

TOWARDS A GENRE OF RETURN IN THE CONTEMPORARY CENTRAL AMERICAN  
NOVEL

by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines exile in four contemporary Central American novels and focuses on the return of each protagonist after an extended absence. The works establish homecoming as a critical feature of Central American literature and include *El asco* by Horacio Castellanos Moya, *Cruz de olvido* by Carlos Cortés, *El retorno de los mayas* by Gaspar Pedro González, and *Con pasión absoluta* by Carol Zardetto.

The aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate that return represents a significant yet often underappreciated aspect of displacement in literature and criticism. The motivations for each character's flight and eventual trip home are unique, and the distinctiveness of each path is mirrored in the various responses to the experience. The novels also approach return from differences of class, race, and gender that inform the perspectives and outcomes of each journey.

Return is a dynamic process that contrasts memories of origins with the sudden encounter with an altered home. An important factor is the underlying tension between what was left behind and the people or places that appear unfamiliar after an extended absence. These journeys and their aftermaths spark difficult encounters and myriad obstacles. This dissertation establishes that exile and its repercussions do not cease once displacement comes to an end. The protagonists defy the assumption that exiles will seamlessly reengage with long-absent communities. In each novel, return is only the first step in a succession of trials and self-discoveries that reflect the tumultuous postwar era in Central America.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, whose unfailing support and love were a constant source of encouragement. Thank you Will, Mom, and especially Dad. All that I am, or ever hope to be, I owe to you.

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## INTRODUCTION

### TOWARDS A GENRE OF RETURN IN THE CONTEMPORARY CENTRAL AMERICAN NOVEL

This dissertation examines exile in four contemporary Central American novels and focuses on the return of each protagonist after an extended absence. These works offer an in-depth investigation of the literature of a region in the throes of social upheaval at the end of the twentieth century. Return is a conflicting event that is manifested in a range of emotions including discouragement, personal discovery, and optimistic views of cultural awakening. The aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate that the genre represents a significant yet often underappreciated aspect of displacement in literature and criticism

Exile and displacement are fundamental aspects of the human experience and include topics such as exodus, assimilation, marginalization, and cultural dissonance. Despite the array of approaches to the field, return fails to receive substantial attention as a literary and scholarly subject.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees designated 1992 as the start of a “decade of voluntary repatriation” in response to the return of displaced groups around the world (Sepulveda 83). Yet in studies of displacement, this theme is conspicuously absent. Explorations of exile tend to focus on three traditional aspects: the mental and social states of individuals prior to flight, the reasons for leaving, and the subsequent attempts to assimilate in foreign lands (Shain 8). Lost in these discussions is the role of return and its far-reaching implications. Exile is noted for probing the bounds of identity between origins and sites of

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<sup>1</sup> “It is not by chance that the exilic condition has turned into a key paradigm for the human condition especially under conditions of estrangement, alienation, and marginalization as well as displacement, relocation, and migration” (Sznajder and Roniger, “Political”12).

displacement: “It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (Said 173). In addition to provoking issues of distance between self and origins, displacement questions the basic concepts of home. When individuals flee their homelands, they also leave behind an elaborate assortment of memories that are transformed and challenged. Instead of idealizing home as a remembered physical place, an uncomfortable in-betweenness emerges among social, cultural, and national modes of belonging. Exile is understood as “a sense of being between places, rather than being rooted definitively in one singular place” (Di Stefano 28). In this sense, identity is continually constructed from the distance of displacement while balancing recollections of home with the desire to eventually return.<sup>2</sup> But once return is converted from a distant dream to a reality, its outcomes are as varied as they are unpredictable. For this reason, this project proposes a genre of return based on recent Central American novels that is beneficial in understanding the process and its place in the wider field of exile studies.

Exile is a wide-ranging subject and “can be analyzed from a sociological, psychological, economic, literary, artistic, and geographic point of view. It relates not only to expulsion from a country but also to reception by host countries, to a dynamics of longing for return, and eventually to the return itself” (Sznajder and Roniger, “Political” 25). The focus on separation from a physical country of origin and the possibility of return are key characteristics of exile in the novels of this dissertation.<sup>3</sup> For Edward Said, exile is at its core “a discontinuous state of being” that stresses the anguish of separation as a continual rupture in terms of self, identity, and

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<sup>2</sup> John Di Stefano defines home as an active process unattached to tangible ideas of place or geography: “It is a space or structure of activity and beliefs around which we construct a narrative of belonging. More than a physical space, home might be understood as a familiarity and regularity of activities and structures of time” (38).

<sup>3</sup> The critic Amy Kaminsky defines exile as an involuntary condition: “‘Exile,’ as I use the term, is always coerced. ‘Voluntary exile’ is, I believe, an oxymoron that masks the cruelly limited choices imposed on the subject” (9).

nation (177). Additionally, exiles are marked by connotations of abandonment, as opposed to refugees expecting to repatriate or members of an established diaspora (Shain 15). Therefore, in this dissertation an exile is an individual who leaves his or her physical home nation, whether voluntarily or forced by threats of violence or danger, and whose absence has a profound impact on a return that occurs either by choice or unplanned circumstances. This definition prioritizes the role of return as an essential component of the exile experience, instead of simply viewing homecoming as a closing chapter. These returnees are shaped by formative experiences during exile that challenge notions of self and nation in turbulent Central American societies. In a similar vein, in this dissertation a homeland is a physical point of origin to which exiles return. As the novels demonstrate, the journey to the homeland is not always a prearranged or even desired event. While homelands are primarily physical locations, they arouse a variety of emotional and sensorial responses. Whether the protagonists are disgusted at returning to their homes, devastated by the ravages of war, or overwhelmed by tropical sensations, homelands are fluid concepts in these novels of return.

In his article “La novela post-exílica de repatriación,” Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat examines the phenomenon of return as a dynamic theme in contemporary Latin America literature. Instead of serving merely as a closing phase of exile, he maintains that repatriation “es lo suficientemente distintivo y flexible como para conformar un género narrativo” (27). While exile is studied from artistic, political, psychological, and economic perspectives, repatriation receives considerably less attention.<sup>4</sup> Although approaches consider abstract psychological or symbolic

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<sup>4</sup> In the view of Julio Cortázar, exile was a topic of literary interest but also constituted a fundamental and pervasive theme in Latin America and its reality (Lagos-Pope, “Introduction” 7-8).

perspectives, Gutiérrez Mouat specifies that his concept of novelistic repatriation involves the return of a protagonist to the society of their birth after an extended absence.<sup>5</sup>

This incipient genre of return is defined in great part by the tension that exists between returnees and the world that surrounds them. The difficulty of resettlement in foreign lands and the process of acculturation are defining aspects of the exile experience: “Exile is conceived by those who experience it as a transitory phase, a ‘life between parentheses,’ as outside the ‘real life’ that remained in the homeland” (Sznajder and Roniger, “Political” 20). A major aspect of this tension is the crisis of the writer in depicting the increasingly questionable foundations of nationhood. Undermined by the rapid pace of globalization and pervasive issues of violence that contribute to a widespread disenchantment, the writer’s task differs greatly from the politically committed literature of previous generations (Gutiérrez Mouat 27). In the case of protagonists that leave their home nations and later venture back, absence is a defining characteristic: “Naturalmente, el estar fuera no contribuye a ningún tipo de participación en un proyecto nacional. Dejando de lado las causas de la expatriación y subsecuente repatriación ... está claro que el discurso del escritor que vuelve al país tiene un carácter posnacional” (Gutiérrez Mouat 34). Instead of idealizing returns as long-awaited conclusions to displacement, novels of return complicate these stereotypes and feature disillusionment and perplexing encounters with distant families and communities.

Although narratives of return are overshadowed by the popularity of the historical novel, the testimonial, and works prioritizing the roles of violence and memory, Gutiérrez Mouat

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<sup>5</sup> Gutiérrez Mouat uses the terms “repatriation” and “return” interchangeably. This dissertation will follow this convention in defining both terms as the return of an individual to their home country after a period of exile.

distinguishes a long lineage of works concerned with the impact of repatriation.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on the literary production of a diverse mix of prominent authors such as Horacio Castellanos Moya, Fernando Vallejo, Jorge Volpi, and Mario Benedetti, recurring facets of the genre come into focus. Urban locations rife with corruption and crime are the setting for a number of novels dealing with repatriation. Additionally, mental anguish is noticeable as characters must make sense of an environment that has changed during their absence. Although the return is a critical feature of exile, when this dream is realized the results are in many cases disheartening or unfulfilling. These homecomings can be empty experiences rife with bitter sentiments of dissatisfaction: “El término *homecoming* en inglés también se presta al equívoco, especialmente en novelas como *El asco* y *La virgen de los sicarios*, en que los lugares de origen a las que retorna el protagonista son todo menos hospitalarias” (Gutiérrez Mouat 28). In sum, this project takes Gutiérrez Mouat’s proposal as a starting point to explore the implications of a genre of return. The analysis of each novel demonstrates that returns are ongoing processes that blend dejection, uncertain notions of identity, and isolation with optimistic goals of cultural revitalization and self-discovery.

### **Exile, Return, and Central America in the Past Thirty Years**

Within the context of recent Central American fiction, displacement and its aftermath are inescapable themes. While the 1990s saw the signing of peace treaties ending prolonged conflicts in Guatemala and El Salvador, the hopes of these agreements have given way to a strong sense of cynicism in the face of violent crime and ongoing political instability. In Guatemala the signing of peace accords in 1996 formally ended a protracted armed conflict recognized as the “longest

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<sup>6</sup> Rubén Darío’s “El deseo de París” is identified as forerunner of the genre of repatriation. Published in the Argentinian newspaper *La Nación* in 1912, the article warns eager travelers of the dangers of the city and sardonically offers two options for dissatisfied Latin Americans in Paris: either ask the consul to repatriate you or throw yourself into the Seine (Gutiérrez Mouat 28-29). A nineteenth century precursor to this genre is the Colombian writer Jorge Isaacs’ 1867 novel *María*.

and bloodiest of Latin America's Cold War civil wars" (Jonas, *Centaurs* 37). The record of violence is staggering: according to the army's own statistics, 440 indigenous highland villages were destroyed, 150,000 Mayas were killed or disappeared, and over one million individuals were displaced either internally or to southern Mexico (Jonas "Guatemalan"). Despite initial optimism, the accords did not usher in a new era of peace and stability. High rates of crime, the rise of gangs, and endemic corruption continue to plague Guatemala in the aftermath of peace.<sup>7</sup> A lasting legacy of the accords is the intransigence of government officials and military leaders in bringing about lasting change. The army's desire to outlast the peace process was matched by the limited mandate of truth commissions, amnesty for war crimes, resistance to any semblance of tax reform, and a series of toothless economic measures: "the peace accords raised popular expectations for a peace dividend that would improve the quality of people's lives—but without developing the capacity to meet those rising expectations" (Jonas, *Centaurs* 184).

In El Salvador a decade-long civil war came to a close in 1992 but the devastation of 75,000 deaths and a ravaged infrastructure contributed to ongoing violence in the nation (Gammage, "Despite"). Castellanos Moya's works emphasize the continued failure of social and political institutions in El Salvador and the endemic culpability of widespread inequality. These issues are key factors contributing to the decade of conflict in the 1980s: "The roots of El Salvador's civil war lay in historic socio-economic inequalities maintained by systematic repression of those who would seek to address these inequalities" (Wade 17).

Susan Coutin notes that by 1984 armed conflict had displaced over 1.2 million Salvadorans and that the government considered these migrants to be unpatriotic rebel

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<sup>7</sup> The murder of the Guatemalan Bishop Juan José Gerardi in 1998 was a shocking reminder of the ongoing struggle to curb violence. Francisco Goldman's study of the criminal investigation illustrates the complex nature of life and death in Guatemala: "The murder, which had at first seemed like a clear-cut political crime—a consequence of the REMHI report—had become a baroque story of perhaps perverse human passions" (65-66).

sympathizers (*Nations* 79-80). In fact, the number of Salvadoran immigrants in the United States increased from 94,000 in 1980 to 465,000 in 1990 (Terrazas, “Salvadoran”). In contrast to the promise of peace agreements, migrations from El Salvador continued after the close of war: “the large exodus of Salvadorans took place after the signing of the peace accords, when they saw the country impoverished, full of crime, traumas, and all the problems of the region” (Coutin, *Nations* 82). Movements of people are not the only factors influencing transnational Salvadoran dynamics. Financial remittances constitute a large portion of the Salvadoran economy and by 1990 the total amount had increased over 700% during the decade to \$600 million (Coutin, *Nations* 124). The violent legacy of war did not ease in the 1990s. The optimism of peace was quickly overrun by continued violence and impunity for war crimes. Several explanations are offered for the high levels of violence, and Coutin stresses factors such as juvenile delinquency, a tradition of criminal amnesty, the widespread availability of arms, and the war as a local symptom of a violent society (*Nations* 164).<sup>8</sup> These factors all contribute to the intense focus on cynicism in recent Salvadoran and Central American literature.

Although Costa Rica avoided the devastation of endemic armed conflict that afflicted Central America in the second half of the twentieth century, the nation is not immune to social strife.<sup>9</sup> In his study of Nicaraguan immigration into Costa Rica, Carlos Sandoval-García examines Costa Rican nationalism and its basis in the myth of an idyllic past, a light-skinned and homogeneous nation, and sweeping ideals of uniqueness from the surrounding region (xv). Yet beneath these factors, currents of inequality and racism provide an unsettling reality defying

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on violence and social instability in the postwar era, see Ellen Moodie’s 2010 study *El Salvador in the Aftermath of Peace*.

<sup>9</sup> Costa Rica’s 1949 constitution is credited with creating the national image of peace and prosperity. The constitution abolished the army, divided power between branches of government, and guaranteed its citizens a range of freedoms (Booth 93).

myths of exceptionalism. In contrast to the nation's image, Nicaraguans living in Costa Rica are the target of derision and considered an inferior scapegoat for the nation's ills: "Conversely, the Nicaraguan 'other' is frequently associated with a turbulent political past, dark skin, poverty, and nondemocratic forms of government" (xiv). With over 300,000 Nicaraguans living or moving to Costa Rica in search of work or stability, the nation has not avoided the perils of migration that plague the wider region (xiv). Given this unsettled situation, it is not surprising that exile, migration, and return are prominent themes in contemporary Central American literature.<sup>10</sup>

The Central American literature of the postwar period reveals individuals struggling to survive in menacing urban city centers corrupted by violence and cynicism: "Los nuevos temas comenzaron a girar en torno a personajes que se movían en una sociedad violenta, aparentemente sin valores o con un sentido de la vida más bien amoral, personajes que destilaban desencanto y cinismo, vacíos existenciales y con una escala de valores bastante degradada" (Escudos 140). The fictional production of the 1990s and 2000s abandoned the politically committed literature of earlier generations as revolutionary dreams and armed struggles came to an end. In Beatriz Cortez's study *Estética de cinismo*, cynicism is a defining characteristic of Central American postwar narratives. Tenets of this cynicism are the questioning of hegemonic power structures and transformations of cultural identity. Cortez observes that cynicism defines a morally corrupt period immersed in chaos and corruption: "Se trata de sociedades con un doble estándar cuyos habitantes definen y luego ignoran las normas sociales que establecen la decencia, el buen gusto, la moralidad y la buena reputación" (27).

Like the cynicism that Cortez identifies with Central American fiction, narratives of return explore dynamics of power and identity. Misconceptions of return neatly summarize the

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<sup>10</sup> Two examples of works that display these themes are Rodrigo Rey Rosa's 2001 novel *Piedras encantadas* and Dante Liano's 1996 novel *El misterio de San Andrés*.

event as a joyful homecoming or as a final, closing phase of exile. Understood variously as a uniform experience, a distant myth, or an unexplainable mystery, return is subject to stereotypes in both literature and social policy. An analysis of narratives of return sheds light on the challenges faced by returnees and the various paths chosen as protagonists navigate a complex environment.

With a focus on the Southern Cone, Kaminsky studies the fates of what she terms “postexiles” in *After Exile*. Among the various categories of postexiles are those who decide to remain in diaspora, undertake new migrations, or journey back to places of origin. Especially important is the focus on identity and its tenuous grasp for exiles caught between familiar and foreign lands. Ties between the personal and the national are bound up in memory and tested by issues of distance and assimilation while in exile: “For postexiles, national identity is very much about individual identity, forged in exile and in resistance to ‘othering.’ The reconciliation of self under these circumstances is a complex task; the postexile who does not return is always something of an outsider. As is the one who does return” (29). The returnee as outsider is a significant theme, especially in the novels of this project. In each of the works, a protagonist journeys back to their familial home amid doubts of personal and communal belonging. For each character, terms of identity are challenged by the tension between home and exile, in which markers of belonging are questioned, reaffirmed, or invented by the process of return.

In “Challenging the Assumptions of Repatriation,” Danielle Sepulveda examines recent studies on repatriation and questions the historically optimistic evaluations of the United Nations and other organizations promoting return. A misconception of return is that all homecomings are similar in bringing displacement to a close. According to Sepulveda, returns are distressing experiences: “Repatriation is portrayed as the culmination of a crisis, and thus the ideal solution.

Evidence suggests, however, that return may be more traumatic than the experience of flight and exile itself” (83). In the novels of this project, national belonging is shown to be suspect as returnees grapple with the past and a new understanding of association with community and nation. According to Sepulveda, “The very notion of repatriation is predicated on the assumption that a singular and immutable bond exists between a 'people' and a particular 'space’” (83).

Homecomings are described as “the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration” (Stefansson 5). These returns may be the stimulus for new social initiatives but can also contradict narratives of progress in an era of globalization and vast movements of people: “‘going home’ appears antiprogressive, illogical, and illusory” (Stefansson 3). The disconnect between exile and home is explored in each novel of this project, and for each protagonist the return is a surprising encounter. Whether overwhelmed by the physical impressions of the environment, awakened to a new social consciousness, or dejected by the lack of progress, the return of each character produces a wide assortment of responses: “Because of such transformations of place and identity, homecoming often contains elements of rupture, surprise and, perhaps, disillusionment, besides the variety of practical problems that returnees usually confront in their ‘new/old’ place” (Stefansson 4). It is fitting that these returns are described as impossible projects doomed to fail (Stefansson 4).

An objective of this dissertation is to explore the notion that return is a closed process that ends the experience of exile. Misconceptions of return imply “the assumption that refugees represent ‘matter out of place’ and returnees should be put ‘back into that place’” (Hammond 228). Instead, the novels that comprise a genre of return prioritize the myriad forces that expose returnees to a new reality. While homecomings bring into focus the remembered past in contrast to the changes of the present, the protagonists must grapple with the anxiety produced by this

dichotomy. It is incorrect to assume that returnees wish to go back in time and renew their lives at the point from which they left: “The implication . . . is that returnees should seek to move backward in time, to recapture a quality of life that they are assumed to have enjoyed before becoming refugees or that those who remained behind enjoyed” (Hammond 230).

This dissertation argues that instead of serving as a cursory closing phase to exile, return carries the same significance as displacement. The challenges of displacement and assimilation do not vanish once the exile arrives in home territory and in many cases returning does not heal the wounds of the past. The same issues that vex exiles, such as coming to terms with the pain of separation or surviving in foreign lands, are similarly found in the narratives of returnees in contemporary Central America.

### **The Novels**

Each of the four novels in this dissertation features a protagonist who leaves his or her home nation in Central America and returns after an extended period of exile. The motivations for each character’s flight and eventual return are unique, and the distinctiveness of each path is mirrored in the various responses to the experience. The novels approach return from different perspectives of class, race, and gender: “Returning from exile is beleaguered with so many problems that it often turns into a new form of exile, an inner exile, in the eyes of the returnee. These problems are found all across the social ladder, from upper-class intellectuals to lower-class workers” (Sznajder and Roniger, *Politics* 310). The bittersweet homecomings of educated middle-class mestizo males are depicted in *El asco* and *Cruz de olvido*. In *El asco* the protagonist rails against the lack of progress in El Salvador during the immediate postwar period. Similarly, approximations of Costa Rican identity in *Cruz de olvido* are noticeably pessimistic and defy stereotypes of economic progress and peaceful democracy. In *El retorno de los mayas*, the

repatriation of the anonymous Kanjobal Maya protagonist to his native Ixcán region in Guatemala challenges the worldview of a society dominated by light-skinned and Spanish-speaking Ladinos.<sup>11</sup> The central protagonist of *Con pasión absoluta* is also Guatemalan, however her exile to avoid the violence of the 1980s is a privilege only available to a select few. Her return due to the imminent death of her grandmother sparks a renewed interest in the hardships of the female members of the family over the past two centuries. When taken together, the novels express the myriad implications of return in the context of recent Central American fiction.

