place estranged from time and history. The narrator offers a description of the Plaza de Berlín, located "al final de la Avenida de las Américas," where a mural commemorates the fall of the Berlin Wall. Adjacent to this mural are two fake Mayan stelae that have been left uncarved. Figures alluding to Guatemala's civil war have been painted on them (210). The suggestion is that if Guatemala had once been part of Latin America's history of revolutions and popular movements, that history, like the Avenida de las Américas, has reached its end in Berlin with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The fact that the stelae have been left uncarved—a truncated and abandoned project—and that they are fake—and thus devoid of sacred value—suggests that in this society there is no collective memory or any sense of future.

Beyond the city limits, a chain of mountains and volcanoes rises, blocking one's view of the sea. The visible landscape—with its "telarañas de iluminación" hanging overhead and patterned clouds looming over a nearby volcano—offers no sense of transcendence, only "una falsa intuición del infinito." Life in the city feels engulfed by chaos and disorder: the blare of traffic, the relentless barking of police dogs, the ceaseless rumble of airplanes. "Todas estas cosas … creíste que iban a enloquecerte. Pero te has acostumbrado," says the narrator, immersing us in this grim reality (211).

Honduran philosopher Roberto Castillo once described his society as "una cultura desarticulada, de lo cotidiano, de poco horizonte y sobre todo muy desarmada frente a situaciones extremas" (203). He argued that "los cuatro jinetes de nuestro modesto apocalipsis nacional: hambre, violencia, corrupción e insalubridad" have deprived Honduras not only of the practical benefits of modernity but also of the "inner" resources of the culture. On the one hand, they have eroded the legacy of critical rationality inherited from the Enlightenment, and on the other, they have destroyed the spiritual resilience that had enabled earlier generations to face adversity with dignity (202). Castillo describes Honduras' entry into the new millennium as a collective "naufragio" (203).

For writers in Honduras, this fractured, hollowed-out reality forms the very foundation upon which they must build their work. As Castillo suggests, it is their essential starting point (202). But this predicament is not unique to them. In reality, it reflects a broader challenge facing Central American writers in general: of how to reach a society whose experiential horizon has become so narrowed and disintegrated that it no longer aligns with literature's time-honored hope of humanizing the individual,

whether it be through an experience of otherness and possibility, or the heightening of critical consciousness.

In this context, it has become easy to dispense with those higher, "spiritual" pursuits traditionally associated with art, literature, and philosophy. Although these pursuits have been given some institutional support, it has usually been within the framework of officially sanctioned "idearios culturales" that tend to reach only a minority of the population—"la culturocracia," as Miguel Huezo Mixco cleverly put it ("¿Cuán relevantes?"). In their broader generative capacity, however, as intellectually and spiritually innervating forces, these humanistic endeavors have been marginalized by a deeply secular culture of profit and calculation, such that ultimate questions and imaginative scrutiny no longer mean much next to the relentless demands of economic survival.[14]

The dismay occasioned by this is given unbridled, comical expression in Castellanos Moya's *El asco*, whose protagonist, an art history professor who has briefly returned from exile to his native San Salvador, rails against the country's pervasive materialism:

> previ que en este país no encontraría nada para alimentar mi espíritu: ni libros, ni exposiciones, ni obras de teatro, ni películas, absolutamente nada para alimentar mi espíritu … aquí confunden la chabacanería con el arte, confunden la estupidez y la ignorancia con el arte … No creo que exista otro pueblo con las energías creativas tan atrofiadas para todo lo que tenga que ver con el arte y las manifestaciones del espíritu … este pueblo está reñido con el arte y con las manifestaciones del espíritu; su única vocación es el comercio y los negocios, por eso todos quieren ser administradores de empresas, para manejar mejor sus comercios y negocios. (80–81, 84)

This is not to say that in Central America historical and cultural understanding is entirely lacking. The robust body of knowledge produced by academics, activists, and the investigators working to preserve historical memory and shed light on the region's cultural diversity is certainly proof of this. The real concern here is that that understanding, however marginal its role in social life may be, has itself become entangled with this narrowing of human vision and experience.

