

Sarmiento, Ignacio. *Specters of War: The Battle of Mourning in Postconflict Central America*. Austin: University of Arizona Press, 2025.

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Ignacio Sarmiento's *Specters of War: The Battle of Mourning in Postconflict Central America* offers insightful analysis of the ways in which mourning plays an important role in Guatemalan and Salvadoran cultural production from the 1990s through early 2020s. Sarmiento analyzes museums, memorials, works of theater, short stories, and novels in support of his contention that there is a battle over the work of mourning that permeates postwar Central America. The main struggles in this battle, he argues, include questions such as who can be mourned, how people can or should grieve their loved ones, and who is welcome to participate in the process. What is at stake, he asserts, is "the possibility of an open, public act of grieving the dead" (5-6).

Specters of War contains an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction, "The Battle of Mourning in Postwar Central America," begins with a brief context of the Guatemalan and Salvadoran Civil Wars, suggesting that these events are arguably the most traumatic events in the history of twentieth-century Central America. Sarmiento establishes the theoretical framework for his study by following Jacques Derrida's notion of mourning as a public act of truth-seeking, including identifying, localizing, and fixing the dead in a particular space and time. The actions outlined by Derrida underpin the notion of mourning as a work of "ethical action that seeks to demand justice," which Sarmiento closely follows through the book (10). The battle he alludes to in the title of the introduction is between forces that demand truth and justice and an opposition that aims to prevent the work of mourning.

The battle between the above forces is perhaps on clearest display in Chapter 1, "Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: Memorialization in Postconflict Central America." Through description and analysis of several memorials, museums, and sites of memory that engage with the internal conflicts, it becomes evident that there is a discursive battle about who deserves to be honored and mourned, which largely falls along ideological lines. Political parties, former guerrillas, and national soldiers, he argues, do mourn the dead but have little interest in building a broad community of mourners that would allow diverse groups of people to come together to grieve the dead. As a result, various sites of memory in Guatemala and El Salvador present conflicting narratives and contrasting approaches to mourning. Guatemala's Museum of Military History, for example, praises the special

operations forces known as the Kaibiles, who were responsible for the 1982 civilian massacre at Dos Erres. Sarmiento begins his analysis with sites of memory in Guatemala City. The Guatemalan Museum of National History completely ignores the Civil War, suggesting that it does not deserve a place in Guatemalan history. By contrast, The Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulum is a memory museum that offers “a complete reinterpretation of Guatemalan history from the perspective of Indigenous communities and women,” and makes important connections between the violent racism of the Spanish colonial period and the state terrorism of the Guatemalan Civil War (36). Sarmiento argues that, “By reshaping the notion of community, Casa de la Memoria performs a profound and meaningful work of mourning” (38-39). The Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional is located on what used to be an army warehouse, where nearly eighty million documents providing evidence of political oppression, torture, and assassination were discovered in 2005. As Sarmiento posits, murals painted on the exterior walls of the archive, including one of a family held at gunpoint as they grieve the murder of their husband/father, are evidence of an active engagement in Guatemala’s struggle of mourning. What is perhaps most striking about these sites of memory is that despite the various civil organizations engaged in developing memorialization practices to grieve the dead of the internal conflict, the Guatemalan state “has not shown any concern for the memorialization of civil war victims” (42).

In the second half of chapter one, Sarmiento changes his focus to sites of memory, museums, and memorials in El Salvador, particularly in San Salvador and Morazán. The Museum of the Revolution emphasizes a discourse of martyrdom in which revolutionary guerrillas have made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of a sacred cause, and are thus at peace in their eternal rest, with appropriate mourning rites having been performed. However, Sarmiento observes the intentional absence of Roque Dalton in the museum, which underscores the constant battle to decide who deserves to be grieved. A notable contrast to the Museum of the Revolution is the Museum of Military History, which shows no interest in memorializing civil war victims but rather presents the fallen soldiers of the Salvadoran army as heroes, emphasizing national identity and the army’s role in Salvadoran history. In this museum, it is the omission of any reference to human rights abuses or massacres that obfuscates the history of the civil war in an attempt to justify the military’s actions, with no apparent interest in seeking justice or truth. Other memorials examined in this chapter include the Monument to Memory and Truth and the Memorial at El Mozote, The Project of Peace and Reconciliation, and the Reconciliation Sculpture Park, all of which, in spite of their conflicting approaches and messages, Sarmiento highlights for their “active role in the mourning process in the

public sphere and for their essential function in developing communities of mourners that exceed the intimate and familiar circle” (76).

Chapter 2, “Staging Mourning in Postwar El Salvador: Jorgelina Cerritos’s *Ensayos sobre la Memoria*,” explores how plays by Salvadoran playwright Jorgelina Cerritos participate in the battle over the work of mourning by engaging with issues of grief, memory, and justice in relation to El Salvador’s traumatic civil war. The chapter begins with a brief history of El Salvador’s theater, thus allowing the author to contextualize the work of Cerritos. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to the analysis of Cerritos’s trilogy of plays *Ensayos sobre la memoria*, all of which debuted between 2013 and 2017. Sarmiento argues that the first play of the trilogy, “La audiencia de los confines,” which features a farcical trial set amidst an eternal night in which the characters await justice, ultimately suggests that truth alone is not adequate to bring the work of mourning to closure. “Bandada de pájaros. Segundo ensayo sobre la memoria” portrays victims of the civil war who, because they have not been mourned, are trapped in nothingness and have not been able to reach an eternal resting place. Sarmiento thus interprets “Bandada de pájaros” as an ethical invitation to collectively mourn. The third play in the trilogy, “13703. El misterio de las utopías,” portrays the search for truth and justice in two families that ultimately provides no answers. Centered around the discovery of a state archive documenting thousands of citizens considered to be subversives, Sarmiento argues that the protagonist “allegorically embodies the atrocities, pain, and doubts left by the war,” thus compelling the audience to participate in the task of mourning. For Sarmiento, the final words of the play “Algo más habrá que hacer” capture the central message of the trilogy that the ongoing work of mourning must continue.