Chapter 1 analyzes Horacio Castellanos Moya's 1997 novel *El asco* and features the unexpected return of Edgardo Vega to El Salvador after an absence of nearly two decades. Vega's voyage is an unenthusiastic undertaking and his sole motivation is the requirement of attending his mother's funeral and claiming his inheritance. As a highly educated professor living comfortably in Canada, Vega's return conjures no nostalgic memories. Instead, the trip is a discomfiting experience to be survived rather than embraced. Vega's unabashed repugnance inspired by the people and culture of his native San Salvador is an evident feature of the novel, and this chapter examines the implications of his ambivalent return. Leaving the comfort of exile places the protagonist in the midst of rapid change in the immediate postwar environment.

Born in Tegucigalpa, Honduras in 1957, Castellanos Moya spent his youth in El Salvador and at the age of 22 left for Toronto to study at York University. Through his work as a journalist in Costa Rica and Mexico, he reported widely on the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and its role in the Salvadoran civil war in the 1980s (Enzinna "Reality"). After living and working in various locations around the world, it is notable that the setting of Castellanos Moya's literature is invariably the El Salvador of the 1990s and the early years of the postwar

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<sup>11</sup> In Guatemala the term "Ladino" refers to mestizos of mulatto and Maya descent who speak Spanish (Montejo, *Renaissance* 3).

period.<sup>12</sup> Speaking on his youth in El Salvador, the author states that “Yo llegué aquí a los cuatro años y salí a los veintiuno, así que el mundo de El Salvador es mi mundo, el mundo que me determinó” (Menjívar Ochoa “Violencia”). Like the peripatetic nature of the author’s life, his fiction features a cast of exiles, nonconformists, and provocateurs that rebel against the uncertain setting of the postwar period. Instead of writing about his experiences abroad, Castellanos Moya indicates that El Salvador inspires a special friction that feeds his work: “Todavía me queda un poco de combustible en El Salvador, aunque no sé cuánto dure. No encuentro fricción para hacer literatura con mis otras experiencias. La fricción que me lleva a escribir novelas y cuentos no la he encontrado en otro sitio” (Frieria “Horacio”).

Beyond merely viewing *El asco* as a criticism of Salvadoran society, this chapter emphasizes the non-places of return. For this dissertation, the theory of the French anthropologist Marc Augé establishes the meaning of non-places. According to Augé, a non-place exists in an ephemeral position lacking a distinct relation with its surroundings: “If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (77-78). In this sense, non-places are locations temporarily occupied but lacking underlying connotations of permanence or symbolic meaning. Subsequently, Augé categorizes space as a medium in which places and non-places are visited or passed through. This usage of space describes “the frequentation of *places* which specifically defines the journey” (86). Like the airplane trips, cabs rides, and crowded highways that populate the novels of return of this dissertation, non-spaces are fleeting methods of traveling between places and non-places. Without a measure of social or

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<sup>12</sup> Castellanos Moya argues that his absence from El Salvador positively informs his perspective: “Salir te da distancia, y la distancia, para la literatura, es importante. Para la ficción es determinante en el sentido de que te permite tomar perspectiva y pensar las cosas con más ‘añejamiento’” (Menjívar Ochoa “Violencia”).

cultural significance, Augé classifies these non-spaces as means of transportation and their relationship with individuals: “spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces” (94).

This definition of non-places is relevant in *El asco* due to Vega’s perspective as a returnee that views El Salvador as a transitory location lacking permanence or importance. Throughout the novel, Vega describes his distressing experiences in airport terminals, cab rides, hotels, bars, and countless non-places and non-spaces that reflect the ephemeral nature of the nation. In the novel, El Salvador is an unstable non-place devoid of cultural or historical significance. Vega’s return illuminates the transitory nature of San Salvador and depicts the city as an inconsequential site to be passed through rather than as a permanent and respected home.

Like the non-places of Salvadoran society, the concept of originary destinations demonstrates the conflicting ties between origins and destinations in the context of modern transnational migration and diaspora. According to the scholar Susan Coutin, El Salvador is an originary destination that is both a centralized geographic location and a transnationally interconnected society (65). For the many Salvadorans who have emigrated in recent decades, the nation conveys conflicted meanings. In this setting, the nation is both a point of origin, an in-between site, and a distant or unfamiliar location in the eyes of the nation’s international diasporic community. As Vega’s return demonstrates, ties between origins and the periphery of Salvadoran nationhood are blurred in the postwar era. In opposition to the desires of his fellow exiles to embark on homecomings, Vega rejects the view of El Salvador as an origin point for his life. Efforts of the Salvadoran government to include members of the diaspora in a transnational Salvadoran identity are in contrast to Vega’s hardline stance against his roots. By denigrating

fellow returnees on the flight to El Salvador and throughout his stay, Vega repudiates his Salvadoran origins in favor of his preferred life in Canada.

In *El asco* the role of literature is directly related to the meanings of return. The influence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Austrian author Thomas Bernhard is apparent in *El asco* through the novel's caustic and repetitive technical style.<sup>13</sup> Yet Castellanos Moya denies any conscious attempt to imitate the harsh tone or distinctive narrative voice of Bernhard and describes the influence as an "infection" rather than a mere reproduction: "his voice had infected me, had infected my mind, so I thought, I'll get it all out" (Enzinna "Reality").

The influence of Bernhard is evident throughout the novel's disregard for basic sentence structure, page-length sentences, and criticisms presented in local slang. Moya explains Vega's opinions of contemporary El Salvador and transmits these comments to the reader. Echoing the features of doubt and uncertainty of the testimonial genre, the reader is given no hints as to the veracity of Vega's opinions or Moya's interpretation. From Vega's point of view, decrying the futility of local literature is a method of distancing himself from a homeland of which he is ashamed. His proclamation that one must leave the nation to produce works of high caliber is a further demonstration of the degenerate nature of society.

Like Vega's comments on the meager role of literature in El Salvador, his journey is an insightful investigation into Salvadoran identity, or *salvadoreñidad*, at a turning point in the nation's history. The task of rethinking Salvadoran society in an era of change is revealed as fatally flawed in Vega's ardent rebuke. By returning from the comfort of exile in Canada, Vega witnesses firsthand the failure of peace agreements, and his response is simply to survive the

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<sup>13</sup> Bernhard (1931-89) wrote in his native Austria in the setting of post World War II Europe. In his poems, plays, and novels an acerbic tone characterizes a contrarian point of view that Castellanos Moya imitates in *El asco*. The major themes of his works include "fascination with death and disease, interior and exterior withdrawal, murder, suicide, and cynical contempt for modern civilization and its moral degeneration" (Kuehn 544).

visit. As an integral theme in recent Central American fiction, narratives of survival feature isolated protagonists in crumbling urban environments that rail against injustice and the shattered hopes of peace. Vega's journey represents the alienated protagonists of postwar fiction that fight to survive in menacing urban settings.

As a contribution to a genre of return, *El asco* demonstrates that homecomings are conflictive and often bittersweet processes. Vega's journey to El Salvador is a rejection of his roots and a multifaceted appraisal of Salvadoran culture and society. A focus on return examines the presence of non-places, ordinary destinations, and the roles of literature and survival as indicators of Vega's stay in El Salvador.

In Chapter 2, return is an unexpected journey to a rejected home. Carlos Cortés' 1999 novel *Cruz de olvido* is set in Costa Rica at the turn of the decade of the 1990s and follows the return of Martín Amador from voluntary exile in Managua, Nicaragua. After working as a journalist promoting Sandinista ideals during the 1980s, Amador receives a mysterious phone call alerting him to the murder of his estranged son in San José. By fleeing Nicaragua just as the Sandinista government loses power, Amador's journey symbolizes his powerlessness in a hostile world.

In his work as a journalist, author, and scholar, Cortés writes extensively on the status of Costa Rica in literary and cultural contexts. In his 2007 work *La gran novela perdida*, Cortés compares Costa Rican fiction with the literary production of Central America and Latin America over the past three decades. Mixing critical analysis with interviews with fictional authors and sarcastically humorous anecdotes, Cortés probes the marginal reach and readership of Costa Rican literature. Cortés summarily rejects the stereotypical dictatorial novels set in banana republics and decries the fact that Central American authors must leave the isthmus to increase

their visibility. In both *Novela* and *Cruz de olvido*, Costa Rican reality is at odds with the clichéd images of a peaceful paradise that has avoided the ravages of war: “la realidad costarricense de aquel momento, o de cualquier momento ... semejaba a una tira cómica sin héroes, una fotonovela sin galanes ni vampiresas, una telenovela en blanco y negro sin amores imposibles” (Cortés, *Novela* 93).

The analysis of *Cruz de olvido* situates the work as a novel of return. Taking Cortés’ views expressed in *Novela* as a point of departure, each section explores a specific theme related to Costa Rican identity from the point of view of Amador’s return. Cortés describes writing *Cruz de olvido* with the goal of opening a Pandora’s box that questions established perspectives and brands the experience as the narration of a perilous journey to the heart of the nation’s being. By dynamiting commonly accepted myths of national identity and exploring the role of literature, the protagonist’s return is a blunt encounter with a homeland that defies perceptions of peace and prosperity.

Amador’s visit to his family home in San José is indicative of the tension between the protagonist’s uncertain ties to his homeland and the pathetic emotional and physical states of his family. Arriving at the home, Amador is overcome by his mother’s rapidly declining mental state and the surreal experience of entering the decrepit space. Filled by putrid water leaking from pipes, the home conjures memories of the protagonist’s father and his secretive disappearance years earlier. Amador’s arrival reinforces his status as an abandoned orphan. Additionally, the futile longing for his own father impacts Amador’s distant relationship with his son.

Journeys are a defining characteristic of Cortés’ works and *Cruz de olvido* is a narrative of persistent movement. The return does not signal the closing stage of Amador’s exile, but instead ushers in a period of constant movement through the city in search of clues to his son’s

destiny and his own sense of belonging. The protagonist observes a society composed of suspicious characters and irredeemable depravity during his travels through hidden underground passages, squalid nightclubs, and the city's red-light district. The text denies straightforward explanations or clues to solve the case and leaves the mystery of the murder unsolved. As a representation of the protagonist's futile search for truth and meaning, ambiguous details and unconfirmed rumors reflect the nature of Amador's frustrated journey through San José.

An aim of *Cruz de olvido* is to demolish the myths of exceptionalism associated with Costa Rica in the twentieth century. The novel challenges legends dating from the arrival of the Spanish in Central America through the colonial period and the bucolic image of the modern day. The origins of these beliefs are traced to the legacy of the Central Valley, home to a concentrated population base. It is recognized for its coffee plantations and importance as an epicenter of cultural development. In the long-term growth of national culture, those living outside the Central Valley are excluded from participation and acceptance. The one-sided view of national belonging contributes to a homogeneous construction that conveniently overlooks a less refined image of the country. Classic representations of the legacy of the Central Valley indicate the degree to which the myth of the archetypal Costa Rican is based on these assumptions: "Un paraíso de campesinos pobres, aislados, sin conflictos, sin clases sociales, étnicamente blanqueados y que, como resultado de su propia pobreza e igualdad de condiciones materiales y sociales, opta por la democracia" (Cortés, *Invención* 27).

A study of return emphasizes the role of literature in *Cruz de olvido*. In the decade of the 1990s, the failure of revolution in Nicaragua and the cessation of warfare in El Salvador and Guatemala corresponded to significant social and political upheaval. The literature of this era reflects a new emphasis in recording and understanding these changes. In contrast to the blunt

political focus and emphasis on the testimonial genre of the 1980s, fiction of the 1990s displays a renewed desire to look beneath the surface of recent events and interrogate the long-ignored roots of such devastating circumstances: “Instead of presenting the compelling ethical choices of the revolutionary years, authors now present an underworld of criminality, intrigue, and violence” (Barbas-Rhoden, “Corpses”).

Despite the popularity of the testimonial in Central America in the decade of the 1970s and 80s, in Costa Rica the genre was never prominently featured. Instead, Costa Rican literature began to look inwardly in attempts to criticize national shortcomings and raise awareness of a previously overlooked diversity within the nation: “fictional works by authors such as Carmen Naranjo, Joaquín Gutierrez, and Quince Duncan critiqued bureaucracy, economic dependency, and U.S. imperialism, and also pointed to the diverse constituencies of the nation, including women and Afro-Costa Ricans” (Barbas-Rohden, “Corpses”). Although not directly affected by the civil wars of previous decades, the nation found much in common with a region struggling to adjust to new challenges during the postwar period. Along with rampant political corruption and changing patterns of migration, the ravaging effects of neoliberal policies are a focus of the Costa Rican literature of the period (Barbas-Rohden, “Corpses”).

In *Cruz de olvido* the project of exploring the Central American novel is centered on a returning exile unfamiliar with the recent past. Like the literature of the region, Amador’s foundations are poorly understood and subject to differing interpretations. With constant fluctuations between narrative voices, the novel reflects Amador’s status as a nomadic individual seeking meaning in a menacing world. His work as a journalist and the influence of his peers at local newspapers and universities is a further reference to the exploration of Central American literature as both a marginalized subject and in terms of a literary awakening.

Return is an ongoing journey influenced by the narrator's hesitant repatriation and his search for meaning in the hostile setting of San José. At once a discovery of his origins and a vigorous denunciation of national stereotypes, Amador's destiny is left in doubt by the novel's close. Disconcerting reencounters with his family, ancestral home, and former friends inspire a tense nostalgia. Ultimately, Amador's unfulfilling search through San José is a sweeping commentary on the failures of Costa Rica to fulfill its pristine reputation.

In Gaspar Pedro González's *El retorno de los mayas*, an unnamed Kanjobal Maya orphan repatriates to Guatemala after nearly a decade of living in refugee camps in Mexico. In Chapter 3 return is a culmination of long-held hopes but also a contentious encounter with memories of death and destruction. The novel features an indigenous protagonist whose anonymity symbolizes the struggles of the collective Maya community in the postwar era in Guatemala.

In the field of Maya studies, González is a prominent figure due to his scholarly and fictional production.<sup>14</sup> In his work as an official for the Guatemalan Ministry of Culture and in his fiction and literary criticism, González emphasizes the revitalization of a unified Maya culture as a product of oral tradition and collective memory: "También hay una serie de tradiciones orales como memoria colectiva que tiene nuestra cultura, que nutren la identidad. Por eso es importante ahora empezar a revitalizar esta tradición para que no se muera. Porque la otra conquista ahora es la conquista cultural" (Sitler "Entrevista").

*Retorno* is an important contribution to the emerging literature and culture associated with the Maya movement. The Maya scholar Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil writes extensively on the program and prioritizes the essence of the movement as Guatemalan rather than purely Mayanist

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<sup>14</sup> His 1992 novel *La otra cara* is the first novel written by a Maya author to become a best seller and tells the coming of age story of a Maya protagonist in the context of recent Guatemalan history. Written in Kanjobal and then translated to Spanish and later English, the novel contrasts descriptive illustrations of indigenous culture with denunciations of racism and prejudice faced by the Maya (Arias, "Kotz'ib" 18).

and unique from the Ladino tradition (513). This challenges customary assumptions of Guatemala as an exclusively Spanish-speaking, mestizo nation and reorients the focus towards an inclusive and multiethnic society.

Cojtí Cuxil fundamentally defines the movement as anticolonial, emancipating, egalitarian, secular, democratic, legalistic, and antiracist (513). This is at once an ambitious and ambiguous description that captures the inherent difficulty in organizing a cohesive cultural and political program among a range of communities divided by language and geographic isolation. Kay Warren, a researcher of indigenous movements, identifies the Mayanist ideology of “unity within diversity” as a constructive approach to the challenges of uniting and maintaining a successful Maya cultural program (13).<sup>15</sup> The image of a weak civilization devastated by conquest and colonization persists into the modern day, reinforcing perceptions of the Maya as a distant pre-Columbian civilization isolated from the modern world. Yet a legacy of confrontation and defeat at the hands of foreign invaders does not discourage notions of a united Maya identity.

Keeping in mind the substantial implications of being considered as Maya, Kanjobal, or indigenous, González affirms his desire to be known as Maya: “Los indígenas de este país tenemos un nombre: maya. Nosotros no solamente nos consideramos como indígenas sino nos consideramos ‘mayas’ porque es parte de un proceso regional de reivindicación de carácter social y cultural” (Sitler “Entrevista”). Drawing upon the pan-Maya concept of unity within diversity, González’s statement is an important assertion that defies previous notions of poverty,

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<sup>15</sup> The anthropologist Victor Montejo argues that despite regional differences of language, tradition, and geographic distance, the Maya share a common heritage that is a uniting force in the battle to defeat prejudice: “Despite this distinctiveness, these characteristics remain interrelated on a macrolevel of cultural identity. Thus, all Maya cultures can be configured within a basic Maya pattern that continues to be strong and persistent as a result of this diversity” (*Renaissance* 24).

destitution, and backwardness associated with indigenous people. To call oneself Maya is to reject stereotypes and to make a forceful claim for a resurgent identity that ties together the many language groups, regional communities, and varied backgrounds of those who now proudly consider themselves Maya in the aftermath of armed warfare in Guatemala.

The depictions of indigenous subjects in *Retorno* differ greatly from approaches to the Maya in the fiction of previous generations. For example, the Maya vision as presented by Miguel Ángel Asturias is recognized for its nostalgic, dreamlike qualities that venerate ancient Maya civilization and its achievements while ignoring the contemporary indigenous world. It is not surprising that the texts produced by contemporary Maya writers bear little resemblance to Asturias' iconic observation on Maya subjects that "Oí mucho, supuse un poco más e inventé el resto" (Barrera 98).

An important outcome of the orphan's return is his initially overwhelming reintroduction to a homeland ravaged by the effects of war. With his community in disarray and his family murdered, the protagonist's return is at first a confrontation with a painful past. After these initial struggles, the return becomes a salient aspect of a cultural awakening invoked by the heavy symbolism of names, colors, dreams, and the narrator's orphanhood. The final discussion deals with the orphan's journey to the village of his youth and an unexpected encounter with his long-lost sister. Although the two have nearly lost the ability to communicate in their native language, the trip emphasizes the open-ended nature of return. Far from a final chapter, the orphan's return is an ongoing introduction to the struggle to overcome difficult circumstances and foment a cultural awakening.

In the novel the orphan addresses the reader directly as he shares his memories of tragic loss. As the narrative begins, he explains that he will discuss what he has seen and heard during

his time as an exile and member of the Maya community. Due to this insistence on relaying firsthand his memories to the reader, the novel is considered an important contribution to the testimonial genre. In the years following the zenith of the testimonial genre in the 1980s, González's work is identified as a post-testimonial novel defined by the effects of trauma and loss that pervade the orphan's life (Kahn 122).

Despite the strong links between the novel and the testimonial, for the purposes of this project *Retorno* is considered as a novel of return. The implications of this perspective impact viewpoints on indigenous identity and the role of the Maya in modern postwar Guatemala. Emilio del Valle Escalante labels repatriation as a decolonial action that challenges a legacy of Ladino dominance through an unjust societal structure ("Viaje" 368). By deconstructing a past of injustice, the return awakens memories, challenges the status quo, and conceives of the Maya as a living, breathing people rather than as a relic of the distant past. Especially significant is the role of the mother in this narrative of return. In the novel, the protagonist's mother is an influential teacher of Maya language, religion, and customs to her young son. Her death during the arduous flight into exile is representative of the cultural genocide the Maya face, and the memory of her example is a symbol of unity for the repatriated orphan years later.

In the case of the protagonist of *Retorno*, returning does not end hardship but is an ongoing battle for social acceptance. For the orphan and the wider community of Maya repatriates, the journey is a struggle to understand the destruction of war and the changes of the postwar period. Surrounded by death and ongoing violence, the return insinuates that the Maya must overcome protracted discrimination and adversity to establish a political presence and cultural resurgence.

After acknowledging the difficulties he will face, the orphan turns his attention to the process of awakening. The arrival of peace in Guatemala is a crucial facet of the orphan's perspective and also as a representation of the Maya movement. For the first time, indigenous coalitions and activist organizations worked to establish a presence in a revamped political and cultural agenda. The transition from intractable warfare to a reformulation of society was a crucial turning point for activists. After establishing a reputation for social protest and fighting for rights in the 1980s, advocates of the Maya movement viewed peace negotiations as a key moment in the struggle for recognition. After centuries of discrimination, these dialogues signified an optimistic tone as leaders proclaimed "decision making power over their own destiny" (Warren 53).

Disagreements among competing Maya leaders and with government negotiators curtailed promising efforts to establish the legitimacy of indigenous communities. Several unresolved issues affected the status of repatriates and contributed to the chaotic mix of hope and anxious confrontation defining the era. The inadequate reach of truth commissions and courts in bringing injustices to light discouraged belief in a reformed government committed to the plight of the war's victims. Additionally, amnesty for genocidal acts and an indifferent commitment to human rights exacerbated feelings of disillusionment. As Susanne Jonas notes, the achievement of peace failed to address effectively nuances of taxation, land reform, and the plight of repatriates and did "almost nothing to improve daily life for the majority of Guatemalans" (*Centaur* 98).