Postwar Central America is no stranger to modernity's privileging of technical-scientific reason as the preeminent form of legitimation. The prestige of knowledge, the authority of the social sciences, and the aura of the expert and their technical competence have all held sway in the effort to reckon with Central American history, identities, and cultural expressions. That such a reckoning has been carried out by investigatory commissions tasked with obtaining "el conocimiento cabal de la verdad," as in the case of El Salvador's Truth Commission (*De la locura* 13), or that journals dedicated to the

study of Central American literature and culture often refer to their editorial boards as "comités científicos," and their publications as "investigaciones empíricas," is in this sense significant. The crucial point here is that while this emphasis on technical-scientific methods—rooted in theory, experimentation, and evidence—has yielded valuable knowledge and information, it has ultimately purged Central American reality of the dark and mysterious and has left no room for the metaphysical shudder or for any sense of wonder.

The human capacity for revelation and epiphanic feeling—a core aspiration of literature—has been excluded from the prevailing frames of cultural and historical understanding. In its place stand the antiseptic theories and objective findings of experts. The cost of this has been significant. For however much the suffering of the past has been accounted for by social scientists and literary "researchers," as patrimony—as something that still impinges and stirs—it has largely been disowned. Knowledge and information abounds, but there is little in the way of a living heritage or tradition, or of a sense that one is partaking of the drama and destiny of Central America's history.

The experience of this is ingeniously captured in a pictorial series titled *Nuestro futuro ya no es como antes* (2000) by Guatemalan painter Moisés Barrios. The series includes depictions of random everyday objects that populate a neoliberal consumerist society: a clock, a handgun, a dress shirt, a film strip, a superhero figurine, a Madonna-and-child souvenir statuette. These objects bear the vibrant yellow color of a banana and are strewn with reddish-brown spots—those spots that signal when the fruit is at its sweetest and best.

That these tokens of neoliberal modernity are of a color reminiscent of Central America's past as a banana republic might seem at first playful and ironic. At this level, the modern and the quaint reconcile into something delectable and amusing. However, as soon as one considers that those reddish-brown spots might actually be bloodstains, and not signs of ripening, everything changes. For one is now confronted with a more difficult and intractable contradiction: a modernity that radiates cheerfulness and optimism and yet is steeped in bloodshed. No longer playful and clever, these pictures suddenly become disconcerting, such that one's earlier interpretation—that the spots are signs of a banana's ripening, that all is well, that the troubled march of history is now just a curiosity of the past—is immediately shown up as self-deceptive, as the expression of a bad faith that chooses to ignore a more unsettling reality: that these are bloodstains, and that history is still ongoing.[15] Peter Sloterdijk struck at the heart of this when he stated that "Our lethargic modernity certainly knows how to 'think historically,' but it has long doubted that it lives in a meaningful history" (xxviii).

The captions that accompany Barrios's pictures are especially suggestive, as they evoke a form of life where time, or so-called "progress," is felt to have lost any meaningful purpose:

> Contamos con un progreso evidente, el incremento de la violencia.
>
> Nuestro tiempo es el de la descomposición orgánica.
>
> Nuestro futuro es cosa del pasado…
>
> Reflexión sombría: el futuro es la basura del pasado.
>
> ¿Tiene futuro el futuro?
>
> Nuestro futuro ya no es como antes.
>
> Perdimos el rumbo. Nos vemos en el futuro…

The captions are witty, but devastating. They convey how, under postwar conditions, time is felt to be neither regenerative, purgative, nor redemptive, but rather, as Walter Benjamin would put it, empty and homogeneous and tending toward further ruin and catastrophe. Without a firm sense of orientation or rootedness in something "more," the past, present, and future seem as if they are cut off from each other and are spaces, not of dreams to be fulfilled or sufferings to be redeemed, but of things that just happened—mere occurrences, nothing more. Accordingly, everyday life is no longer felt to be shaped by turning points, continuities, or culminations; instead, it is experienced as a series of random accidents and chance events.