Chapters 3 through 5 are dedicated to postwar Salvadoran and Guatemalan fiction. Chapter 3 “What to Do with the Dead?: The Specters of War in Claudia Hernández’s *De fronteras*” analyzes the role of mourning in several short stories from Hernández’s 2007 collection, specifically “Hechos de un buen ciudadano” (parts 1 and 2), “Carretera sin buey,” “Molestias de tener un rinoceronte,” “Abuelo,” and “Manual del hijo muerto.” In the first two stories, he emphasizes the impulse among characters to create communities of mourners and to express their responsibility toward the dead, whereas in the others he analyzes the metaphor of the mutilated body and its implications with regard to mourning. He ultimately concludes that “Hernández’s literature is an act of defiance toward the imperative to overlook the atrocities around us, past and present” (140).

The following chapter, “Somos la masa silenciosa: Archival Work and the Work of Mourning in Mónica Albizúrez’s *Ita*,” argues that Albizúrez’s 2018 novel provokes a reconsideration of the role of archives in post-authoritarian societies. Inspired by the 2005 discovery of the Archivo Histórico de

la Policía Nacional, the eponymous protagonist consults not only this official archive but also her own family's documents, and the sealed archive of her mother's psyche in an effort to piece together her own family's entanglement in the internal conflict and gain a deeper understanding of Guatemala's traumatic history. As a socioeconomically privileged *ladina* lawyer, the process of consulting the archives facilitates a significant transformation in Ita, which Sarmiento describes as "a radical move from utter disinterest in others' sorrow to embracing communal mourning as a political disposition oriented toward justice" (155). In this sense, he argues, "Archival work becomes a crucial tool for the work of mourning" (145). The novel thus suggests, according to Sarmiento, that "the battle of mourning is fought on several fronts, even within the privileged groups that, consciously or not, supported or turned a blind eye to the political violence of the internal conflicts" (142).

The final chapter, "Eduardo Halfon: A Global Struggle for Mourning," presents a broad overview of the Guatemalan author's oeuvre, examining the through line of grief across its entirety. Sarmiento focuses on two recurring tendencies in Halfon's work: the troubled relationship between father and son and the narration of trauma. Specifically, Sarmiento contends that the Shoah and the Guatemalan Civil War are two traumatic historical events that are central to his overall literary corpus. Among the works he considers in support of his overarching analysis are the following: *Esto no es una pipa*, *Saturno* (2003), *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* (2011), *Signor Hoffman* (2015), *Duelo* (2017), *Canción* (2021), and *Un hijo cualquiera* (2022). Sarmiento finds in Halfon's fiction a world ethic that transcends the context of the Guatemalan civil war, concluding, "It is a form of revisiting the unclosed wounds of the past, resisting forgiveness and forced reconciliation as a compulsory acceleration of mourning with justice. Halfon's fiction is a defense of the right to mourn" (188).

In the conclusion, Sarmiento reminds the reader that "the battle over the work of mourning matters precisely because there are numerous forces in postconflict Central America that have been pushing for decades to either cancel or apprehend and resignify the grieving process of the internal conflicts' victims and their loved ones" (189). He offers the Ríos Montt trial in Guatemala and failed reparations programs in El Salvador as examples of the ways in which these battles have played out politically in the decades since the conflicts. He further critiques the discourse of forgiveness, particularly when "these apologies often take place against a background of impunity supported by our neoliberal present" (192). He acknowledges that the absence of indigenous voices is an important limitation to the study and points to several films, including Marcela Zamora's documentaries and Jayro Bustamante's *La llorona* (2019), which might also have been included had he written a chapter on postwar film. He concludes by asserting that the work of mourning, "must resist its apprehension

by the state and its apparatus” and “fight back any attempt to inscribe it into the neoliberal reason” (201).

In sum, Sarmiento’s monograph is an important contribution to the field of Central American studies. He successfully articulates a framework for analyzing postwar culture that engages with, yet transcends the scholarship of testimony, trauma, and memory that has dominated Central American studies over the last three decades. He thoughtfully builds upon prior scholarship about Central American culture and provides illuminating analyses of a variety of forms of cultural production. The overall thesis regarding a battle over the work of mourning is well supported by the examples he provides. He productively incorporates Derrida’s concept of mourning as the overarching theoretical apparatus, yet avoids overwhelming the text with superfluous jargon. This study would be a useful and accessible resource in undergraduate or graduate Latin American cultural studies courses or in courses on Central American culture, literature, and history. It would also likely be of particular interest to Central Americanists and scholars of memory and trauma studies.