The rejuvenation of an oppressed Maya identity is an ongoing task and years of displacement leave the orphan in an unenviable position. With his family dead, his homeland destroyed, and his native language and culture persecuted, fashioning a broad Maya identity is an

intimidating task. The protagonist's repatriation is a crucial factor in this emergence of self and community. In opposition to extensive Ladino cultural domination, a distinctly Maya worldview materializes from the orphan's exile and return. Nameless, orphaned, and unaware of his spiritual connection to his home territory, the return ignites a renewed obligation to explore his connections to a nebulous Maya past. His anonymity personifies the struggles of the Maya to overcome centuries of distrust with hopes of overturning these prejudices and declaring a legitimate role in the nation's future.

Abandoned and unfamiliar with his home territory, the protagonist must also contend with an ominous sense of blame. A long list of shortcomings is ascribed to the Maya including decades of violence, lagging economic development, cultural backwardness, and the perceived reliance on Ladino assistance for survival. These factors are all cited in discussions of Maya culpability for ongoing social issues. The protagonist must grapple with these matters as he struggles to balance positive visions of the future with the implied guilt linked to the Maya.

The presence of dreams and colors brings into focus the indigenous experience of return. Flight, exile, and return are all illustrated with the rich imagery of dreams. Exile is repeatedly referred to as a long nightmare whose end is an awakening from a long and tortuous dream. Highly descriptive scenes illustrated with a variety of colors and sensations further enrich the narrator's life. Exile is depicted as a world devoid of color and life deprived of the bright colors typical of traditional Maya weaving. This period of displacement is imagined as a black and white landscape in which the richness of youth gives way to a barren emptiness.

Returns are not final destinations, and the orphan's arrival in Guatemala does not end his itinerant refugee status. Repatriation is a unique step in the orphan's developing consciousness

and the desire to journey to the village of his youth, Pananlaq, is a recurring theme. In this second journey, the present-day village bears little resemblance to its depictions in memories. The desolation and death that the orphan encounters is a step towards a new life: “la muerte no es más que un paso hacia la vida. Olvidan que mientras más se muere, más se vive. Porque el ciclo de la existencia comienza y tiene su origen en la muerte” (85).

In contrast to the two previous novels studied, in *Retorno* awakening is a major facet of the protagonist’s return. After confronting a legacy of discrimination, the orphan embraces an optimistic project of communal and cultural reestablishment. In this sense, the novel is an introduction to the Maya way of life written from the perspective of an indigenous returnee in the immediate postwar period in Guatemala. As an example of the Maya movement, the orphan’s return sheds light on the abuses of the past while promoting a nascent interest in indigenous religion, language, and cultural practices.

Author Carol Zardetto’s exile in Canada during the worst years of violence in her native Guatemala is the basis for her 2005 work *Con pasión absoluta*. In Chapter 4 return is a voyage to a tropical environment that recalls disconcerting visions of the past. For Irene, the novel’s protagonist, arrival in Guatemala consists of an erotic awakening and an introduction to a family left behind years earlier. Zardetto summarizes the novel as an investigation into painful memories and an elusive home: “se trata del retorno de una mujer a Guatemala, lugar donde se había jurado no volver; su desesperado intento por comprender un pasado doloroso, una patria enigmática y en ese intento, dar un salto que la pueda llevar de la pasión, a la compasión absoluta” (Lemus 41).

Zardetto’s own life is the catalyst for the novel’s protagonist and plot. Like Irene, Zardetto left Guatemala during the violence of civil war and lived in Canada during the

immediate postwar years. The author emphasizes the interstitial identity of exiles caught between points of origin and especially the uncertain past and future of displaced Guatemalans: “los guatemaltecos somos todos exiliados de la patria posible y estamos condenados a vivir una patria que se empeña en ser imposible” (Fernández Hall “Carol”). Imagining Guatemala as a nation of exiles condemned to an elusive and incomprehensible home is a defining characteristic of *Con pasión absoluta* and Irene’s exhaustive search for her origins.

In *Con pasión absoluta*, Irene suffers from the anguish of separation during exile but also gains a distinct outsider’s perspective on the long-term events of her native country. While living in Canada in the mid 1990s she learns the details of the peace process, discovers investigations into war crimes, and expands her personal boundaries with a series of exhilarating yet ultimately flawed relationships. Like the previous novels in this dissertation, *Con pasión absoluta* begins with a return after a lengthy period of exile. Irene’s trip is unexpected and solely motivated by the imminent death of her grandmother, Victoria. After years of exile in the gray climate of Vancouver, the tropical sensations of Guatemala initiate a renewed interest in her past. Set against the backdrop of Guatemala stretching from the nineteenth century to the present day, female members of Irene’s family come to life in detailed accounts including anecdotes, historical events, newspaper articles, and personal letters.

Displacement and return express Irene’s ill-defined position as a Guatemalan, an exile, and a woman. Her proclamation that returning is an impossibility expresses the hybrid nature of her journey and the difficult confrontation between the past and present: “Las calles de mi infancia desaparecieron sepultadas bajo estas otras, demasiado pequeñas para contener el caos que las abarrota. El polvo tiñe de sepia el ambiente pesado” (15). The assertion that the past is tinged in dusty sepia tones situates the return in starkly visual terms and places Irene’s personal

history in the nebulous territory of faint memories and her imprecise knowledge of the nation's past.

Like Zardetto's experience, the sights and sounds of the tropics personify Irene's return. The lush environment is frequently contrasted with Irene's years of displacement in the gloomy environment of Vancouver. The setting triggers a visceral reaction in the protagonist and contrasts the misery of exile with the overwhelming sensations of home. Irene's powerful response to the tropics is both unexpected and instructive in understating her place in an altered homeland. Her reaction to this stimulus is indicative of the intensity of return. The first days of return in Guatemala City are highlighted for the gritty appearance of the city that matches the protagonist's mood: "Ajena. Así me sentí esos primeros días en estas calles estrechas y sucias, infestadas de polvo y de pobreza. La gente me parecía fea, el tránsito frenético, plagado de bocinas estridentes y rudas" (42).

Luxurious descriptions of the Guatemalan environment parallel Irene's erotic awakening. The novel's visual and corporeal literary style gives voice to forbidden topics associated with the subservient position of women. Throughout Irene's return, her exploration of the erotic is a revolutionary act that balances a biting social criticism with suggestive sexual imagery. Similarly, erotic undertones permeate Irene's memories of former lovers, dance partners, and the unfulfilling relationships of the women of the Ferrara family. Lyrical descriptions of everyday actions are imbued with exotic imagery. For example, when Irene's lover Costa eats a plate of shrimp, the scene is conveyed in vivid detail as the succulent flavors and juices are illustrated: "que me hizo tomar de inmediato el siguiente con todos los dedos, lamer el caparazón y sorber el picante sabor del ajo, para penetrar luego la carnaza dulzona del marisco, sin duda fresco y suave" (89).

Irene's return is an exploration of the turbulent lives of the female members of her family. Memories of her great-grandmother Amparo demonstrate the subservient status of the women of the Ferrara family. Amparo's marriage to a prominent coffee exporter is notable for the uneven nature of the relationship and the wife's status as an anonymous figure. When her husband unexpectedly marries another woman and leaves his family, Amparo's response expresses the frustration of betrayal and abandonment: "Los hombres son puras bestias—siguió hablando sola—, sólo uno de mujer quiere a los hijos" (126). His indifferent response that "la ley no puede ser igual con todos" reinforces his superior status as a landowner and his dominance as a male in a society accepting of romantic indiscretions and familial neglect on the part of men (130). This theme is reinforced when later in life Amparo's granddaughter Ibis becomes pregnant by her mulatto lover and is condemned by her family. Like the ill-fated relationship of her mother and father, Ibis is quickly converted into a marginalized object to be possessed and discarded by a superior male figure: "El mulato nunca la quiso y se la tuvo que llevar como un objeto desvalorizado que ya nadie quiere" (36).

Travel writing is a prominent feature of the novel and contributes a female perspective to the genre of return. The scholar James Clifford describes the concept of travel as culture in identifying the ways people leave, return, and explore differently centered worlds and connected urban centers (103). While Clifford proposes new definitions of travel and culture, the question of origins is relegated to the background by a focus on the in-between nature of travelers and exiles (108). The interconnected links between cultural practices and travel is especially telling in relation to recent feminist writing. In the long record of travel writing, women who journey independently and record their explorations are rare. But in addition to being uncommon, these writers are labeled as "unusual, marked as special in the dominant discourses and practices"

(Clifford 105). In writing both about and against the cultures they encounter, women grapple with the world around them and actively redefine long-held viewpoints on society and gender. This is especially true in *Con pasión absoluta*, in which a female traveler mirrors the author's own lived experiences of overturning literary and gender roles.

The view of travel as a journey from one definite point to another is superseded by a more involved idea of what occurs both during the event and its aftermath. From this vantage point, exile ceases to be a linear movement from home to a distant land and instead highlights the mixed elements of displacement present during processes of assimilation and survival. In Clifford's innovative approach, the interstitial physical and psychological sites of the remembered home complicate returns.

As a traveler rather than simply an exile or returnee, Irene's perspective is informed by her nomadic existence. Initially sent into exile in Los Angeles, California by her father, Irene eventually moves to Vancouver to begin her career. Her return brings back memories of journeys throughout South America for vacation or with short-term romantic partners. In *Con pasión absoluta* travel and return are intimately linked as Irene's voyage to Guatemala reveals memories of her trip into exile and the many travels of the female members of her family. As a traveler, Irene's return to Guatemala is both a rite of passage and a difficult encounter with a changed landscape. Through travel, she comes into contact with her familial past and in turn better understands her place among the struggles of the women of her family.

Life writing parallels travel writing as an effective genre for women writers as they seek to subvert rigid conceptions of literature and explore new approximations of female belonging and empowerment. In the novel, life writing is an emancipatory act that employs return to explore the lives of female protagonists. A great deal of writing on exile is male-centered and life

writing offers a space for women to rebel against these norms: “Many of these writings centre on a search for a sense of belonging or identity, a journey to find a home. They often tackle questions of cultural identity pre-and post-migration, across place as well as down the generations” (Temple 601). It is significant that the concepts of journey and home are mentioned in reference to life writing and its approaches to exile.

Viewing the return as a form of travel with elements of the author’s life situates the experience in a new light. It is not a coincidence that at one point Irene’s lover casually remarks that she is beginning to resemble the characters from her novel in progress as an outcome of her rebellious nature. Similar to these fictional women, the categorization of Irene as a figure that challenges accepted principles of society reinforces the author’s intent to revise the subordinate place of women in society (367).

In *Con pasión absoluta* return is a sophisticated encounter with a Guatemalan home shrouded in mystery. Upon arrival, Irene’s conversations with her grandmother illuminate a past obscured by the distance of exile. The unexpected journey evokes a sensorial response due to the stunning tropical environment of home. Like *Retorno*, awakening is an important aspect of Irene’s response to Guatemala City and eroticism, travel, and life writing are all forms of discovering personal origins and the role of women within Guatemala’s recent history. By the novel’s close, Irene develops a greater understanding of her home nation and her place within it, although the decision whether to remain in Guatemala is left in doubt.

The four novels demonstrate the numerous aspects of a genre of return in contemporary Central American fiction. The protagonists of these novels exhibit differences of race, gender, education, and socioeconomic status and for each character homecoming reflects the myriad outcomes of return. In line with the cynicism of postwar narratives, accounts of return relate

intense condemnations of the failure to take advantage of peace accords. Frustration with continued violence and social strife is expressed by returnees whose experiences in exile inform a unique perspective on national events. Beyond profound sentiments of cynicism, the novels vary in accordance with the personal situations of the protagonists and their perspectives. Each must grapple with the reality of arriving in an unfamiliar home and the outcomes of this process range from disinterested ambivalence to stirring calls for cultural revitalization. In addition to these factors, elements such as orphanhood, dreams, places, travel, eroticism, and blame are all part of the mosaic of return

## CHAPTER 1

### REVULSION AND RETURN IN *EL ASCO* BY HORACIO CASTELLANOS MOYA

Scholarship on the works of Horacio Castellanos Moya covers a wide range of theoretical perspectives including distance and place, economic patterns, genre, and an overwhelming cynicism in recent literary production in Central America.<sup>16</sup> Yet in Castellanos Moya's 1997 novel *El asco*, exile and return receive considerably less attention. In contrast to the topics mentioned above, this chapter examines the contradictory standing of the novel's protagonist as a reluctant returnee to a land that he outwardly despises. For Edgardo Vega, the death of his mother and the need to collect his inheritance are the catalysts for an unforeseen return to his native San Salvador. Eighteen years after voluntarily leaving for Canada to complete his education, Vega's narration of the journey home and short stay quickly devolves into an excoriating rebuke of all facets of Salvadoran life.

This chapter proposes that return places the protagonist at odds with his immediate family and confronts notions of a unified transnational Salvadoran community. Return challenges the identity of the returning figure, his place in postwar El Salvador, and the society that is the target of his criticism. Vega is both a native son of El Salvador and an educated individual living in exile, and his denial of connections to the Salvadoran diaspora complicates simple categorizations of the character as a Salvadoran or an exile longing for return.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, María del Carmen Caña Jiménez proposes an "estética del asco" that highlights the theme of neoliberal violence in *El asco*: "una literatura de la afección que busca no sólo etiquetar el episteme neoliberal como asqueroso sino, también, suscitar en el lector una reacción visceral y corporal ante sus principios y estructuras" (220).

Like the other novels in this dissertation, the basic plot of *El asco* revolves around the return of the protagonist to his home country after a significant absence. Edgardo Vega's exile is a voluntary and even desired action in contrast with common factors leading to flight such as violence or social instability. His youth in El Salvador is not fondly remembered and his recollections underscore his yearning to leave: "con mi ansiedad por largarme de aquí, con el desasosiego que me causaba la eventualidad de tener que vivir en medio de esta podredumbre" (46). The desire is eventually fulfilled as Vega travels to Canada to pursue his education and remains to teach art history at McGill University in Montreal.

In the process of writing the novel, Castellanos Moya gradually developed the character of Vega as a comprehensive amalgam of stereotypes and lazy misconceptions about Salvadoran society: "I discovered I had this character through whom I could tell all the biased prejudices, all the phobias, that I heard in El Salvador. This character is a kind of cocktail of every complaint I've ever had or heard about El Salvador" (Enzina "Reality").

As the novel opens, Vega is discussing his return with his friend Moya in a bar in San Salvador. The technical style consists of a complex mix of first and third person voices as Vega relates his opinions to Moya, who then quotes these views to the reader. Through this narrative technique, Moya's intermediary status between the protagonist and reader filters Vega's thoughts and emotions. This metafictional device between the protagonist and an intercessor who shares the name of the author is a clever reference to the testimonial genre and the ways that literature is created and disseminated. Testimonial works traditionally include the perspective of a subject whose voice is recorded and later edited by an intermediary. In *El asco*, however, this mediating voice is an unreliable source whose point of view on Vega, El Salvador, and the transcription of the novel's conversation cannot be trusted.

As the two chat, it becomes apparent that Vega feels a strong desire to share his impressions of the country before returning to Canada. Vega's survey of El Salvador does not invoke nostalgia but instead involves acerbic rants against Salvadoran life and culture: "tengo que platicar con vos antes de irme, tengo que decirte lo que pienso de toda esta inmundicia, no hay otra persona a la que le pueda contar mis impresiones, las ideas horribles que he tenido estando aquí, me dijo Vega" (17-18). The relentless criticism has many targets including corrupt politicians, abandoned libraries, unread newspapers, disgusting food, and an uncultured public. Rich in vivid and often coarse descriptions, the novel's action recedes to the background as Vega's conversation with Moya extends to the many aspects of Salvadoran life that he finds unappealing. Memories of his youth in El Salvador and time in exile are briefly mentioned along with details of the agonizing return trip by airplane.

After eighteen years of exile with no contact with his brother in El Salvador, Vega must deal with his family as he finalizes his mother's finances. But before going back to Montreal, the momentary loss of his Canadian passport in a seedy bar is the culmination of his deepest fears. The rediscovery of the document leads to one final surprise: Vega has changed his name to Thomas Bernhard in an attempt to permanently disassociate himself from his Salvadoran roots.

The links between *El asco*, subtitled *Thomas Bernhard en San Salvador*, and the works of the Austrian author Thomas Bernhard are readily apparent. The unrelenting narrative style and biting condemnations of *El asco* are clear nods to Bernhard's influence.<sup>17</sup> As a central figure in post-World War II Austrian literature, Bernhard's abrasive novels and plays frequently provoked the ire of his fellow countrymen. Bernhard's style is described as *Rollenprosa*, or "rolling prose,"

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<sup>17</sup> According to Castellanos Moya, *El asco* was inspired by a very bad mood. On New Year's Eve of 1995, he relates that he cancelled plans to attend a party and as an afterthought sat down to write. Influenced by a recent reading of the works of Bernhard, the work was completed in the short period of three weeks (Enzinna "Reality").

and is unique in its ability to incite provocation or frustration with the reader: “It is a prose that mercilessly hammers away at the reader's nerves with endless repetition and elaboration of a few basic themes . . .” (Kuehn 550).

The relationship between the stylistic technique of *El asco* and the fiction of Bernhard is a salient characteristic of scholarly approaches to Castellanos Moya’s novel. While the intense public reaction to the novel and its perceived criticism of El Salvador are common objects of study, the role of return receives significantly less attention.<sup>18</sup> As a novel of return, themes of national belonging, migration, and repatriation are key aspects of Vega’s complex navigation of identity. Unreliable narrators and mixed messages are central to the open-ended nature of the novel. Like the works of Bernhard, deception is a key characteristic of *El asco* that permeates its literary style and intertextual connections. Vega’s journey is riddled with a narrative unreliability that undermines attempts to categorize the meanings of the journey. In place of a simple denunciation of a detested society, the overriding presence of doubt in the novel contributes to a return that is open to variable interpretations and scrutinizes the impact of Salvadoran culture both at home and beyond national borders.

In *El asco* the return emphasizes contentious issues of representation and El Salvador’s relationship with its large emigrant population. After his self-imposed exile of nearly two decades, the return is more than just a framing device for discussions of culture and the vitality of local customs. Rather, the trip offers special insight into the unsettled social upheaval of El Salvador in the aftermath of civil war. Just as the period following Vega’s return does not appear as a joyous occasion or conclusion to an unsettled past, the aftermath of conflict contradicts visions of peaceful transition in a country still plagued by endemic crime and weak political

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<sup>18</sup> In her discussion of the novel, Cecilia Rivas singles out Vega’s disgust as a defining feature of postwar Salvadoran identity, patriotism, and literature. Rivas also notes that after the publication of *El asco*, Castellanos Moya left El Salvador in a “self-imposed exile” inspired in part by the controversy surrounding the novel (90).

institutions. The return demonstrates how Vega's outwardly jaded attitude towards his birthplace informs a broader view on El Salvador and shifting notions of identity in the wake of the failure of the postwar period to usher in a more prosperous society.<sup>19</sup>

The first section of this chapter emphasizes the transitory non-places of Vega's return. His attitude is dismissive of Salvadoran institutions and throughout the text non-places reflect the lack of permanence or authority of national institutions. Within the context of the economic framework of neoliberal reforms carried out in the aftermath of peace, Vega strives to distinguish himself from fellow emigrants and the Salvadoran diaspora. His dismissive rant against a monument to returning migrants demonstrates a noticeable insolence towards Salvadoran culture both within and beyond national borders.

The second section analyzes the concept of originary destinations in relation to the changing ties between El Salvador and its emigrants. Vega's flight home and arrival at the San Salvador airport is narrated as an intolerable experience among insufferable masses of travelers. In her observations on modern El Salvador, Susan Coutin explains the importance of links between origins, destinations, and displacement. El Salvador is a point of origin from which citizens may leave but are still valuable financial and cultural contributors to an international sense of Salvadoran identity. In this view, origins are points of beginning and also desired destinations of return. In the novel, Vega rejects the positive contributions of the Salvadoran diaspora such as the value of monetary remissions and strong ties to an international culture. Instead, the return confirms his view that emigrants are a national disgrace evocative of a

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<sup>19</sup> Arturo Arias comments that *El asco* signals the threat of a vanishing identity in postwar El Salvador: "dada la falta de satisfacción existente a lo largo de esta década, el concepto de identidad mismo corre el riesgo de desaparecer del todo como marco referencial" ("Post-identidades" 146).

decrepit Salvadoran society. With his deep misgivings, Vega seeks to separate himself from Salvadoran life to avoid his inclusion in the humiliation of being Salvadoran.

The third section examines the relationship between return and the function of literature. Vega repeatedly asks Moya, a local writer, why he remains in El Salvador instead of moving to a place more hospitable to cultural and artistic production. Vega also takes a special interest in disdaining the contributions of Salvadoran writers and rejects the possibility of producing works of quality from within Salvadoran territory. In a country devoid of intellectuals or prestigious universities, Vega is isolated from his academic position in Canada and dismisses the possibility of producing quality literature in El Salvador.