Disenchanted, social life has carried on, but merely as a matter of survival—a bleak, relentless grind of making do and getting by in a world that offers no consolation: no utopia in the future, no meaningful continuity with the past, no certainty other than death. In this context, the popular expression "la vida no vale nada"—that grim refrain of the postwar experience—speaks to more than just the prevalence of violence: it speaks to the loss of agency and control, to the sense that life has been reduced to mere contingency.[16] It is this impoverishment of experience that lies at the heart of Central America's postwar "disenchantment."

**Conclusion**

Disenchantment is difficult to bear. That people should cling to whatever they can—whether it be criminal gangs, charismatic religions, political ideologies, material consumption, technological rationality, or anything else that can offer some sense of anchoring or meaning—is certainly understandable. In this context, even paranoia has proven to be valuable. By imagining and projecting "hidden orders behind the visible," paranoia makes the incoherence and uncertainty more manageable (Bersani 100–03). It gives a name to the perpetrator—*aparatos clandestinos de seguridad*, *el Estado dentro del*

*Estado*, *escuadrones de la muerte*—and provides a reason for the violence whenever explanations are lacking—*estaba involucrado en algo*, *se metió en babosadas*.[17] Of course, given Central America's history of war and political repression, such paranoia is often not without basis. For even in peacetime, clandestine apparatuses and death squads have continued to operate. Central American society, therefore, finds itself trapped in a grim contradiction: the more paranoia provides a sense of stability and sanity, the more distress and delusion become a normal way of being.

All of this—the perversion of social values, the reduction of life to mere survival, the human devastation wrought by neoliberal modernity—has been the object of fascination and horror for Central American writers. It holds a powerful yet fraught allure for the literary imagination. As Rodrigo Rey Rosa remarked in a 2012 interview: "No sé por qué sigo en Guatemala. A veces pienso que es porque hay tanto material… Casos que oyes y que parecen ficción. En estos países de anarquía y de contraste entre gran riqueza y pobreza extrema cabe cualquier relación humana. No hay que armar mucho el relato, sirve con recordar, vale casi con aplicar la escritura automática" (qtd. in Rodríguez Marcos).

To find inspiration, Central American writers need only look to the frightful headlines that make the rounds every day. Sometimes it is even enough to look to their own experiences.[18] Close at hand are countless stories of former soldiers turned hitmen, of corrupt officials and "abogángsters," of kidnappings and lynchings, of organized crime and widespread impunity. Indeed, when faced with such realities, the writer's imagination often falls short. "He aquí," Castellanos Moya observes, "una situación insólita que enfrentamos algunos escritores latinoamericanos: la realidad de la violencia criminal que afecta a nuestras sociedades es de tal magnitud que nuestras obras de ficción resultan a veces conservadoras y palidecen ante los hechos cotidianos. Así, un texto que en un país europeo se consideraría una novela negra y cruda, en México, Colombia o El Salvador parecerá *light* frente a la lectura de la página diaria de sucesos del periódico" (*La metamorfosis* 30).

Yet a deeper horror remains. With postwar society awash in violence and corruption, with everyday life drained of values and orientation, and with the ravages of neoliberalism making a mockery of peace and democracy, one cannot but recoil and ask: Was all that long and difficult history—of colonialism, political resistance, revolutions, and social struggle—really meant to culminate in *this*? A violence that's worse than the war? A peace captured by economic elites? A democracy without dreams? How is it we had all that experience but missed the meaning?[19] Already, the hopes and dreams for a genuine peace have been wasted. Now, all that remains is for the tragedy

and pain to be dismissed as senseless, wasted suffering—as just more debris to be piled upon the general wreckage.[20]

Central American writers are confronted with several options: either surrender to a cynical compromise with the new reality by treating the Central American experience as fodder for literary consumption and entertainment; embrace the loss of a stable symbolic framework as an opportunity for free play and deconstructive possibilities; or attempt to salvage from the wreckage some kind of meaning—call it truth, the universal, cultural identity, or historical memory.