The fourth discussion focuses on the presence of a dualistic Salvadoran identity within the context of return. Beyond Vega's ardent criticism, a deep preoccupation with El Salvador emerges from the narration. This suggests that beneath Vega's dismissal of his home culture, his return elicits an implicit preoccupation with his home: "it is difficult to express so much rage about an issue that does not matter. On some level it reveals a sense of commitment to the nation because disillusion implies a prior feeling of hope and optimism" (Thornton 216). The reader is left to wonder if Vega's monologue is a true expression of his hatred or if crucial details and points of view have been altered in Moya's mediation. The intensity of Vega's disgust is called into question and hints at an underlying preoccupation with his home.

The fifth section argues that Vega's return is a battle for survival. In place of nostalgia for his abandoned home and forgotten family, Vega makes no mention of any fondness for his brother and relatives. The death of Vega's mother carries no emotional significance and he instead devotes his energy to enduring his time in San Salvador. While finalizing his inheritance, Vega is overcome by paranoia and fits of uncontrollable stress. The overwhelming desire to

leave takes precedence over attempts to understand the contemporary postwar Salvadoran landscape or the changes that have taken place since his departure.

### **El Salvador as a Transitory Non-Place**

In *El asco* return is an undesired journey where Vega disassociates himself from other returning emigrants. Interrogating the basic reasons for flight and the motivations for return reveal Vega's goal of maintaining a foreign identity and rejecting an untenable Salvadoran identity. Central to this rejection are theories of non-places, which emphasize Vega's contradictory position as a native Salvadoran, a voluntary exile, and an unenthusiastic returnee. On the surface, Vega's tirades leave little doubt as to El Salvador's position as an inferior and culturally insignificant location. With Salvadorans dispersed throughout the hemisphere, San Salvador pales in comparison to powerful centers of political and cultural influence. The international airport functions as a hub for the constant stream of Salvadorans leaving to join their compatriots in the international diaspora or returning for brief stays. As a transient place, the inability to retain its citizens or provide the opportunities available in foreign lands deeply influences approximations of Salvadoran identity.

This suggests that Salvadoran national representation is subject to traditional internal cultural norms but also transcends borders in a relationship composed of a fluid give and take between the homeland and Salvadorans abroad. Considering El Salvador as a non-place contributes to the image of the nation as illegitimate and relegated to a marginalized status. In addition to labeling the nation as a transitory location, *El asco* includes a variety of conceptual non-places that appear throughout Vega's stay in San Salvador. These places reflect the fleeting nature of contemporary El Salvador and the tremendous influence of emigrants and the diaspora.

Hotels, seedy bars, run-down brothels, jam-packed commercial centers, and revolting airline flights are all non-places that Vega must endure in the quest to collect his inheritance.

For the critic Andrés Aluma, physical and social spaces become sites of convergence and conflict in *El asco*. These ephemeral sites are intricately linked to the rise of a neoliberal capitalistic economy in the era of the 1990s: “Estos ‘no-lugares’ constituyen sitios de tránsito frecuentados por sujetos efímeros, temporales, consumidores; cuya única identidad se identifica justamente con aquella del consumo . . .” (8). Aluma is unique in suggesting that identity is a manifestation of fleeting consumers in a postwar economy much altered from that of previous decades. The link between national identity, economic policy, and its effects on the non-places that consumers must maneuver are all brought together in this approach. In the same way that goods and services cross borders with great frequency, migrations of those seeking economic opportunity or fleeing the effects of political policies also surge. Aluma therefore situates the El Salvador of Vega as a location that disperses its citizens across the hemisphere to satisfy the needs of the neoliberal market. Accordingly, the protagonist’s return is an eye-opening encounter with this altered economic environment and debilitated national culture.

The necessity of migrations in the global marketplace and in Central America results in a continually weakened identity: “los habitantes de la diáspora mencionada y representada en el personaje literario de Castellanos Moya deberán someterse a un despojo progresivo de su identidad salvadoreña” (Aluma 12). The illustration of nationalistic ideals that devolve into a progressive plundering is in line with *El asco*’s overreaching frustration with the stunted progress of postwar Salvadoran society. Like the description of a barren culture devoid of much needed investment, degradation greatly impacts society in the neoliberal realm. As a novel of

return Vega's encounter with his origins demonstrates a conspicuous renunciation of his Salvadoran roots.

The result of such pervasive non-places in the text is a fundamental distinction between Vega and his surroundings through the physical and symbolic site of San Salvador. The aspects of Salvadoran life that are Vega's targets relegate all symbols of his former home to the periphery and isolate him in a privileged and unique position: "La realidad es que Vega se mantiene al centro—y mantiene al resto de los salvadoreños al margen—con base en un absurdo" (Cortez 256). It is notable that the center that Vega adheres to is described as an absurdity, indicating the flawed foundations of his worldview. The implication of this distorted rationale is that Vega is not to be trusted and that a pervading sense of doubt accompanies his criticisms of Salvadoran culture.

Vega's stream of insults creates distance between himself and El Salvador. An inadvertent consequence of this effort is a biting critique of the protagonist himself. The novel illustrates a condemnation of those who attempt to distance themselves from their roots: "podría decirse que su más fuerte crítica se dirige a quienes se reconocen en Vega, es decir, aquellos salvadoreños que se definen con base en su diferencia ante el resto de los salvadoreños que ellos consideran incultos" (Cortez 258-59). This reading of the novel turns the divisive invective of Vega back upon himself and questions the authority of those who disparage their former homes from the comfort of exile or in positions of wealth and status. As he relays to Moya throughout the text, the reasons for leaving El Salvador do not correspond to the stories of those who fled during the years of armed conflict due to violence or human rights abuses. In place of warfare and threats to personal safety, the basis of Vega's decision to flee is his inability to further tolerate a place that he loathes. In Montreal, Vega's position as a highly educated art history

professor places him at odds with the desperate migrants that discussions of war-torn refugee situations bring to mind.

In an extended outburst on his unlucky fortune of being born in a country that he himself describes as the worst and most stupid of all, Vega explains to Moya why he fled years earlier: “no me fui como exiliado, ni buscando mejores condiciones económicas, me fui porque nunca acepté la broma macabra del destino que me hizo nacer en estas tierras, me dijo Vega” (21). By calling his birth in the place a cruel and inhuman joke, the protagonist isolates himself unequivocally from the Salvadoran homeland and its international population.

Journeys of return are complicated by factors that convert the idea from a distant dream into a reality. Peace accords ending armed conflict, negotiations that encourage displaced populations to come home, and promises of land, economic opportunities, or social stability are all motivators of return in recent decades in Central America (Takenaka). But in the case of *El asco*, return is an unwanted inconvenience to be suffered. No feelings of sadness or mourning customarily associated with the death of a family member are evident and instead hostility defines the experience.

An all-encompassing negativity punctuates Vega’s return. The insistent repetition of the phrase “no tengo la menor intención de regresar a este país” is reminiscent of the driving literary technique of Bernhard and is just one example of the emphatic decision never to return (40). Vega is adamant in voicing his displeasure and he swears that this visit will be his last: “para no tener que regresar jamás a este país, para romper todos los vínculos con el país, con el pasado, con mi hermano y su familia, para no tener que saber nada más de ellos, por eso fui enfático desde un principio . . .” (45). If the narrator is to be taken at his word, then the second flight back

to Canada will mirror the first in the attempt to break all familial and communal ties to El Salvador.

The desire to leave at the first possible moment is a repeated theme. As Moya tells the reader, Vega repeatedly mentions that he must only suffer for one more week before leaving. Dedicated to the mission of avoiding any reminders of his family or the place that he scorns, he swears to Moya that he will spend the remainder of the trip hidden in his hotel room. His preoccupation with ensconcing himself is at odds with the idea of the return as a culminating event. This also places Vega in contrast to the Salvadorans who journey home to maintain ties to the community or family they long for while living in foreign lands. He even belittles the common places that returnees visit such as public parks and pupusa restaurants as they reestablish local ties. In the words of Moya, the protagonist scoffs at the places which typical returnees are anxious to see: “a todos esos horribles lugares que supuestamente los salvadoreños que regresan al país quieren visitar con ansiedad, a esos lugares que llaman ‘típicos’ y que teóricamente yo tendría que haber extrañado durante mis dieciocho años en el extranjero, como si yo alguna vez hubiese sentido nostalgia . . .” (65-66). Besides his rebuke of typical tourist landmarks, Vega also denies longing for these sites during his time in exile. In a quest to place himself in opposition to typical Salvadorans, he states that these are places he theoretically should have longed for while in Canada. His remarks indicate that in a place lacking a robust national identity or a strong cultural tradition, it is impossible to feel nostalgia when there is nothing of significance to yearn for while in exile.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym studies the links between return and nostalgia: “Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history” (8).

Among the tourist stops and well-known landmarks of El Salvador, none is more representative of Vega's position as a disenchanting returnee than the *Monumento al hermano lejano*. Located on the Comalapa highway between the international airport and San Salvador, Vega describes the monument as a heinous insult representative of a degenerate nation. Constructed in 1994 in the immediate aftermath of war, the design resembles an open door that honors Salvadorans in foreign lands and welcomes the returning emigrants whose monetary remittances are a crucial pillar of the local economy. For those passing by on the trip to the capital city, the memorial is a reminder of the profound ways that migration, displacement, and repatriation shape the current economic and cultural landscape.

Initially inaugurated with the name *Hermano Lejano, ¡Bienvenido!*, in 2002 the title was altered in accordance with the wishes of Salvadoran migrants living in the U.S.<sup>21</sup> The insistence on the name change demonstrates the willingness of government forces to comply with the desires of external populations to be considered full-fledged members of Salvadoran society. By transitioning from the original slogan's connotation of distance and separation to a new phrase that represents an embracing welcome, the memorial symbolizes the objective of migrants to be seen as *hermanos* who happen to live in foreign lands rather than as expatriates with no connections to the communities and traditions of their nation of origin. Yet Vega sees the monument in a very different light. As he remarks to Moya,

ese llamado Monumento al Hermano Lejano parece en realidad un gigantesco mingitorio, ese monumento con su enorme pared de azulejos no evoca otra cosa que un mingitorio, te juro, Moya, que cuando lo vi por primera vez no sentí más que ganas de orinar y cuantas veces he pasado por ese lugar el así llamado Monumento al Hermano Lejano no hace otra cosa que excitar mis riñones. (101)

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<sup>21</sup> The change in title is not the only notable feature of the structure. In the immediate aftermath of civil war, the construction of the monument preceded any memorials associated with the conflict or its victims (DeLugan 89).

In an unrelenting narration that goes on for several more pages, Vega continues his verbal assault on the memorial and the migrants it honors. The structure is labeled as a sign of bad taste in honor of a people described as “los sombrero y las regordetas que vienen de Estados Unidos cargados de cajas repletas de los chunches más inusitados” (101-02). Beyond criticizing the physical features of the monument and the Salvadorans abroad for whom it was built, Vega condemns the government responsible for its construction. Judged as a “partida de zoquetes” obsessed with spending federal funding on such foolish projects, he denounces the politicians responsible and blames their “mentalidad troglodita” for the perceived degradation of taste in El Salvador (102). In Vega’s eyes the monument is a transitory and hollow space lacking legitimacy, similar to Aluma’s discussion of non-places. In contrast to official discourses promoting emigration as a positive contribution to Salvadoran society, Vega’s outburst denies and denigrates the value of emigrants in relation to their Salvadoran origins.

### **El Salvador as an Originary Destination**

Attitudes towards Salvadoran emigrants have changed in recent decades and in her article “Originary Destinations: Re/membered Communities and Salvadoran Diasporas” Susan Coutin investigates the ties between origins and destinations in the context of displacement. With a focus on the recent factors that invite a more welcoming stance by the Salvadoran government, Coutin explores changing policies towards emigrants. Even the use of the term “diaspora” to identify the millions of Salvadorans living outside national borders is a phenomenon that dates only to the 1990s and is indicative of the suddenly altered desire of the government to perceive these individuals as allies instead of traitors (48).

In this new postwar model, emigrants are considered an asset due to their financial contributions and as long distance siblings still emotionally tied to a collective Salvadoran

family. This inclusive image of Salvadoran belonging redefines conceptions of origins: “El Salvador is construed as a temporal and spatial origin point, one that merges individual biographies with the history of the nation. Within these constructions, origin also becomes a place to return to, and therefore something of a desired or in some cases feared possible destination” (48). Furthermore, in the aftermath of civil war the ruling ARENA (*Alianza Republicana Nacionalista*) party began to portray El Salvador as a symbolic parent to which emigrants owed loyalty and respect through return visits, political support, and economic help in the form of remittances (49). In this shifted perspective, the homeland is a hospitable ally instead of a war-torn nation that forces the flight of an inordinately large percentage of its population.

Salvadoran officials frequently perceive emigrants as “more Salvadoran” than the internal population that has not fled during the war or for reasons of economic or educational opportunities (56). According to Coutin, a central mission of government officials is to redefine national spaces to go beyond physical borders and create a “sociedad sin fronteras” (65). This transnational perspective stresses connections between people and their place of origin regardless of geographic location. The theory that Salvadorans in exile are more in tune with their nation than those within borders is a radical shift from previously antagonistic attitudes.

Coutin’s analysis of the construction of a new Salvadoran identity portrays the return as a nuanced event that problematizes the role of memory and remembering: “Re/membering is thus temporally complex: it permits connections to be forged but does so through return, a doubling back that is simultaneously a leap forward” (52). As a way of forging connections with memories of the past and the reality of the present day, Vega’s experience in *El asco* is a counterpoint to the confrontation between nostalgia and the altered present. He describes the visit to San Salvador as “mi temporada en el infierno,” and the vivid narration of the visit home by airplane

is a key aspect of the return (95). His revulsion begins during the normally mundane act of sharing the flight home with fellow Salvadorans. He not only rants against his homeland and its traditions, but also spends an inordinate amount of time disparaging the Salvadorans who also return. Agonizing fits of tension and signs of insanity are reoccurring characteristics of Castellanos Moya's protagonists and Vega's voyage home resembles an uncanny descent into madness.<sup>22</sup> For example, he describes the return trip as "un viaje diseñado precisamente para alterar los nervios, un viaje por poco me condujo a una extrema e incontrolable crisis nerviosa" (90).

The narration of the flight and arrival serve several important functions. Along with providing a small degree of background information pertaining to the protagonist's family and the process of embarking upon his return, the extended section places Vega in direct conflict with migrants journeying back to their home country. The return thus represents a turn towards personal madness and public opprobrium chronicled as "un macabro preámbulo de lo que me esperaba al llegar a San Salvador" (92). Passengers of more meager backgrounds do not favorably compare with the protagonist's upper class status. On the surface, he appears to be surrounded by a brutish and unsophisticated crowd in the airplane cabin and he goes to great lengths to demean those he surmises are of low social standing such as gardeners, domestic workers, and alcoholics. The necessity of sharing a flight with Salvadoran returnees rekindles a passionate aversion to home. The seven-hour flight is a rude reawakening to a degenerate people and culture: "siete horas en aquella cabina repleta de sombreroados recién escapados de algún manicomio, siete horas entre sujetos babeantes que gritaban y lloraban de algarabía porque estaban a punto de regresar a esta mugre, siete horas entre sujetos enloquecidos por el alcohol y

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<sup>22</sup> For example, in Castellanos Moya's 2004 novel *Insensatez* the protagonist slowly loses his mind while editing a report on the military genocide of an indigenous community. The phrase "Yo no estoy completo de la mente" is repeated throughout the novel as an expression of increasing despair (13).

la inminente llegada a su así llamada patria” (93). The unbridled joy of the passengers is contrasted with Vega’s derision of the other returnees who seem brutish in comparison with a cultured professor.

The agony of Vega’s flight does not end when he arrives at the airport in San Salvador. Passing through security checkpoints and migration checks surrounded by large crowds described as “esas masas siniestras” contributes to a sudden nervous reaction that contrasts with tales of return as a moment of triumph (96). Vega’s experience is an unambiguous reminder that the return is an often-painful occasion. Consequently, his first thoughts upon setting foot in El Salvador are of regret and disbelief: “a punto de quebrarme, sudando la temblorina, diciéndome que no había vuelto atrás, ya estaba en este territorio que había jurado no volver a pisar” (96). It is not hyperbole to define Vega’s initial moment of return as a powerful shock in the suffocating atmosphere of the airport.

Leaving the airport and stepping into the warm tropical climate for the first time in many years produces a strong reaction comparable to an inferno: “sino del shock que significa pasar de un clima soportable en el interior del aeropuerto a ese infierno achicharrante y embrutecedor de la costa tropical . . .” (99). The unambiguous barrier between Vega and Salvadoran returnees illustrates a wholehearted renunciation of the *sociedad sin fronteras* that proposes transnational ties between Salvadorans at home and abroad. *El asco* is a disheartening reality check that disproves perceptions of a unified, vibrant Salvadoran culture both within and beyond national borders.

### **Narrative Fidelity, Literature, and Return**

The influence of Thomas Bernhard weighs heavily on *El asco*. Bernhard’s distinctive techniques include repetitive phrases, run-on sentences, and inflammatory remarks and in *El*

*asco* these elements depict the return as a bewildering undertaking. An elaborate combination of voices and intermediaries culminate in the portrayal of return as a perplexing experience. Despite the fervor of Vega's attacks on Salvadoran life, his underlying motives are less clear. Described by the late Roberto Bolaño as "una novela para morirse de risa," the work may be read as a light-hearted take on Salvadoran culture that is not to be taken literally (130). This interpretation disputes the potency of Vega's claims and complicates the meanings of his return.

The fluid stylistic structure of the novel shares many similarities with the testimonial genre.<sup>23</sup> Like the testimonial, Vega shares his thoughts and feelings with Moya who then conveys this information to the reader in a fictionalized and highly compartmentalized narration. Deemed "simulated orality" by the critic Megan Thornton, issues of representation and identity are cast into doubt as the borders between fiction and non-fiction are crossed indiscriminately: "By blurring and parodying elements associated with the authenticity of testimonial discourse, *El asco* offers a perversion of the *testimonio* through the lens of fiction, reminding readers that history itself is a construction and interpretation of reality" (211). The blurred lines between fiction and reality mimic the hybrid Salvadoran identity in a postwar environment subject to drastic economic change, increased migration, and new challenges of crime and violence.

The preface, or *advertencia*, is the first hint to the reader that Vega's return is a disconcerting event. It states that Vega is a real person residing in Montreal, albeit under a different name. Speaking in the first-person voice, the narrator relays that Vega's original statements and opinions are altered into a more benign form to avoid controversy. The admission from the narrator that "Quise suavizar aquellos puntos de vista . . ." creates doubt regarding the

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<sup>23</sup> John Beverley defines the testimonial as a novel-length narration told in the first-person voice. Like *El asco*, Beverley's definition emphasizes a heightened sense of urgency: "La situación del narrador en el testimonio siempre involucra cierta urgencia o necesidad de comunicación que surge de una experiencia vivencial de represión, pobreza, explotación, marginalización, crimen, lucha" (9).

veracity of Vega's vitriol and leads the reader to question which statements are changed and which are left in their original unfiltered form (11). The deceptive point of view of the preface embodies the return in terms of multiple interpretations and questionable motives. Is Vega really so upset that he reacts with a stinging denunciation or is the entire episode a duplicitous anecdote not to be taken at face value? The words of Bernhard, "To shake people up, that's my real pleasure" recall the deceitful style mirrored in *El asco* and question the veracity of the tirades that follow a dubious preface (Kuehn 552).

The multiple narrative voices that repeat, reflect, and possibly alter an original monologue challenge the argument that the novels of Bernhard are a single-minded rejection of cultural values. As the critic Heinz Kuehn observes, it is more accurate to portray Bernhard as an "outraged moralist" whose scathing critiques are read as a call to action to preserve what is left of an emaciated culture:

. . . the man who uses all the tricks of the trade—irony, sarcasm, spite, cynicism, malediction, confrontation- to lay bare his utter, hopeless despair over the moral disintegration of modernity . . . who wants us to join him in his descent into hell so that, like Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, we may recognize, embrace, and perhaps rescue whatever is precious, beautiful, noble, and enduring. (550)

Kuehn concludes that Bernhard cannot be solely read in a literal fashion and this proposal complicates definite conclusions of the return. Kuehn's proposition is to go beyond traditional models of satire and pessimism and view the text as a challenge to analyze, redefine, or even discard commonly held points of view: "What Bernhard wants us to do, I believe, is to test our own vision of the world against his, to accept, modify, or reject what he sees and thereby reaffirm whatever makes us survive the powers of darkness and the spirits of evil" (553).