Under postwar conditions, none of these options can be entirely satisfactory. A surrender to cynicism, however justified, would only accommodate literature to the status quo and deepen its entanglement in the larger process of disenchantment. It would not only deny the reader a way to come up for fresh air but would leave them to continue striving amid the ruins. Equally dubious would be a literature whose embrace of ambiguity and indeterminacy denies the possibility of establishing stable notions of truth, virtue, and objectivity—notions that could serve as a standard by which to measure the status quo and ultimately find it wanting. Postmodern skepticism is a luxury not all societies can afford, especially those in the grip of catastrophe. Lastly, a literature driven by an affirmative impulse—whether to enlighten or liberate readers through cultural identity, historical memory, or broader humanistic truths—presupposes a consensus on values and ideals that does not exist. But more than that, it presupposes a capacity for receptiveness that has already been extinguished by the traumas of neoliberal modernity.

Central American writers find themselves in a shifting terrain of flawed alternatives and unresolved tensions, facing questions about the role of literature and whether it can still possess a genuinely emancipatory power—whether, amid the prevailing crisis, it can still be subversive and fuel a striving beyond the status quo. What would that subversion look like? Can literature, even with its contradictions, still serve as a space for utopian aspirations? What would the utopian even look like in a disenchanted world? To attempt to answer these questions is beyond the scope of this article. Here, it is merely hoped that the issues outlined will help clarify some of the sociohistorical conditions under which Central American writers have produced their literature.

## Notes

[1] Other prominent writers include Carlos Cortés, whose novel *Cruz de olvido* (1999) examines the sordidness of Costa Rica's political culture and deconstructs the myth of Costa Rica as a country of peace and stability; Claudia Hernández, whose short story collection *De fronteras* (2007) renders surreal the alienation and dehumanization suffered by a society scarred by violence and war; and Sergio Ramírez, whose novels provide a critical perspective on Central American history and the myths produced by political ideology. Other notable writers are Arturo Arias, Eduardo Halfon, Miguel Huezo Mixco, Dante Liano, Tatiana Lobo, Waldina Mejía, Denise Phé-Funchal, Anacristina Rossi, and Carol Zardetto.

[2] For details on Bishop Gerardi's murder, see Goldman.

[3] For more on the literary intelligentsia's loss of prestige, see Franco.

[4] For a discussion of how neoliberalism elides the distinction between "market *economy*" and "market *society*," see Gledhill 340. For a discussion of Nicaragua as a "media intense" society, see Norsworthy.

[5] For more on Central America's book market and the influence of international conglomerates on its literature, see Arias "¿De veras agotadas?"; Arias, *Taking* 19–25; and Robbins.

[6] For further discussion on the "políticas culturales" of postwar Central America, see Cuevas Molina 23–63; Huezo Mixco, "¿Cuán relevantes?"; Huezo Mixco, "El Salvador"; Pleitez Vela 252–68; Rodríguez, "Mozote"; Walter 117–57; and Zavala.

[7] On the importance of Concultura's publishing enterprise and its effort to conserve El Salvador's cultural patrimony, Knut Walter remarks: "Bajo esta óptica, no es casualidad que la institución cultural que más presencia y aceptación tiene entre la población (aparte de los parques y sitios arqueológicos) sea la Dirección de Publicaciones e Impresos, la editorial estatal que—exceptuando sus momentos de crisis e inactividad—ha dejado una huella notable en la bibliografía nacional" (156).

[8] A good definition of "symbolic order" is provided by theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet: "This *symbolic order* designates the system of connections between the different elements and levels of a culture (economic, social, political, ideological—ethics, philosophy, religion…), a system forming a coherent whole that allows the social group and individuals to orient themselves in space, find their place in time, and in general situate themselves in the world in a significant way—in short, to find their identity in a world that makes 'sense,' even if, as C. Lévi-Strauss says, there always remains an inexpungible residue of signifiers to which we can never give adequate meanings" (84–85).