In a postscript to *El asco*, Castellanos Moya describes his process of writing the novel as a stylistic exercise in the imitation of Bernhard and admits "yo me había divertido durante la

escritura de este libro, en el que quise hacer una demolición cultural y política de San Salvador . . .” (136). This statement is a telling example of the dual meanings found in the novel. Beyond his cultural critiques, the admission that the author found the writing an enjoyable experience hints at the ludic quality of the text. Vega’s rants take to heart Bernhard’s veiled advice to compare visions of the world and to question patriotic norms.

Vega states that to write one must travel outside Salvadoran territory. He insists that his home is a literary wasteland and that only those outside national borders, including emigrants such as himself, are in a position to create works of literary merit. Moya, as Vega’s intermediary between the protagonist and reader, is himself a writer and former exile that has also returned to El Salvador. When the topic of conversation between the two turns to writing, Vega’s first question to Moya does not involve a discussion of relevant works or recent publications, but instead he bluntly asks “¿Qué haces vos aquí?” (26). Like Vega, Moya fled El Salvador to escape escalating warfare but instead of establishing himself permanently in exile, he returns to continue his career as a writer and intellectual. Returning to El Salvador to write is laughable to Vega: “Por eso me da risa que vos estés aquí, Moya, no entiendo cómo se te ha podido ocurrir venir a este país, regresar a este país, quedarte en este país” (28).

This choice sets the character apart from Castellanos Moya.<sup>24</sup> Vega sees Moya’s decision to reestablish himself in El Salvador as a fateful choice that will deprive him of opportunities to promote or distribute his work. While the fictional Moya returns to an intractable situation and faces impossible odds to publish his writing, the real-life author has enjoyed success and widespread acclaim while living outside El Salvador. In contrast to the stark differences between

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<sup>24</sup> Both the author and protagonist exhibit ambivalent attitudes towards El Salvador. Castellanos Moya remarks that as a writer, the nation is a wound to which he is compelled to return to in his works: “Para mí El Salvador es una marca, una herida, y vaya donde vaya siempre voy a volver a ella” (Jiménez Barca, “Castellanos”).

Moya and Castellanos Moya, both Vega and the author are emigrants who return to El Salvador for short periods, hold prominent positions of cultural influence, and witness the descent into pessimism of the postwar period.

Vega labels Moya's return as "un verdadero absurdo" since he is coming back to a place lacking a sophisticated readership or public (26). Vega's assessment of Moya's situation is bleak, and he speculates that if Moya was truly interested in writing, he would not come back to such a terrible place: "eso demuestra que en realidad no te interesa escribir literatura, nadie a quien le interese la literatura puede optar por un país tan degenerado como éste, un país donde nadie lee literatura . . ." (28-29). Examples of Salvadoran writers who work in their homeland are a cautionary tale and demonstrate the peril that awaits anyone who attempts to produce literature in an unreceptive society. According to Vega, the beloved folklorist Salarrué is an outdated provincialist when contrasted with icons such as Miguel Ángel Asturias. Even the well-known poet Roque Dalton is belittled as a "fanático comunista" who is most notable for being assassinated by the same rebel forces that he supported (86-87).

The warning given to Moya and all aspiring intellectuals is the same: "debe largarse lo más rápidamente de este país: aquí te vas a pudrir . . ." (63). As Vega continues his acerbic monologue against the poor quality of newspapers, the crude state of the universities, and a complete lack of historical perspective, he repeats to Moya that a departure is the only remedy: "Tenés que irte, Moya, zarpar, ubicarte en un país que exista, es la única manera de que escribás algo que valga la pena . . ." (84). By linking the lack of a renowned literary tradition to the absence of a vibrant national culture, the novel challenges illusions of literature serving as a force for unification or the resurgence of shared national values in the postwar era.

Far from the literature of the earlier decades of the twentieth century devoted to political change and social revolution, the climate of *El asco* is that of a superficial and degenerate culture unwilling to support artistic production. This criticism is at once an indication of the decrepit state of culture within national borders, a warning to Moya that he must escape to save his career, and a subtle reflection of Castellanos Moya's personal experience as a prominent writer in the international literary scene.

### ***Salvadoreñidad and Return***

Like the criticisms mounted against literature, Salvadoran national identity is a target of Vega's wrath. As Beatriz Cortez argues in *Estética del cinismo*, early hopes of nascent identity have gradually given way to a pervading skepticism in the works of recent Central American authors. The assertion that "La identidad nacional sigue siendo una ficción" is a damning indictment of the failure of postwar El Salvador to reinvent itself (Cortez 187). In this sense, *El asco* is primarily a demolition of established cultural norms that are traditionally viewed as sacred or beyond reproach. An outcome of Vega's verbal demolition is a superficial national identity lacking strong foundations: "Esta identidad está tan pobremente fundada, que en el texto la separación entre el protagonista y la identidad salvadoreña depende de un objeto: el pasaporte canadiense de Vega" (Cortez 255). As a crucial symbol of his status as a Canadian distanced from his Salvadoran roots, Vega's passport is a dividing line between his self-image and the El Salvador he loathes.

Castellanos Moya confesses his ambivalence towards the idea of nationhood when he states in an interview that "La idea de nación es algo naturalmente débil en mí . . ." (Rodríguez Friere 62). The idea of home is a contentious subject for the author and the fictional characters of *El asco*. When asked "Where is home for you?" his response emphasizes that home is not a

dynamic or established concept in his eyes: “ese concepto de hogar que ellos tienen, nosotros no lo tenemos, para mi *home* es donde me recupero de la resaca” (Rodríguez Friere 62). Similar to the conflictive relation to home in the works of Bernhard, Castellanos Moya’s perspective towards El Salvador is alternatively dismissive and preoccupied with the state of the nation. For both the author and the protagonist of *El asco*, El Salvador represents the crushing failure of postwar reforms and a pessimism that pervades hopes of progress.<sup>25</sup>

The legacy of displacement and emigration that continued after the formal end of armed conflict complicate efforts by the Salvadoran state to promote a unified vision. Yajaira Padilla underscores the role of emigrants in constructing a global Salvadoran identity. In the wave of governmental outreach towards those living outside national borders, Padilla stresses the desire for migrants to maintain a Salvadoran identity and to contribute from abroad: “Underlying many Salvadoran transnational practices is the need by migrants to participate in and feel part of the Salvadoran nation they left behind. This desire for the homeland speaks to the diasporic elements that mark the waves of Salvadoran international migration spurred by the civil conflict . . .” (96). In direct contrast to Padilla’s observation is the protagonist of *El asco*, who decries Salvadoran cultural and society. In the case of Vega, a barrage of criticism deflects questions of personal and national identity. Over the course of the novel, a cynical and deceptive point of view questions the feasibility of proposing a unique Salvadoran identity.

Castellanos Moya has written extensively on *salvadoreñidad*, or how Salvadoran society and culture are created, disseminated, and reformulated. His 1993 work *Recuento de incertidumbres*, composed of a series of essays that scrutinize Salvadoran history and culture, is

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<sup>25</sup> Equating the writer with the characters he creates is a misguided task. Those phoning death threats to the author would be surprised to learn his true feelings: “But people think that because of that book that I don’t like *pupusas*. . . . I like *pupusas*. Or they think I don’t eat *chuco de canchas*. I love *chuco de canchas*” (Enzinna “Reality”).

an optimistic meditation on the promises of the peace accords and explores a culture of violence and its subjugation in the interest of peace. In contrast to the tone of *El asco*, *Recuento* appears exceedingly hopeful given the ongoing circumstances of postwar El Salvador.

In *El asco*, the protagonist's return exemplifies the dissonance between the sanguine beginnings and later descent into cynicism in El Salvador. In comparing the message of *Recuento* to the bitter perspective of *El asco*, Castellanos Moya notes the drastic change in the short span: "En el primero hay una voluntad de decir: 'todavía se puede cambiar', pero en *El asco* hay una decepción, donde además se señala que todo esto es un poco irredimible" (60).

Approximations of *salvadoreñidad* stress the challenge of rethinking and redefining ways of being Salvadoran: "'repensar' el país, participar en su rediseño significa un reto y una responsabilidad concreta para la intelectualidad . . ." (*Recuento* 59). In *Recuento* Castellanos Moya writes from a specific moment in time when the illusion of progress was not yet overcome by the harsh failures of the peace accords. The crushing futility that took hold among writers of the era in the wake of a failed social project is readily apparent. In a tone characteristic of the initially optimistic thinking of the period, the author contrasts the culture of war and strife of the past to a contemporary setting primed for a respite from violence and a turn towards stability and creation: "Me atrevo a llamarlo 'el momento del sosiego': la guerra fue un esfuerzo agotador, inmenso; la sociedad quedó exhausta, harta. Y también 'el momento de la creación': las energías dilapidadas durante tantos años en el crimen y la confrontación, en la autodestrucción, ahora buscan otras salidas" (*Recuento* 74). From the fusion of creation and destruction, *El asco* is representative of the evolution from hope to cynicism in the postwar period.

In contrast to the pessimism of the later years of the 1990s, in *Recuento* Castellanos Moya proposes a renewed effort to redefine the nation without succumbing to the divisive

extremes of past generations: “Descubriendo a la nación, ya sin las gafas de ideologías extremas, engarzamos con el mundo, con lo mejor de lo contemporáneo, lejos de nacionalismos, racismos y tribalismos ahora tan en boga” (*Recuento* 74). Constructing new representations of nationhood that eschew endemic problems is an admirable project whose failure is visible in the shift from hope to disappointment in *El asco*. El Salvador stubbornly remains on the periphery and attempts of cultural renovation have been met with startlingly little success.<sup>26</sup>

As the shift from hope to disillusion in *Recuento* and *El asco* demonstrates, the issues of culture and national identity are contentious themes in postwar El Salvador. In *El asco*, Vega defies the postwar attempts of the Salvadoran state to promote a unified and transnational identity.<sup>27</sup> In a study dedicated to the reformulation of Salvadoran national belonging in the postwar era, Robin Maria DeLugan emphasizes the revamped cultural critiques that the novel rejects. DeLugan outlines a series of initiatives on the part of the Salvadoran state to bolster relations between emigrants and the homeland and forge a renewed awareness of national identity. In an innovative transnational setting, the role of culture is crucial in altering perceptions of citizens towards the state and as a method of displaying a unique shared past. A shared sense of identity highlights the inclusion of previously derided emigrant populations and new efforts to acknowledge long-ignored segments of society: “In the interest of presenting a common national identity, state projects promoted an ethnically and racially homogeneous national society based on the ideology of *mestizaje*, which emphasized the historical blending of indigenous and Spanish biological and cultural roots” (5).

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<sup>26</sup> Despite the optimistic tone of *Recuento*, the author acknowledges the crude generalizations towards the region and its cultures: “Lo centroamericano: la sudorosa mayoría mestiza de la franja del Pacífico, la tristeza y el mutismo del indígena del altiplano guatemalteco, la algarabía de la negritud en la costa atlántica, incluso la presunción de aldea suiza que campea en la meseta central de Costa Rica” (48).

<sup>27</sup> In *Taking their Word*, Arturo Arias similarly argues against wholesale or generalized approaches to the region and its populations: “Whatever our definition is, we need to think about categories such as ‘Central American’ as multiple and discontinuous, not as categories with ‘ontological integrity’” (22).

The power of culture to contribute to a series of shared beliefs culminating in a unified community is in line with the attempts of the Salvadoran state to construct a renewed awareness of nationhood designed to “transform attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors of citizens” (21). In light of the context of the postwar period, culture is powerfully contrasted with the demolition witnessed in *El asco*. The dichotomy between a nation building project and a text that denounces a common unifying tradition demonstrates the atmosphere of cynicism found in the literature of the period and gives voice to a generation of wasted optimism. In a study of *El asco* that highlights the issue of repatriation, Thornton bluntly summarizes Vega’s outlook: “[He] seems to be asking the question: why would anybody return to postwar El Salvador?” (212). This forceful statement contradicts the perceived success of the peace accords. Furthermore, the novel displays the postwar period from the point of view of a protagonist whose own identity as a Salvadoran is a source of disgust.

The continued emigration of Salvadorans and the presence of a large diasporic population are also sources of frustration that contest the validity of the nation: “Because the novel represents the fact that so many Salvadorans live outside the country's borders, it underscores the unresolved political, economic, and social problems that continue to plague the nation” (Thornton 214). This interpretation suggests that for Vega, Salvadoran identity is a disease to be contained and extinguished rather than celebrated. The enigmatic relationship between Vega and the uncertain identity that he must navigate during his return is an indictment of postwar El Salvador and its emigrants. In the face of such tremendous problems a sweeping reinvention of the nation is the only solution. To re-imagine the nation from the ground up, Vega’s criticisms are a point of departure and a dividing line between the empty promises and unfulfilled expectations of the postwar period (Thornton 212).

## Return as Survival

In addition to its role as a discourse on contemporary society and emigration, survival is a defining aspect of Vega's return. As he repeatedly remarks, the return is a burden and an unwanted interruption to his comfortable life of voluntary exile in Canada. As he makes clear, there is no greater nightmare than returning to a depraved San Salvador: "No tengo nada que hacer en este país . . ." (37). While enduring his stay in the hostile environment, an all-consuming paranoia and the unspeakable thought of remaining permanently threaten the protagonist's survival.

The impetus for a theory of survival in *El asco* is taken from a variety of critical sources that emphasize the theme in Central American literature, through the hardships of emigrants and returnees, neoliberal reforms, and Vega's status as an orphan. Albrecht Buschmann situates Castellanos Moya's novels in the labyrinthine and decaying environment of the modern city center and highlights the disenchanting characters that populate his works (118). For Buschmann, survival is a resurgent element of recent Central American literature and offers a type of hope distinct from aesthetics of cynicism so prevalent in postwar writing. To not succumb to the perils of violence or endemic poverty is in itself a type of victory against a menacing urban environment. *El asco* is therefore a roadmap filled with knowledge on how to survive in a contemporary postwar society: "In this sense, Moya's works carry enormously valuable knowledge—knowledge about how to survive in societies traumatized by the violence of civil war, and about the damage inflicted on the individual in the battle for survival" (Buschmann 119).

Speaking on the recent influx of migrants from Central America to the U.S., Castellanos Moya cites a lack of national identity as a reason for the massive flight north. The movement of

migrants is indicative of El Salvador's inability to retain its native population or provide the resources necessary for its citizens to live in relative stability. Migration signals the failure of the Salvadoran state, leaving flight as the only means of survival: "no toleramos nuestras realidades nacionales, porque nuestras realidades nacionales no nos ofrecen nada que valga la pena, porque la nación ha perdido su sentido de ser" (Fernández Hall "Entrevista"). In *El asco*, the journey into exile is an escape valve to flee an intolerable El Salvador. The protagonist's comfort in exile in Montreal vanishes when he sets foot in San Salvador. From the moment of his arrival, Vega's mission is solely to endure the cultural wasteland that surrounds him. Thus, returning itself becomes a question of survival as his inability to tolerate and outlast the repulsion of his home country constantly threatens to overcome him.

In the fiction of postwar Central America, individual motives and desires take center stage as narratives focus on the individual's mounting struggle to overcome corrupt declining social settings.<sup>28</sup> Like the earlier discussion of places and the impact of neoliberalism, economic policy influences Vega's quest for survival in *El asco*. By drastically reducing social services and cutting back welfare programs, neoliberalism contributes to a new model of citizenship where the lack of long-term employment and weak formal economies create a setting in which every individual is responsible for their own well-being. In this economic model, citizenship itself is fragile: "Under a regime of flexible labor, every individual is expected to be responsible for his or her own destiny and to anticipate nothing from society as a whole" (Hershberg and Rosen 10). Constrained by the limits of a fragmented society, the protagonists of recent Central American fiction fight to get by instead of dedicating themselves to personal achievement or visions of a better future: "in these works the freedom of the individual is severely constrained

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<sup>28</sup> Carlos M. Vilas studies neoliberalism in Central America in the 1990s and stresses the damage of unregulated economies and free markets in the region: "Markets, when left to their own dynamics, encourage highly speculative behavior culminating in devastating crises" (212).

by the violence and decay of nations still ruled by corrupt elites, in which it is virtually impossible even to know what is going on, much less to freely act upon such knowledge” (Kokotovic 24).

When exile is a rupturing of bonds between oneself and the physical or emotional homeland, the return follows as a way of healing these wounded ties and strengthening relationships after long periods of neglect. But in *El asco*, Vega’s situation is a complete reversal of these assumptions and demonstrates a stubborn unwillingness to embrace the place and people he has abandoned. A salient characteristic of Vega’s return is the conspicuous absence of attempts at reviving old friendships, visiting places that evoke fond memories, or catching up with former acquaintances in the community. It is noticeable that in place of nostalgia, Vega delights in his contempt for San Salvador and rejects personal or familial identification through his insults.

Vega’s untenable stay manifests itself in the quest for survival and the menacing paranoia that overtakes him. Added to the blend of fearful obsession and panicked nerves is Vega’s isolation as an orphan who rejects his brother’s hospitality. Vega shows no signs of mourning his deceased mother and her passing is yet another broken tie between the protagonist and his Salvadoran roots. The stipulation in the mother’s will that her son appear in person as a condition of receiving his inheritance exemplifies the antagonistic relationship between the two: “la muerte de mi madre es la única razón que me pudo obligar a regresar a esta podredumbre . . .” (22-23).

Although the strained relationship between Vega and his mother is not elaborated upon in extensive detail, the character’s animosity towards his family is a frequent refrain. Even stronger than this familial renunciation is Vega’s subservience to his mother. In the final tally of a long-simmering conflict, the mother’s requirement that Vega return paints her as a victor and her son

as the loser in the feud between the two: “Ganó mi madre, Moya, me hizo regresar, ya muerta, claro, pero ganó . . . regresé nada más para constatar que hice muy bien en irme, que lo mejor que se me pudo ocurrir fue largarme de esta miseria, que este país no vale la pena para nada, este país es una alucinación, Moya . . .” (24). Identifying the protagonist as a loser establishes a further link between the novel and the stylistic and thematic influence of Bernhard. Bernhard’s 1983 novel *The Loser* features a continuous interior monologue employing run-on sentences and an abrasive subject matter. Like the protagonist of *The Loser*, Vega is a vulnerable figure consumed by a lack of belonging as he rages against a despised society.

Thornton surmises that death is an avenue of self re-invention that indicates the abandonment of traditions and the symbolic death of the Salvadoran nation (212). In the same way that the mother is neither mourned nor missed, Vega spends no time lamenting the downfall of El Salvador. Rather, in his estimation the nation is inherently lacking value and the failures of the contemporary postwar era are merely a continuation of a fatally flawed society. As he explains to Moya, the random fate of being born in El Salvador is a curse that is only overcome by emigrating: “yo me fui precisamente huyendo de este país, me parecía la cosa más cruel e inhumana que habiendo tantos lugares en el planeta a mí me haya tocado nacer en este sitio, nunca pude aceptar que habiendo centenares de países a mí me tocara nacer en el peor de todos, en el más estúpido, en el más criminal . . .” (21).

As Vega admits, the return is an affirmation of the decision made years earlier to leave and also signals an implicit weakness and insecurity. Even in discussing his opposition to his mother, Vega takes the opportunity to condemn his home as a worthless place. The initial flight from San Salvador is an escape from an intolerable society, and the return is a homecoming that is to be survived rather than embraced. The likening of the country to a hallucination is an

explicit means of contrasting Vega's current and former residences. As a professor of art history, Vega attempts to portray himself as a refined member of the cultural elite in Montreal while El Salvador is depicted as a cultural backwater. As he ponders his cruel fate, his position as an esteemed university professor nearly causes him to vomit in disgust as he considers the deplorable state of the arts in El Salvador. Lamenting the lack of interest in local and national culture, Vega considers that if he had not left for exile he would have become one of the most esteemed art history professors in El Salvador: "Casi me vomito, Moya, casi vomito del asco cuando me dijo que ya que yo soy profesor de historia del arte, y dado que en este país en ningún lugar se enseña historia del arte, entonces quizás yo tendría muchísimas oportunidades, así me dijo, Moya" (56). The trip home sharply contrasts Vega's prominent academic career and El Salvador's lack of artistic accomplishments.

Survival is complicated by a series of nervous paroxysms brought on by the sights and sounds of San Salvador. In illustrating the trip as "la peor pesadilla," Vega's onset of anxiety is an omnipresent threat to his ability to endure (22). As he complains of his ailments to his doctor, his condition slowly begins to mirror the series of spastic, compulsive, and sickly characters that populate the novels of Bernhard. He complains of an "extremo estado de alteración nerviosa . . . producido por el regreso" that threatens to culminate in a full-blown nervous breakdown (69). As he rails against Salvadoran society, it is apparent that the visit is taking a tremendous toll on his emotional state. After implying that San Salvador is a city constructed especially to irritate his nerves, Vega complains of an insufferable tension during his flight and later suffers an acute attack of claustrophobia in a local nightclub (109).

When Vega loses his passport in a run-down brothel, this anxiety reaches a culminating point. Losing the passport dooms him to remain among the people and culture that he detests:

“convertido en un salvadoreño que no tiene otra opción que vegetar en esta inmundicia, me dijo Vega” (121). Without the document, his symbolic difference from which the criticisms of El Salvador are mounted ceases to exist. For this short period he is grouped with local Salvadorans and family members that he has disavowed so violently during his return. Consequently, there is a correlation between the degree of distance between Vega and his Salvadoran roots and his psychological state. From his comfortable self-imposed exile in Montreal, traces of *salvadoreñidad* are conveniently forgotten. Yet from his initial discomfort during the flight home to a panic attack in the airport and the loss of the passport, Vega’s discomfort is inversely proportional to the space between himself and El Salvador. He concludes that to be Salvadoran is a fatal flaw and through his exile and the change of name on his passport he seeks to rid himself of any ties to his origins and demolish a personal and national past that he abhors.

As Vega struggles to manage his stress, his brother becomes a target of his fury. Like his deceased mother, the protagonist expresses a dismissive contempt for his brother. The return was so unforeseen that Vega did not even call his family to announce his arrival: “El viaje fue de tal manera improvisado que ni siquiera telefoneé a mi hermano para informarle sobre el vuelo en que yo llegaría” (100). In contrast to Vega’s decision to flee and reestablish his nationality and personal identity in exile, his brother is disdained for his decision to passively remain in the nation instead of fleeing at the first possible moment.

Due to Vega’s delicate emotional state, his brother is the target of a deep-seated paranoia. As a Salvadoran citizen and easy target of Vega’s anger, the brother is yet another element that must be overcome as he seeks to survive. Privacy and hidden motives are a central principle of this paranoia: convinced that his brother is trying to steal his portion of the familial inheritance, Vega grows increasingly suspicious until finally he can no longer tolerate the situation and

moves out of his brother's house and into a local hotel for the remainder of his stay. Before leaving, Vega makes special mention of the obsession with keys and locks by his brother and Salvadorans in general. Necessary to ensure personal protection amid the threat of home invasions and rampant crime, the observation is another example of the pressing nature of survival. In a fit of rage, Vega summarizes his frustration as he abandons his brother: "que los quince días pasados en su casa han sido los peores quince días que recuerdo en mi vida, que nunca había estado inmerso en un ambiente tan miserable, tan estúpido, tan ajeno al espíritu . . ." (50).

In a place described as "fuera del tiempo y del mundo," Vega's mission is a telling example of the multifaceted character of the novel and contemporary Salvadoran society (63). In a nation devoid of traditions, legitimate social institutions, and a repulsive population, there is little for Vega to do while in El Salvador but to resist as much as possible while counting the days until his exit. Accordingly, to survive is an implicit rejection of Salvadoran identity. Faced with the difficult undertaking of returning to a despised home, Vega rejects his Salvadoran roots instead of showing critical interest in understanding the contemporary landscape. In a country he deems unworthy of his attention, Vega determines that if he is able to outlast his paranoia and anxiety he will go back to Canada with no memory of his descent into an abhorrent El Salvador. As much a reflection of the protagonist as his homeland, Vega's choice to minimize the impact of his stay reflects the degree to which survival takes precedent in an ominous postwar society.

## **Conclusion**

*El asco* defies unambiguous definitions of the postwar period and of the transitory nature of El Salvador. An intricate narration that forces the reader to interpret Moya's account instead of hearing Vega's words directly complicates the intensity of Vega's criticisms. The

protagonist's position as a voluntary emigrant and a grudging returnee compounds the novel's narrative unreliability. A direct result of the hybrid structure and thematic content is a ubiquitous tension: "With no easy solutions, *El asco* thereby represents the tensions of postwar El Salvador: peace and chaos, optimism and disillusion, national and transnational communities, home and host societies, fiction and the *testimonio*, writing and orality" (Thornton 217).

As a novel of return, *El asco* challenges visions of the journey home as a fulfilling encounter. Extended discussions belittle El Salvador's diasporic population and create a clear sense of distance between Vega and these detested emigrants. By expressing his discomfort on the flight and in the airport while surrounded by fellow returnees, Vega questions the validity of a multinational Salvadoran identity. His repeated scorn of these migrants described as mere gardeners and undistinguished workers portrays El Salvador's external populations as uncultured non-contributors: "Because Vega specifically criticizes Salvadoran immigrants in the United States, he implicitly comments on the nation's perceived class identity as a country of uneducated and uncultured, working-class individuals" (Thornton 214). Consequently, in this view El Salvador is a transient non-place that Vega desperately seeks to keep at a distance.

The arrival in San Salvador does not exhaust Vega's frustration as he probes the lack of cultural investment and the degraded state of society. His perspective as a returning exile and also as a highly educated professor in a first-world university informs his perspective on the failure of the nation to reinvent itself in the aftermath of civil war. Observations on the neglected state of literature signal the dilapidated state of cultural production and are a frank warning that no literature of merit will be produced in such a desolate cultural landscape.

Yet to read *El asco* solely as a denunciation would be a mistake given the obsession of the narrator with El Salvador and the questions of narrative ambiguity overtly imitated from the

style of Bernhard. The return resembles the same distorted tones suggested by the literary techniques that appear in the text. Vega's journey home is at once a descent into a place he despises and conversely a sincere interrogation into what has caused society to become irredeemable. Bernhard's attitude reflects the paradoxical attitude of *El asco*: "I hate Vienna yet it is deeply moving, that I curse these people and yet must love them and that I hate this Vienna and yet must love it . . . that these people are my people and will always be my people" (Kuehn 549).

While Bernhard demonstrates contradictory emotions towards a place that he at once loathes and loves, in Castellanos Moya's novel *salvadoreñidad* is an object of derision and a challenge to interrogate the failure of progress in the modern era. As Castellanos Moya details in his writings at the time of peace agreements, the drastic changes offer an opportunity to rethink Salvadoran cultural practices with the goal of overcoming a culture of violence. As *El asco* demonstrates, these optimistic goals have gradually given way to a sweeping disillusionment that is prominent in contemporary literature. Throughout his cultural demolition, Vega rejects notions of a vibrant transnational Salvadoran identity that receives contributions from native citizens and those in the international diaspora. The loss of his passport demonstrates this total rejection and is an example of the protagonist's desire to completely disassociate himself from his Salvadoran origins.

Implied in Vega's invective is his principal goal of purely surviving the stay in El Salvador to leave for Canada at the first possible opportunity. The protagonist harbors no fond memories of his youth and ardently denies any sentimental feelings on the subject of his mother's death or visiting with his brother after years of silence between the two. His absence of

nostalgia situates Vega as figure with no interest in understanding the forces that contribute to the decline from initial hopes to the disillusionment of the present.

A defining feature of the characters of Castellanos Moya's novels is an ominous threat of failure, and Vega's instinct of survival is intimately linked to a sense of fearful dread (Buschmann 118). The thought of remaining in El Salvador beyond the length of his brief stay is extremely upsetting and Vega's obsession is revealed in his bouts of paranoia and anxiety. The prospect of remaining is a potential catastrophe in Vega's eyes and the thought that his mother has bested him one final time compounds his sense of failure. In this sense, the return is an unequivocal defeat and Vega's time in the country is to be overcome rather than appreciated.

One of the enduring strengths of *El asco* is the diverse array of critical readings and reactions that the work generates.<sup>29</sup> Whether read as a brazen demolition of Salvadoran postwar society or as an amusing take on patriotic symbols and traditions, the novel invites a range of responses: "Whatever the reader response, the text invites an (auto-) analysis of one's reaction to Vega and the postwar nation, suggesting the possibility of social action" (Thornton 216). His deconstruction of a unified and international Salvadoran identity ultimately concludes in frantic quest for survival with the goal of returning to Canada as soon as possible.

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<sup>29</sup> Despite the controversy surrounding the novel's harsh criticism of Salvadoran patriotism, the Salvadoran publisher Editorial Arco Iris has issued ten reprintings of the work. The well-known Spanish publisher Tusquets published the novel in 2008 (Ortiz Wallner 66).

## CHAPTER 2

### RETURN AS JOURNEY AND DEMYSTIFICATION IN *CRUZ DE OLVIDO* BY CARLOS CORTÉS

This chapter analyzes the theme of return in Carlos Cortés' 1999 novel *Cruz de olvido*. Set in San José, Costa Rica at the turn of the decade of the 1990s, the novel follows the return of Martín Amador to his home city after ten years of exile in Nicaragua. His motivation for returning is the gruesome murder of his estranged son, and rapid fluctuations between points of view and narrative voices characterize the subsequent search for the truth.<sup>30</sup> The return becomes an exhaustive investigation into a turbulent personal past as the protagonist travels through the decaying city center seeking clues about the crime. Long-buried memories of an absent father and a deep dissatisfaction with his Costa Rican origins come flooding back once he sets foot in San José. Although critical approaches to the novel mainly focus on considerations of literary genre and reformulations of Costa Rican national belonging, this discussion analyzes the work through the perspective of return.<sup>31</sup> In addition to functioning as the point of departure for the novel's intertwining plots and character development, the return is a valuable vantage point to

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<sup>30</sup> Amalia Chaverri notes that the murder of Amador's son in the novel is loosely associated with the 1986 murder of seven women in Alajuelita, on the outskirts of San José. Four suspects were later linked to the crime but never convicted, exposing the nation to levels of brutality and impunity reflected in the novel's emphasis on the inability to find the son's killers ("*Cruz*" 41). For those accustomed to the peaceful nature of Costa Rican society, the murder marked a new era: "una orgía de terror que marcó un antes y un después en la historia delincriminal y judicial del país" (Lorena Jiménez n.pag.).

<sup>31</sup> In "*Tanda de sueños, visiones y ficciones*" Chaverri situates the novel's setting as an apocalyptic destruction of national symbols: "En el mundo macro en que se desarrolla *Cruz de Olvido* no había otra opción que una situación apocalíptica, cuando al final se queman y se derrumban todos los símbolos nacionales, como símbolo del derrumbe de una nación" ("*Tanda*").

study issues of identity, movement, nationalism, and the role of literature in contemporary Costa Rica.

From the first lines of the novel, Costa Rica is described as a cultural backwater where nothing of consequence takes place. According to the as yet unidentified narrator, “En Costa Rica no pasa nada desde el Big Bang, me dijiste” (11). It is a quarter of the way through the work before the protagonist is finally identified and these ominous words set the stage for a narrative that challenges the status quo of Costa Rican national identity. After leaving San José to work as a journalist for the Sandinista government during the 1980s, Amador’s journey back to his native city is a solemn one.

His return is the catalyst for a series of mishaps and surreal confrontations that occur during the ensuing investigation. Two defining periods that compare with contemporary San José at the dawn of the 1990s include memories of his youth in Costa Rica and the initially hopeful but ultimately unsuccessful Sandinista rule in Nicaragua in the 1980s. In treks through the city’s red light district and unseemly neighborhoods, Amador views an underworld of criminality that shatters the national reputation of a pristine tropical paradise. A major theme of the novel and Cortés’ literary production is the rejection of Costa Rica’s reputation of exceptionalism. Central to this mission is the return, which questions national identity and culture from the perspective of a native son that has spent the last decade outside national boundaries. Amador’s life is cast as a critical failure ranging from the disappointment of his revolutionary ideals to the abandonment of his son and the dilapidated state of the capital city he discovers.

The cast of characters that Amador encounters upon his return reflects a troubled nation. For example, the fictional president of Costa Rica, El Procónsul, is a parody of Latin American dictators and balances his abuse of power with an overwhelming appetite for alcohol and

immorality. El Maestro, Amador's mentor and a respected journalist, exemplifies the scant attention paid to writing and literature in Costa Rica. In a bizarre scene illustrating El Maestro's untimely death, the journalist's deceased corpse narrates a final journey through the city. Similarly, when Amador arrives at his family home, he encounters a mother suffering from madness and an apathetic family. The unexpected revelation of his father's past shatters Amador's familial origins and leaves the protagonist uncertain of his place in a rapidly changing world.

In defiance of the declaration that nothing ever happens in Costa Rica, by the novel's close an undercurrent of malfeasance and criminality are highly evident. Amador discovers that his son Jaime is alive and was taken as bait to lure him back as an unwitting participant in a reckless arms deal. The Procónsul has resigned his office in disgrace and the sacred Virgen de los Ángeles statue, a symbol of national pride, is stolen under dubious circumstances. Amador's future is uncertain as he is caught between a floundering journalism career and an indifferent family. Whether or not he will remain in Costa Rica is left unanswered as sentiments of culpability and cowardice exemplify his personal failings and reflect a nation on the verge of decline.

In *Cruz de olvido* the perspective of a self-imposed exile deconstructs and reimagines Costa Rican nationhood. Defining the characteristics that shape a nation complicates the categories of geography, language, and religion in what Homi Bhabha refers to as an "ambivalent tension" between historical origins and the physical and imaginary crossing of borders in the present day (1). Return is a fluid process that goes beyond merely crossing a tangible border in the journey from displacement to reestablishment. In *Cruz de olvido*, return is a perplexing journey that fuses issues of personal culpability and memory. Tensions between the

San José of the past and present are an omnipresent factor in the return and reveal a constantly shifting anxiety as the wholesome image of the nation begins to unravel. As both a physical border and a metaphysical dividing line between exile and home, crossing the boundary between Nicaragua and Costa Rica is a significant act with far-reaching repercussions. Consequently, Amador's return is an exercise in demystification that shatters perceptions of Costa Rican uniqueness in a region beset by violence and social upheaval in recent decades.

Bhabha warns that defining the nation confronts the dichotomy between center and periphery, or the ways in which cultural constructions are formed across boundaries. Crossing borders is a key element of *Cruz de olvido* and the boundary between Nicaragua and Costa Rica symbolizes the questioning of national representation: "The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning . . ." (4).

Situated among the violence of the northern triangle of Central America and the overwhelming influence of the United States in the surrounding region, Costa Rica is uniquely positioned by geography and the development of a nationalism of exception. Idealized as a peaceful democracy populated by small coffee plantations and luxurious tourist destinations, views of local culture traditionally illustrate Costa Rica as a serene locale. To outsiders and vacationing tourists, a tropical climate and peaceful traditions are firmly entrenched stereotypes including "...el opio de 'la eterna primavera,' 'la Suiza de Centroamérica,' 'el mejor café del mundo' y 'la belleza de nuestras mujeres'" (Barahona 118).

Uncovering the reality behind the many superficial clichés defining the nation is a persistent preoccupation of Costa Rican intellectuals. A focus on a diverse Costa Rican history and ethnicity includes fictional representations of non-white populations such as the Garifuna

and groups of African origin on the isolated Atlantic Coast.<sup>32</sup> Cortés is a leading contributor to a new era of Costa Rican literature and in *La gran novela perdida* he discusses *Cruz de olvido* and the motivations that lead to a keen interest in his home nation. On topics ranging from identity to the idea of narration as travel and the debatable reach of local literature, Cortés provides a framework to analyze the novel. In each of the four discussions that follow, a specific theme proposed by Cortés is related to the impact of return.

The first section of this chapter analyzes the myriad issues that affect the protagonist as he travels to San José. Cortés compares *Cruz de olvido* with the opening of Pandora's box and the exploration of new veins in Costa Rican society: "Lo que ocurre es que *Cruz de olvido* fue como destapar la caja de Pandora y ahora he querido explorar algunas de las vetas que se me abrieron, intentando darles la espalda a las convenciones narrativas . . ." (*Novela* 249-50). Amador's ominous sense of failure and disenchantment stresses return as a vital theme. Tinged with the inability of the Sandinistas to remain in power, a distant relationship with his own father and the unbalanced mental state of his mother debilitates the protagonist. These feelings are compounded by the insuperable blame resulting from a life of disappointment and personal weakness. The cumulative factors of return take a great physical toll on Amador: his atrophying body is described in alarming detail and preconceived notions of self and nation rapidly deteriorate. By opening Pandora's box, Amador must grapple with unexpected revelations about his parents, his son, and the nation at large.

The second section analyzes return as a continual movement beyond merely coming back to one's birthplace. Return is rarely a neatly delineated closing to exile and Cortés observes that

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<sup>32</sup> For example, Anacristina Rossi's 2002 novel *Limón Blues* explores the Afro-Caribbean legacy of Costa Rica's Atlantic coast, including the rise of the United Fruit Company and the pervasive racism faced by immigrants of African heritage.

his narratives include connotations of voyages, trips, and passages between realities. After arriving in San José, Amador's journey begins anew as an exasperating search that brings him into contact with a city rarely seen by outsiders. Moving from Nicaragua to Costa Rica is merely the first border that the protagonist crosses. During his time in San José, boundaries between spotless tourist zones and unsavory neighborhoods are blurred and question the merits of exceptionalism. Passages through a variety of city spaces define Amador's return and illustrate a place unexplored in the stereotypical image of the nation.

The third section considers the relation between return and national identity. The social and cultural facets that generate a tradition of exceptionalism are of great concern to Cortés as he investigates the shallow foundations of national myths. Exploring, and in turn exploding these myths is a central mission: “Con *Cruz de olvido*, justamente, intenté dinamitar las bases de la nacionalidad costarricense, por un lado, y al mismo tiempo, hacer una novela centroamericana . . .” (*Novela* 248). Dynamiting traditional pillars of cultural identity is an outcome of the return. In addition, Amador's inability to square visions of the present with his range of experiences during exile and his distant youth profoundly marks the tension inherent in his journey.

The final section examines the relation between return and literature. According to Cortés, Central American fiction is a marginal field on the outskirts of public consciousness. The task of creating a local novel is a forbidding challenge given meager readership and competition among more well-known Latin American authors. A stated goal of the author is to create a genuine Central American novel based on references to the economic crises of the 1980s and to

pay homage to classic genres such as the total novel and the dictatorial novel (248)<sup>33</sup>. Like the aims of examining the foundations of national identity and exceptionalism, a key proposal is the evaluation of Central American reality: “Mi propuesta fue refundar el contrato de realidad de mi narrativa y de la narrativa nacional y para ello era indispensable apelar a referencias más generales, que excedieran el marco ideológico cerrado y agobiante de lo que hasta entonces se consideraba como ‘lo nacional.’ Por eso es latinoamericana” (*Novela* 248). Redefining the Latin American novel to include Costa Rican and Central American themes is intimately tied to return. No longer banished to the margins, Amador’s journey of discovery challenges literary traditions and their observations of contemporary Central America and Costa Rica. By choosing a returning exile as the primary character of the novel, Cortés accentuates the role of exiles in recent history. Although not a political exile or a refugee that must flee due to imminent danger, the protagonist abandons his origins and leaves for Nicaragua distressed with the misgivings of his native home. While Amador heads to Nicaragua to work as a journalist, his revulsion towards Costa Rica is an equally pressing factor in his flight: “Detestábamos aquella aparente pasividad, el conformismo y la estrechez de espíritu” (31).

### **Opening Pandora’s Box**

A central motivation of *Cruz de olvido* is to open Pandora’s box and explore a side of Costa Rica rarely seen by the outside world. Although Amador comes into contact with his family after an absence of over a decade, the return is not a cheerful homecoming. Whether

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<sup>33</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa defines the total novel within the tradition of Latin America and stresses the rejection of reality and its replacement with all-encompassing novelistic works: “This perspective is traditionally the one which has nurtured the illusion—naïve, demented, but nevertheless formidable—of wishing to recapture with fantasy and words the total image of a world, of seeking to write novels that express this total reality not only qualitatively, but also quantitatively” (“Today” 270). One of the most ambitious total novels is Vargas Llosa’s 1969 work *Conversación en la catedral*. Additionally, two prominent examples of dictatorial novels are Vargas Llosa’s 2001 work *La fiesta del chivo* and Miguel Ángel Asturias’ 1946 work *El señor presidente*.

agonizing over a sense of blame for the many failures in his life, dealing with a mother on the edge of insanity, or coming to terms with the alleged death of his son, Amador's journey is a trying experience. Amador is depicted as an abandoned figure whose visions of his past alternate between surreal memories and forgotten details that undermine his state of mind. Throughout the novel, the trajectory of return is inconclusive as referents of identity are challenged and the perpetrators of his son's murder remain unknown and unpunished.

Amador's return is both an introspective quest for origins and a striking reevaluation of a tenuous personal belonging. As an example of a genre of return, the journey is a key insight into the psychological tensions of the voyage home. Feelings of isolation and abandonment compound an insurmountable sense of blame for the failures that envelop him. Themes of orphanhood, tenuous familial relations, and the burden of remembering the past are additional factors that obfuscate the trajectory of return and disrupt attempts to logically construe straightforward interpretations of Amador's role among his family.