[9] A 1996 report on the Culture of Peace Program in El Salvador stated: "The proposal for a global culture of peace has the characteristics of a universal movement in the process of construction, a utopia which is both viable and historically necessary. It has been conceived under specific historical conditions, in which there is a new opportunity for peace and in which there is a strong impulse for the construction of a new humanism" (Lacayo Parajón et al. 16). For an analysis of the relationship between the culture of peace and Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis, see Drouhaud. For insight into the utopian aspects of UNESCO's Culture of Peace Program, see DeLugan 21–43; Pavone; and *UNESCO*.

[10] As Charles Hale has argued, in the era of neoliberal multiculturalism in Guatemala, the logic of "sí pero" prevails: identity is celebrated as a matter of individual choice but not as a catalyst for collective mobilization; anti-racism is framed as opposition to individual acts of discrimination but not as a challenge to structural inequity; and indigenous culture is valorized as a means of fostering self-esteem and self-help but not as a vehicle for advancing collective empowerment (508, 521). Hale concludes that much of the ground that "subalterns" have gained within the neoliberal establishment turns out to have been contrary to their interests (522).

[11] One example of this sort of conflict is when an indigenous community's claim to ancestral lands, as backed by a legally and historically informed panel of experts, conflicts with the efforts of environmental groups that view those lands as essential for preserving biodiversity (Harvey, *Enigma* 251–52).

[12] On the depoliticization and dehistoricization of violence in postwar Central America, see also Oglesby.

[13] On the self's psychic strategies for survival, see Erikson; Lasch 94–99; and Lifton 163–78.

[14] This was especially evident in the realm of higher education. It is significant, for instance, that in El Salvador, prior to 2000, there were no formal university programs in history or anthropology, and that the literature program at the country's top university—Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas—was eliminated in 1995. See DeLugan 47; Pleitez Vela 24; and Montes Gómez 16–17.

[15] For a discussion of Moisés Barrios's artwork and how it engages Central America's history as a "banana republic," see Klein 129–35.

[16] For a discussion on how writers and poets—specifically, Juan Sobalvarro, Claudia Hernández, and Marta Leonor González—have depicted postwar Central America as a landscape of decay, hopelessness, and violence, where poetry can no longer imbue life with value or alleviate suffering, see Aparicio 77–99. See also Ortiz Wallner, who examines the ways in which contemporary Central American novels, particularly after the publication of Castellanos Moya's *La diáspora* (1989), provide "una radiografía de un lugar en descomposición," where collective identities and previous understandings of truth,

once articulated through the genre of testimonio, have become fractured, mutilated, and precarious (163). For a series of photographs reflecting the theme "la vida no vale nada" in Guatemala, see Milton.

[17] On paranoia and the rationalization of postwar violence, see Nelson 208–41; and England 197–245.

[18] The personal experiences of these writers have often provided compelling material for their literary creations. Sergio Ramírez, for instance, a key political figure in the Nicaraguan Revolution, directly witnessed the corruption and breakdown of the Sandinistas' revolutionary dream. Castellanos Moya, for his part, has faced death threats and exile, as well as the dangers and disillusionments that came with working as a journalist during El Salvador's transition to peace. Rodrigo Rey Rosa, in 1981, suffered the kidnapping of his mother, whose release he helped to secure.

[19] Cf. T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "We had the experience but missed the meaning" (194). On the popular perception of postwar violence in El Salvador as being "worse than the war," see Moodie 83–112. On the process by which political and economic elites commandeered, or "captured," the peace process in El Salvador, see Wade. On how neoliberal technocracies in postwar Nicaragua have created a market-based democracy devoid of the country's utopian aspirations, and how this "democracy without dreams" has led to a resurgence of caudillista politics, see Chávez 267–309.

[20] For a discussion on the theme of waste and wasted opportunities in Central America's postwar cultural production, see Rodríguez, *Dividing* 195–222.

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