An accounting of Amador's situation as a newly arrived returnee is negative; his son is dead, he is labeled as an unsuccessful liberal revolutionary, he is destitute and unwittingly embroiled in an international arms trading deal. He must also encounter a family whose memory recalls the murder of his own father years earlier. The culminating effects of this dire situation suggest Amador's sense of blame for his many disappointments. His involvement in the Sandinista revolution expresses his profound disenchantment with the inability of the movement to establish itself. An overpowering guilt continues to torment him and after the revolution he is left a hollow and anguished man:

Había traicionado la Revolución y tendría que pagar por ello. De nuevo, desde niño, me atacaba la maldita culpa. Una culpa, una sufrida culpa que me hacía chocar contra las cosas y contra la gente como si todos tuvieran que pagar por esta

afrenta siniestra a la coherencia de mi propio, intransferible fracaso. Y, finalmente, al fracaso de todos los que habíamos colaborado. (35)

This guilt is magnified by the fact the Amador is forced to flee the failed movement due to the death of his son. In this context, returning to San José gives the protagonist the undesired opportunity to reflect on the cumulative effects of these disasters as well as come face to face with a place he left in haste. It is indicative of Amador's fragile state of mind that during the drive to San José he considers his isolation and impotence in a hostile world: "Era el hecho de saber que no sos de nadie, que no tenés ninguna amarra con el mundo y que solo sobrevivirís enredado a unos pocos hilos deshilachados de tiempo perdido en la memoria" (16).

In seeking clues pertaining to the murder, encounters with a cast of friends from his youth expose an undercurrent of malfeasance inconsistent with the nation's democratic reputation and further compound Amador's shame. These figures from the past reemerge as symbols of the sordid state of national affairs. Consisting of a group of childhood friends nicknamed "Los cuatro fantásticos," El Procónsul, Edgar Jiménez, Joaquín, and Amador are all involved to differing degrees in shady political machinations and criminal conspiracies (314). While El Procónsul abuses his presidential power to extremes, Edgar Jiménez is a corrupt oligarch whose ties to weapons smuggling threaten the futures of all four friends.

The fate of Joaquín is a frequent source of consternation and guilt. In a wide-ranging flashback to his youth, the details surrounding their friend's death torment the group. The narration gradually reveals that Joaquín was abused and violated by two of his professors and his friends swore a pact of silence to preserve their innocence. His resulting agony and death weigh heavily on Amador and contribute to sentiments of failure and weakness.

As the return takes its toll on both mind and body, the underlying sense of guilt manifests in Amador's physical appearance. Ties to his family, friends, and son come apart in the same

way that his physical body fails him: “Mi vida personal se había borrado de cualquier tipo de atadura . . .” (84). A quick glance in the mirror alerts him to his surprisingly emaciated appearance: “Permitía ver a un hombre cansado, con el que me costaba trabajo identificarme o al menos sentirme integrado, a un idiota consciente de sí mismo, dicho esto en mi descargo, desilusionado, abatido y envejecido, por un lado; y por el otro, ansioso, inestable y frágil . . .” (89). This striking image of a dispirited and withered figure anxious to end this stage of life personifies a precipitous decline. Both Amador and the nation are similar in their inability to avoid destruction. The protagonist, as an extension of his doubtful origins, offers little hope of overcoming the present decay: “San José destruido y acabado es un reflejo de la problemática existencial del personaje” (Chaverri, “*Cruz*” 48).

Guilt and personal failings also illustrate the difficult relationship between Amador and his family. The cause of the death of Amador’s father years earlier is a lingering question, and this mysterious event lurks as a painful reminder of a completely dysfunctional family. As an expression of his abandonment and ill-defined destiny, the orphaned protagonist wistfully exclaims: “durante mi vida solo había buscado una cosa en el mundo: el abrazo de mi padre” (16). Amador is not shy in expressing his personal weakness; he spends his nights in seedy bars and drinks excessively to disappear from his failings as a father, son, and revolutionary. He describes himself as a life-long coward, with the death of his father as the origin of this personal debility: “En realidad había sido un cobarde toda mi vida. El asesinato de mi padre era mi pecado original. Desde ahí sentía que no tenía más remedio que quitar la cara y salir huyendo” (91). The implication that Amador fled Costa Rica due to the murder of his father is yet another source of personal guilt that his return does not remedy.

When Amador arrives in San José he faces a tangle of half-truths and enigmatic circumstances. A pertinent example of the protagonist's difficult situation is the return to his childhood home. Revisiting this site is a trying experience that spotlights the underlying tension between memories and the present state of affairs. The physical state of the edifice is a veritable house of horrors: leaking water pipes inundate the entire area with water and the resulting stench of mold and rotting pestilence is a brutal reminder that for Amador returning is unpleasant. Additionally, wading through the house reveals a series of discomfiting sights including rotting furniture and repulsive scents: "El aire era una mezcla de agua salobre, orines, madera podrida, aceites desconocidos, vejez y un poco de orégano. El agua manaba interminablemente desde aquella fuente de plomo" (245). The visit depicts a deplorable situation. Welcomed to the home's interior by the sight of a dead rat floating in the ankle-deep water, Amador must face the fact that his flight contributes to the plight of his family.

An element of Amador's return is the problematic state of his family, and specifically his mother. In a stubborn act indicative of her emerging insanity, she refuses to allow repairmen—or any men—to enter the home. Neglecting to see a doctor or take pills, her health suffers as she refuses to eat and decries the abusive role of men in her life. Her condition is the result of her husband's supposed tragic death, and she reacts with fits of anger and confused ramblings. As a symbol of a nation in decline, Amador's encounter with his erratic mother exemplifies the complicated connections that the journey home arouses. Amador's relationship with his mother is a paradigm of the complexities of return and the inherent dissatisfaction that devolves into an unbearable experience. He only learns of his father's true fate after extensively questioning his family members. That the father is alive and living in Panama comes as a total shock and undermines everything Amador believes about his family.

The journey to the ancestral home is a hollow experience reflected in the curiously empty rooms in the house. Locked and hidden from view, these spaces are a direct representation of the mother's emptiness and the invisibility of her family. Amador's return does little to improve her outlook and the home, like its occupants, is tired, worn down, and dead inside: "En estos años no había cambiado nada, las cosas ocupaban el mismo lugar, pero todo se había muerto de cansancio" (241). The mother's admission that she has led an empty life parallel's her son's inability to find purpose and meaning. Her statement that she directly passed from courtship to pregnancy and from pregnancy to old age is indicative of a struggle to survive a futile existence (271).

To be an orphan is to be abandoned and to lack the familial ties that bind people together. Amador's abandonment and culpability fuses into a disturbing expression of "la totalidad del ser costarricense" in which the stain of his failings as a father and son are seen in light of the nation's inability to maintain order and prevent a steep decline. (Quesada Roman). Amador's difficult family ties are indicative of an existential orphanhood. The flight from Costa Rica occurs voluntarily and shatters his already tenuous links to home, family, and nation. Unsuccessful as a revolutionary and journalist abroad, his reintroduction to Costa Rican society demonstrates his inability to fit in with his family or peers: "Siempre había renegado de mi generación, de nuestra propia degeneración, como nos llamábamos con sorna, y había tratado de hacer el camino al revés" (44).

What remains of the nation lies in a state of rapid decline headed for oblivion: "Es más, haciendo todo lo posible para acelerar el proceso del olvido y la descomposición. Y caer para siempre en el olvido. En el olvido donde no hay odio ni pasión. Solo olvido" (253). Forgetting appears to be the only method of coping with such tragic events. The memory of what has

happened along with a palpable guilt is the only tangible product of the journey: “Después de todo, solo tengo la memoria. La memoria y la culpa. Pero uno aprende a vivir con la memoria y con la culpa” (88).

The closing lines of the novel reflect the insistence on forgetting the past and emphasizing that in time all will be forgotten, including the experience of return: “Podrás ver como un hilillo de sangre va bajando desde la boca de la montaña, al pie de vos también, vos también, con el tiempo, que todo lo borra, que todo lo cura, lo bueno y lo malo, implacablemente, te olvidarás de todo, hasta de tu nombre” (464). In this poetic image, the nation’s decline is personified as an inexorable journey of forgetting. Like a defense mechanism to deflect attention from his isolation and blame, Amador’s insistence on forgetting encapsulates the unpredictability of his return. The experience is an ongoing trauma to be suffered and survived at great cost. The prominent role of forgetting reinforces the fact that for the protagonist, nothing is worth remembering. Remembrances of family and exile will all be forgotten since little of real value is held in each. Amador’s only option is to forget his family members, revolutionary dreams, and ideals of Costa Rican exceptionalism.

### **Narration as Journey**

Movement, in both physical and symbolic terms, is a striking feature of *Cruz de olvido* and Cortés’ works prominently feature a variety of journeys: “muchos de mis relatos son viajes de iniciación o simplemente viajes, pasajes entre una realidad y otra” (*Novela* 220-21). In the novel, the return is merely the first step in a series of voyages through a bewildering urban center. This section explores the many travels through time and space in *Cruz de olvido* and argues that Amador’s return is merely the first step in a series of problematic journeys.

The protagonist's decade-long exile and return are intimately linked to recent political events in Central America. As an ambitious journalist intent on covering the incipient Sandinista rule in the early 1980s in Nicaragua, Amador heads north and in the process abandons his young son and family. A decade later, Sandinista electoral defeat coincides with a return that the protagonist reflexively describes as untimely: "Martín Amador, el mejor amigo del ministro de Interior, periodista también, y desde hace una década en la Nicaragua sandinista, había vuelto intempestivamente. Ahora resulta que era el padre de uno de los mierdosos de la masacre. O al menos eso decía él" (128). Even after arriving in San José, intermittent descriptions of Managua hold a certain fascination with Amador, who remembers the city alternately as a place of unbounded hope and shattered dreams. The surreal fog of memory envelops the phantasmal city: "Una ciudad sin centro, un pueblo fantasma en el medio de un desierto de barriadas perdidas, urbanizaciones condenadas y callejuelas que van a ninguna parte" (12). Amador's confrontation with his home city is fraught with tension between bewildering memories of Managua and San José. A common outcome of exile is the gaining of skills or knowledge during displacement, however Amador's experience is less instructive. Managua is a distant and painful memory that only exacerbates sentiments of failure and leaves the returnee unable to cope with his new surroundings.

The return carries a heavy psychological burden and begins in earnest as the protagonist reaches San José. The trip is not a pleasant one: Amador relates that the drive from Managua is an agonizing descent into a place purposely abandoned in hopes of participating in a promising revolution. The voyage is an unwanted encounter expressed by shouts and tears: "De camino hacia San José había gritado y llorado a gritos" (34). The experience brings to the surface a combination of guilt and helplessness. The detailed descriptions of the personal items that he

loads into his jeep for the ride carry a bittersweet nostalgic value. Books, photographs, journals, and a pistol are the few possessions that Amador retains and consist of a meager “buen montón de mierda nostálgica” (39).

The inability of the Sandinista government to maintain power is a crushing defeat for Amador and results in a passive ambivalence towards life. Memories of Managua fuse experiences of failure with vivid recollections of the suffocating urban atmosphere of the Nicaraguan capital. Described as “un mundo espectral...envuelto en una asfixiante gasa de arena y calor infernal,” visions of the past shroud exile in unsettling recollections (12). Like the San José of the present, the Managua of exile is a nightmarish scene replete with confusion and darkness. Although the protagonist’s time in exile has ended, nostalgia for the convictions that initially attracted him to the struggle still linger. Despite abandoning the revolution, Amador is continually plagued by what he described as “aquella memoria en ruinas, de esta ciudad de pedazos” (24). Fully aware that the remainder of his life will be consumed by the heartbreak of his personal shortcomings and the unsuccessful flight to Nicaragua, the trip to Costa Rica bears little resemblance to a return as a closing chapter of exile.

The constant movement through the urban space of San José highlights the intersection of memory, failure, and return. As a journey to the roots of Amador’s personal trauma, the event is a confrontation with demons of the past and an unsettled present: “Inicia entonces un viaje a las raíces de sus traumas, a la patria que odia y ama, y a enfrentar el hecho de que la última revolución americana del siglo XX ha sido un fracaso” (Quesada Roman). The fusion of trauma and nostalgia is a major component of Amador’s return and his peripatetic existence does not end with arrival in San José.

Amador's investigation into his son's death is a frustrating search that casts San José as an ominous space and home to an assortment of suspicious characters. The San José of the novel is much different from the carefully cultivated image of a tropical paradise presented to the outside world. For example, the red-light district in the southern section of the city is noted for its gritty bars, brothels, and high crime rates: "Sirve para designar lo marginal, lo oculto, lo que está debajo de la ciudad real" (337). The division of the city symbolically separates the seedy underworld from the more desirable elements of a stable democratic society. The return shatters the barriers between these two strata along with the relationship between myth and reality. Cultural institutions and upper class establishments such as fancy hotels, universities, and theaters are exposed as superficial landmarks built on a foundation of degradation. Inversely, Amador's travels through underground passages, dangerous bars, and morgues are a revelation that the nation's cultural mystique is weakly founded and on the verge of collapse. In Amador's eyes, the city is now a paltry space filled with inconsequential people and places: "Toda la ciudad parece haberse convertido en un inmenso restaurante chino" (38).

Amador's experience is an introduction to the deeply flawed underside of society. The relentless attack on clichés defies a nationalism based on exception. As Cortés describes in *La invención de Costa Rica*, "Somos diferentes porque, naturalmente, somos diferentes: sin indios, sin violencia, sin clases sociales, sin ejército, por un lado; con una población blanca, con una estabilidad democrática, con educación para todos, con paz, por el otro" (39). Myths of tolerance and prosperity are unambiguous targets of Cortés' wrath. The question of what it means to be a citizen of Costa Rica in this time of change is left to Amador, who as a returning exile has abandoned his homeland and only come back reluctantly. His attitude towards nationality is ambivalent at best and stresses the unredeemable invisibility of society: "Un paisesito de mierda,

decíamos en los años de los heroicos furores. Un país que no existe sino en el olvido, agregaba yo” (17). It is through the endless search for his son that Amador witnesses this revealing portrait of Costa Rica and questions the underpinnings of his belonging.

Rather than the end of a nomadic existence, Amador’s return is merely one phase in an itinerant life devoid of purpose. Subsequently, the return to San José is an ongoing revelatory experience instead of a closing chapter. Crime is an omnipresent facet of a revealing interpretation of national belonging, and Jaime’s death underpins the desperate pursuit of an obscure record of events. *Cruz de olvido* is the story of a crime that provokes a homecoming, which in turn leads to a search for origins. Amador’s unexpected trip is in essence “un viaje que no es otra cosa sino la disección de San José de Costa Rica, donde una cadena de hechos, recuerdos, rechazos y reconocimientos da como resultado la incierta luz de una identidad de posguerra, tiempos en los que parece no haber heroísmo y la corrupción campea” (Quesada Roman).

Violent crime pervades the atmosphere of the city, and in the analysis of Laura Barbas-Rhoden, violence is crucial to understanding literary attacks on traditions and cultural beliefs. These efforts are focused on the specific ways in which narratives dismantle the foundational fictions prevalent in Costa Rican literature and challenge the politics of a society hesitant to acknowledge their shortcomings (“Corpses”). Like the murder of Amador’s son, the ill-defined quest offers little resolution and exposes a salacious side of the city. Despite the vicious nature of the crime, its effect on the city’s citizens is negligible. After detailing the brutality of his son’s murder, Amador is debilitated by the fact that no one recognizes its significance as daily life continues uninterrupted: “Todo, todo sigue igual, como siempre, desde hace siglos, a pesar de los

siglos. Pensé con cólera que nada podía hacer despertar a los costarrisibles de su limbo” (*Cruz* 30).

The polyphonic mix of narrative voices and points of view toys with the impossibility of solving the crime. The narration leaves the reader lost in a confusion of hearsay and unreliable official explanations that reflect the complex nature of the return. The cumulative effect is a challenge for the overwhelmed reader to unravel:

Cortés, for his part, utilizes multiplies scenarios until the dazed reader is no longer sure what is reality and what is illusion. As a consequence, the veneer of nicety in Costa Rica peels away, and what remains is a troubling vision not just of the country but also of the narratives societies construct to make sense of their history. (“Corpses” n.pag.)

The circulation of vicious rumors and the inability to positively identify the remains of the crime’s victims is a cause for concern that adds to Amador’s hopelessness of ever solving the crime and bringing those responsible to justice.

In contemporary Central American fiction crime and urban city centers are inextricably linked. In *La gran novela perdida*, Cortés equates San José with its output of cultural production. As the major point of reference for a new generation of writers, a modern metropolitan reality is both a source of inspiration and great anxiety. Writing with the mindset of the city as a canvas to be explored, Cortés stresses the strong ties between the urban environment and the literary figures it produces: “la necesidad de anclar los personajes a la realidad de una urbe específica o real, mezclando todos los materiales que proporcionaba la ciudad—lo que pomposamente llamé la novela impura—” (90).

In *Cruz de olvido*, Amador’s trip is a symbolic reentry into an undesired homeland. A portentous San José is the setting that drives the protagonist’s exasperating search. The return is thus a formative yet frightful experience and the metropolitan environment is a powerful

influence. The protagonist is at the mercy of his environment and is transformed into a helpless antihero: “En la gran ciudad, el antihéroe es ‘nadie’, ‘ninguno’, ‘nobody’, ‘John Doe’, y simplemente se deja llevar por el derrumbe de los acontecimientos—es uno más del ejército de la historia, para ponerlo de esa manera, a merced de las fuerzas sociales . . .” (218). Amador is left to unravel the nebulous meanings of his existence within the secretive underworld of San José.

San José is an interactive space to be negotiated and survived rather than as a place to live and work. Cortés’ depiction of San Jose evokes images of a country torn apart by capitalism and globalization: “San José ya era esa especie de banco-filas-fastfood-ruido-smog-pitos-gritos-carros-parada-de-buses-acera-bulevar-con-huecos que es ahora, es decir, no tenía vida de barrio ni de lugar para habitar . . .” (219).

Amador’s journey to what he sarcastically terms “la isla de paciencia” is a reluctant undertaking at the mercy of an inexorable destiny: “y ahora regresaba porque no tenía más remedio, precedido por la voluntad inexorable de mi destino” (28). The assertion that nothing has ever happened is juxtaposed with imminent signs of change. The return coincides with a turning point in the protagonist’s life. Corresponding with a midlife crisis fueled by myriad disappointments, the return takes place in a rapidly changing world. The fall of the Berlin Wall, peace agreements ending prolonged armed conflicts in Guatemala and El Salvador, and the failure of revolutionary movements throughout the region are all examples of the turbulent changes in the decade of the 1990s. However, the disparity between these societal alterations and Amador’s outlook is striking. Upon his arrival, his perspective on local events offers a dim view of the rapid pace of change. The nation is commonly seen as an oasis of peace in a worn-torn region, but in the text this association is tinged with elements of pessimistic sarcasm. Instead of

glorifying a peaceful democratic tradition, Costa Rica is described as a stale and decaying land where nothing ever changes.

Amador registers an impending sense of movement that menaces his every step: “Algo se movía y se movía rápidamente hacia mí” (43). Throughout his informal investigation an ominous atmosphere of dread clouds his thoughts and actions. When Amador concludes that his inquiry has been fruitless and dissolves, along with his personal quest of meaning, into the “niebla de las palabras,” his words reference an unstable grasp of reality with no hidden significance to be discovered (455). Like the unrelenting movement through physical space of the city, the text jumps from the present to the past in a chaotic timeline. Before meeting with his son for the first time after discovering that he was falsely assumed to be murdered, time appears greatly distorted as a result of the trauma associated with the encounter: “Aquellos años que fueron siglos que fueron apenas minutos...” (444). Like the journey through San José, the variable chronological narrative obscures a past that is subject to changing attitudes and points of view. In the same way that Amador struggles to solve the mystery of his son’s fate, the many narrative voices reflect a fragmented and constantly evolving return experience. As the next section demonstrates, exploring and in turn exploding myths of identity is a major theme of the return.

### **Dynamiting National Identity**

Since the colonial period, San José and the surrounding Central Valley has thrived as a cultural center boasting an idealized perception among outsiders. Beginning with the rise of the coffee industry in the late nineteenth century, the valley has come to define what it means to be Costa Rican. The typical coffee planter is “Desconfiado y astuto como un montañés; cortés pero tímido; trabajador sin constancia, buscando el provecho fácil de esfuerzo; campesino egoísta pero bondadoso, cazurro siempre...” (Azofeifa 78). Spared the ravages of armed conflict, Costa

Rican consciousness prioritizes images of a humble and peaceful people in contrast to the chaos surrounding them.

Amador's return stresses the nation's foundational myths and the persistence of time-honored stereotypes. Thus coffee—a traditional staple produced for export—is a telling symbol for the relationship between literature, identity, and the meanings of return. While in El Salvador and Guatemala production was monopolized by the elite classes and relied on poor rural peasant labor, in Costa Rica coffee cultivation is a fundamental influence in the creation of a peaceful society. Víctor Hugo Acuña Ortega, writing in *La Nación*, remarks on the foundations of national culture and the promotion of coffee in the nineteenth century: “En el siglo XIX, el café fue llevado en imágenes a los billetes, a las monedas, a los mismos boletos de las haciendas, al escudo nacional y a las primeras manifestaciones del arte y la arquitectura nacionales . . .” (1). Acuña Ortega describes coffee production in this period as an expression of success and the promise of a prosperous future. However, in the present day, coffee ceases to be a profitable export product and is chiefly a stereotypical cultural reminder of the past: “Ahora a finales del siglo XX, el café es esencialmente un recurso para idealizar el pasado” (2).

The diminished status of coffee appears in *Cruz de olvido* when Amador is offered a cup by his aunt upon returning home. Her insistence that coffee cures all ills is sternly rejected: “—No, el café no lo cura todo. Menos este café que es puro petróleo” (256). Like the treatment of coffee in the novel, Cortés first identifies and then actively deconstructs the tradition of the country as an oasis of peace surrounded by a violent Central America. In “Ínsula rarísima” he articulates the mystical origins of exceptionalism. The clichéd cultural landscape is traditionally designated as an island of peace that creates a sanctuary of rural democracy and a treasure of

biodiversity within a stable and homogeneous setting (250). Accordingly, the origins of these stereotypes are found in a series of mythical fictions that perpetuate the cultural domain.

Cortés actively subverts and demolishes symbols of nationhood in *Cruz de olvido*.

Central to this mission is the protagonist's position as a hesitant returnee to a homeland that he rejects through flight to Nicaragua. As Amador surveys the state of his homeland in the present day, he quickly decries his youthful naivety. Likening the past to an insubstantial myth, Amador is now poised to uncover a different side of Costa Rica as he searches for his son: "En verdad volvía a un país que solo existía en mi sueño melancólico y que había desaparecido durante mis diez años de ausencia" (31). Revealing illustrations of violence and corruption in the novel upend images of Costa Rica as an idyllic tropical destination.

The journey reflects a confrontation between the mythical Costa Rica of legend and a stark encounter with its neglected current condition: "No quería volver y enfrentarme al fracaso de no haber llenado de sentido aquel territorio" (17). The arrival in San José becomes an eye-opening journey that discredits facile visions of utopia. From Amador's perspective, the failure of revolution in Nicaragua further intensifies this bitter perspective. In frequent conversations with old friends, he emphasizes how the nation has fallen into disrepair and does not match the high expectations of outsiders or tourists: "Ya no éramos la arcadia agrícola de los guías turísticas" (18).

Return sets in motion the demolition of an Arcadian paradise. The atmosphere is one of disappointment and dread as the investigation uncovers a string of questionable characters and events that sully the nation's wholesome image. A late-night raid of seedy bars results in a roundup of homosexuals and transvestites. This action uncovers the hidden gay scene in the city and shows the discrimination of police in "una noche triste y larga" (278). The narration stresses

the intent by politicians of persecuting a marginalized sector of the city's population. For example, government officials try to cover up elements that challenge the city's image. The narrator's drunkenness clouds the impact of the scene, thus shrouding the event in mystery as the text obscures lines between fantasy, reality, and chronological events.

The return is in great part a sober demystification of a political and cultural mystique. Observations on the state of national affairs contribute to this attitude of derision and situate the trip as a discovery of the uninspiring revelatory nature of his homeland. The indication that nothing of significance has ever happened is a derisive interpretation of the failure of established national institutions to achieve equitable economic growth and cultural development. Although the protagonist harbors no sentiments of longing for Costa Rica while in exile and the return is unanticipated, his arrival stimulates a keen interest in the inner-workings of the nation. The revelation that the country is not an exception to the ravages that afflict the region is a product of Amador's transformed perspective. A newly dispirited point of view turns a scornful gaze towards the pillars of national identity. The frequent repetition of phrases such as "En esta ciudad de mierda nunca pasaba nada" underlines the sense of hopelessness that pervades his attitude (305).

The disappointments that Amador confronts are seemingly endless, culminating in a month of incessant tragedies. In April alone, the country becomes Latin America's leader in automobile accidents, has the most cases of gastric cancer in the world, and is noted for rising rates of money laundering and corruption (300). The state of affairs is equated with the magical realism found in the novels of Gabriel García Márquez as a sequence of tragedies intensifies sentiments of despair. The collapse of a landfill on the outskirts of town due to heavy rains is officially denied by politicians, who refute that the trash heap and the people that live in it even

exist. A report to the Procónsul summarizes the precarious state of affairs as his presidency reaches its turbulent end: “que las muertes de Alajuelita y las del Vampiro de Hatillo [. . .] la inflación [. . .] la robadera [. . .] la corrupción [. . .] esas cosas no gustan, Presidente [. . .] van a rodar más cabezas . . .” (382-83).

The case of the Maestro is a further example of the imperiled state of literature and its weak influence. Once a leading journalist and inspiration to a generation of aspiring writers including Amador, a quarrel with the Procónsul unceremoniously ends the Maestro’s career. The Maestro offers little hope for improving the standing of cultural pursuits through his admission that alcoholism is an all-consuming way of life in “Un país que no tiene palabra” (149). He is remembered for his blunt assessment of the three “C’s” of life in Costa Rica: “comer, coger, cagar” (260). To this graphic summary Amador, in a fit of rage both physical and emotional, revises the list of basic Costa Rican characteristics: “caídas, catarros y cagaderas” (260). Like the Maestro, the Procónsul exhibits a lifelong struggle against a trivial existence: “El Procónsul había luchado toda su vida contra las tres enfermedades costarrisibles: la pequeñez, el olvido y el alcoholismo” (58).

The fact that these divisive issues are “cosas invisibles y hasta secretas” reinforces the misunderstood relationship between myth and reality (403). A strong wind that sweeps through the landscape is a metaphor for Amador’s return as an inadvertent mission to discredit national mores. The wind uncovers centuries of ash and dust that conceal the degenerate nature of the city under a thin but inaccurate veneer: “un viento repentino que golpeó todas las puertas y ventanas y levantó el polvo que los siglos habían acumulado sobre la ciudad y la ceniza de todas las erupciones volcánicas con el ruido de ira desatada, de maldición que se cumple, de cólera profana, de ciclón sin salida” (403-04). With the myths of his youth and nation left in ruins,

Amador must face an uncertain future unrestrained by the tradition of exceptionalism. A major component of this quest is the literary search for meaning central to *Cruz de olvido* and Cortés' wider literary production.

### **Making a Central American Novel**

Return is more than a linear path from displacement to one's origins. In *Cruz de olvido* this process is related to literary expression and the role of narrative fiction. Like Amador's exploration of San José, the text employs literature in the quest for meaning, examining the relationship between Costa Rica and the outside world. In a work that stresses the dynamic role of literature as an indicator of social and cultural identity, the novel's central character is a nomadic figure disillusioned with his life and homeland. Amador's instability provides little solid footing from which to craft a sturdy accounting of national belonging and the merits of Costa Rican literature. The choice of a rootless protagonist to guide this interrogation reflects the practices and perspectives of displaced exiles and their places of origin. In *Cruz de olvido*, Amador's status as a disillusioned returnee is a key reference point for the questioning of society and its literary production.

Few authors demonstrate the preoccupation with literature that Cortés shows in his fictional and scholarly works. As a literary critic firmly committed to exploring the function of Costa Rican, Central American, and Latin American literature, Cortés writes extensively on the relationship between narrative production and the turbulent history of the region in recent decades. A central objective is questioning the place of local literature and its purpose: "¿Qué es novela costarricense? ¿Qué novela es o puede ser costarricense? ¿Qué novela costarricense es aceptada y reconocida como 'literatura nacional?'" (*Novela* 243). Like *Cruz de olvido*, these questions intently examine the function of narratives and their role in approximations of national

belonging. Fluidly moving between categories of genre and literary precedents, the novel is firmly committed to exploring the impact of novelistic production in both Costa Rica and Latin America. This is accomplished through a ludic and at times irreverent attitude towards cherished national traditions and sudden leaps between genres and narrative styles. Aspects of the historical novel, the testimonial, the dictatorial novel, and the bildungsroman are all present within the context of a search for origins. The disorderly combination disorients the reader and contributes to an atmosphere where no one can be trusted: “Cortés multiplies voices, manipulates analepsis and prolepsis, contradicts, and negates, all in order to create uncertainty about the events that unfold. Macabre moments jump to the forefront of the narrative only to fade away or be discredited” (Barbas-Rhoden “Corpses”).

In *Cruz de olvido*, Cortés parallels return with the renewal of the Spanish-American political novel in the turbulent decade of the 1990s. This period is a tumultuous search for literary expression and Cortés’ works emphasize political corruption, social decay, and the depressing aftermath of revolutionary movements (Corral 127). A precise explanation of the narrative style and categorization of Cortés’ novels is an elaborate task. These works “all deal with experiences that defy summary, since they happily swirl from police procedural to bildungsroman, from novel of manners to historical novel, from parody to love story” (Corral 131).

Through an assortment of stylistic elements that merge genres and targets of criticism, the act of forgetting is tied to return. Amador is flooded with memories that he would prefer to forget: “Ahora que recuerdo todo se me cruza, todo me persigue, como si no pudiera salir limpio aquella masa compacta de recuerdos” (13). The multifaceted act of simultaneous remembering and forgetting tragic events is an all-encompassing process not given to simplistic conclusions.

Like memory, history is an unpleasant experience comprised of an agonizing and largely fruitless undertaking. The journey is at its most basic level a frightful experience:

The journey is really a descent into Costa Rican hell, and during his subterranean passage through the “hidden” underworld of San José Amador meets his generational cohort: judges, politicians, and key figures in the world of communication. What they also have in common . . . is their deep disappointment at the loss of the revolutionary ideals . . . (Corral 127-28)

Amalia Chaverri asserts that remembering or alternatively forgetting the crimes of the past encapsulates a cathartic historical novel or “*novela histórica catártica*” (“*Cruz*” 37). Chaverri argues that the novel should be placed within the context of the new historical novel in Latin America. But in contrast to the commonly established definitions of the new historical novel, in which the author relates a distant past they have not personally experienced, in *Cruz de olvido* Cortés creates a universe with which he is intimately familiar (37). The central question of genre in the new historical novel is: ¿cómo tratar, dentro del género novela histórica, un texto que devela y denuncia un momento histórico del cual el escritor es testigo?” (“*Cruz*” 38). Chaverri offers a new categorization of the work as a historical novel with the added element of catharsis in the Central American context of the period.

An accounting of the elements of genre in the novel includes at least six separate classifications. The many instances of violence related in graphic detail are examples of the hard-boiled or detective genres in which an individual attempts to track down or bring to justice the perpetrators of a murder (“*Cruz*” 42). Repeated references to political exploitation and crooked politicians who subvert laws or engage in questionable dealings are reminiscent of the political novel, which seeks to expose and denounce widespread corruption. The novel may also be read as a psychological thriller that divulges the intimate emotional details of a protagonist struggling with an overwhelming sense of personal loss (“*Cruz*” 43). The mental anguish that Amador

suffers is revealed in the battle between attempting to remember a questionable series of events and alternatively demonstrating an inability to accurately reconstruct the crimes of the past. Finally, the novel is a meditation on the urban center of San José. This is in line with contemporary Central American fiction, which portrays the individual male protagonist as a solitary figure in a decrepit urban environment.<sup>34</sup> Martín Amador fits this description perfectly as a displaced and helpless individual in a sprawling capital city.

This array of classifications represents the diversity of the return experience and culminates in the “cathartic new historical novel” (Chaverri, “*Cruz*” 42). The text is classified as a historical novel due to the desire of Cortés to confront and demystify superficial stereotypes of Costa Rican culture in the real world setting of the 1990s. The presence of a crime at the center of the story and attempts to disentangle the intricate web of lies in the labyrinthian setting of San José becomes an expression of cathartic emotion aimed at the contemporary city and society. Catharsis is a purging of emotion or tension through artistic expression, and *Cruz de olvido* is a prime example of a contemporary novel that deals with the recent past and takes as its main objective the denunciation of national myths.

Chaverri is one of the few critics to mention the return of the protagonist as a key theme. Amador is portrayed as a despondent figure after ten years in Nicaragua: “Desde el ángulo de la subjetividad del personaje, es también el regreso de un antihéroe solitario, derrotado anímicamente, pues a partir de lo anterior se desata y revive la gran tragedia identitaria del personaje, su orfandad . . .” (Chaverri, “*Cruz*” 45). The return is similarly an encounter of the protagonist with his native San José and a frustrated investigation of a gruesome crime. The experience also demonstrates Amador’s weakness as a failed father, family member, and a

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<sup>34</sup> Castellanos Moya’s 2001 novel *El arma en el hombre* encapsulates themes of urbanity and isolation in postwar Central American fiction.

representation of San José itself (Chaverri, “*Cruz*” 48). Forgetting the past is itself a cathartic exploration of contemporary society. The ability to overlook criminality and failure ultimately results in an ominous worldview consumed by the inability to unravel the crime: “En forma cíclica, el cierre, luego de la macabra y esperpéntica narración . . . expresa poéticamente en el mensaje final la capacidad de olvido del costarricense como fenómeno colectivo . . .” (Chaverri, “*Cruz*” 50).

### **Conclusion**

The novel’s close offers few answers to the many issues that plague Amador throughout his frightful visit to San José. An uncertain future is marked by a lack of closure concerning his father’s existence and his mother’s declining mental health. Although the desire to leave for Mexico is a recurring theme, no concrete plans to establish a new career or begin a new life are evident. Uncomfortable memories blur with a present that is impossible to decipher, and in the process forgetting is left as the only form of dealing with disillusionment on a grand scale. Unchecked violence reigns in a confused atmosphere in which events are quickly erased from memory: “The only lingering image is of an inexplicable violence that people see and ignore, until they no longer know who they themselves are” (Barbas-Rhoden “Corpses”).

Yet the frustrating conclusion does not indicate that the return is without consequences. The quest is an ongoing rediscovery of self and nation from the perspective of a disenchanting returnee unfamiliar with the changes that occur during his absence. Amador’s arrival in the city of his youth underscores conflicts between exiles and their notions of self and nation from beyond national boundaries. The return opens a figurative Pandora’s box and the protagonist’s encounters with former friends and family members are a dispiriting introduction to a place he did not intend to see again. A visit to his family home morphs into a nightmarish scene in which

a senile mother is set against the surreal background of the house's unchecked flooding. As he slowly becomes aware of his father's fate and the lies he was told to conceal the truth, Amador's familial circumstances become a matter of survival: "El grupo formado por el padre ausente y la madre loca es una obsesión que el personaje debe exorcizar si desea sobrevivir" (Quesada Roman).

Besides reintroducing Amador to his family and the city he left behind, the return indicates an ongoing journey rather than the end of exile. In a series of movements throughout San José, his previous knowledge of home and self fade away and are replaced by contradictory images. The result of his investigation into his son's death is an unfulfilling conclusion. In discovering that Jaime is alive and was used as bait to lure his father into an international smuggling scheme, Amador's return devolves into a bitter tale of failure. The protagonist's search through the underworld of San José is a demonstration of a culture in decline and a man unable to come to terms with his role in a rapidly changing world: "indica un viaje del individuo para recuperar su origen. Es un recorrido para encontrar respuesta(s) a la interrogante inicial de ¿quién soy?" (Montero Rodríguez 69).

A key theme in *Cruz de olvido* is the polemical discussion of myths and traditions. A national identity based on the rise of rural coffee production in the Central Valley is largely credited with a stable democratic society during the second half of the twentieth century. Cortés' view of recent history differs greatly from the tradition of exceptionalism that symbolically separates the nation from its neighbors. The return details the ways an unrelenting wave of violence and corruption mute the nation's perceived homogeneity. Dynamiting of national identity takes place from the vantage point of return and Amador's perspective is an insightful view of the current failings of the nation. Anecdotes of depravity and vulnerability include the

Maestro's fading journalistic career, a series of natural disasters, and the indictment that nothing notable has ever occurred within national boundaries. Amador's return is an apocalyptic version of reality that overturns accepted notions of nationhood and belonging (Chaverri 50).

*Cruz de olvido* features a number of references to literature from Costa Rica and Latin America. The many writers and journalists that populate the novel express an intense interest in the role of literature and its place in society. The desire to create a Central American novel is of great interest to Cortés, and it is significant that a returning exile is the main protagonist in the work. Amador's position as a struggling journalist and his association with a range of fellow writers emphasizes the precarious state of literature. Through a wide-ranging collection of genres and stylistic techniques, Cortés pays homage to literary antecedents while at the same time questioning the feeble foundations of local literature. The objective of dynamiting national identity parallels the desire to construct a new and innovative literature. Amador's return and journey through San José is crucial to this process of reinvention of national perceptions firmly rooted in an innovative fusion of genres, narrative voices, and literary influences

### CHAPTER 3

#### “RETURN IS RENOVATION, NOT RESIGNATION”: STRUGGLE AND REAWAKENING IN *EL RETORNO DE LOS MAYAS* BY GASPAR PEDRO GONZÁLEZ

Gaspar Pedro González's 1998 novel *El retorno de los mayas* narrates the life of a Kanjobal Maya orphan during the height of armed violence in Guatemala in the 1980s and the peace agreements of the middle 1990s. The central theme is the repatriation of the protagonist after years of exile as he looks back on the personal losses and painful memories that define his existence. González's novel combines rich descriptions of Mayan language and culture with pertinent discussions of indigenous identity in the contemporary world.<sup>35</sup> For the orphan, return is an ongoing and open-ended process. The arrival home is a distressing reminder of the intractable issues affecting Guatemala in the context of a trying homecoming to a ravaged home and a confrontation with the loss of loved ones. This chapter argues that the protagonist's return is a vivid encounter with the devastation of civil war and ushers in a new era of optimism. As the orphan transitions from exile to resettlement in a home territory that he barely remembers, his desperation transforms into an ardent desire to reshape the position of the Maya in Guatemalan society.

*El retorno de los mayas* is narrated in the first-person voice of the nameless orphan and in each of the novel's three parts he explores a distinct period in his life. The first, titled “Bab’el Tuqan” in Kanjobal and “El éxodo de Yichkan” in Spanish, establishes the fragmented identity

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<sup>35</sup> The Maya are composed of 23 unique ethnic groups and mainly concentrated in Guatemala, Honduras, and southern Mexico. Of the roughly six million speakers of Mayan languages, nearly 80% belong to four major groups: K’iche’, Kaqchikel, Mam, and Q’echi’ (Warren 13).

of the protagonist and his lack of connection to community, family, and nation: “Yo vengo de allá. De un allá lejano y sin nombre. Yo tampoco tengo nombre: ni apellidos, ni papeles, ni identidad, ni patria, ni tierra, ni pueblo, ni familia, ni padres, ni hermanos” (1). The novel is an extensive recollection of his volatile childhood and the first two parts are narrated in the past tense as memories of a life troubled by trauma and alienation. He affirms his desire to speak for himself and his community when he states “Quiero esta vez hablar por mí mismo” and in the process contradicts outside voices from Ladinos, urban writers, and international scholars that minimize or ignore the presence of the Maya (2).

The narrator’s complete anonymity complicates the task of expressing his desires. In the absence of a name, he is referred to only as a *meb’ixh*, or orphan, and occupies the lowest place in the communal hierarchy: “Un *meb’ixh* no tiene la protección de nadie; es el último de todos los niños; ocupa el escalón más bajo del grupo de los desposeídos” (65). The lack of a family history or personal past makes the protagonist an archetypal figure that represents the Maya experience of return in the contemporary world.

Descriptions of the orphan’s childhood include extensive passages on customs and religious ceremonies intended to familiarize the reader with Maya cultural practices. For example, the memory of attending a protest march as a child leaves an indelible mark and is one of the *meb’ixh*’s first exposures to injustice. The disappearance of his brother and the brutal murder of his father are anguishing ordeals that motivate the remaining family members to flee the violence. Before leaving, the family members say goodbye to their deceased relatives in a series of prayers narrated in the original Kanjobal. The orphan’s mother alludes to the difficulty of the looming flight when she uses the uncommon phrasing “*ul walkan hintoj ayex*” (translated

as “Vengo a despedirme de ustedes”), which a person only utters when leaving without the possibility of return (18). As the family leaves their village, the area is consumed in flames and the brilliant blue hue of the sky contrasts with the destruction of a land rife with bloodshed and the stench of death.

The second part, “Skab’Tuqan” or “El tormento del exilio,” begins several years after the flight from Guatemala and discusses the orphan’s exile in Chiapas, Mexico. The narrator describes how the Maya have lost the essence of their culture as younger generations have drifted towards individualism with a profound indifference towards traditional beliefs.

Tales of torture and suffering are punctuated by nostalgia for home. The anguish following the murder of many members of the community and the dispersal of families is exacerbated by separation from sacred lands. This home territory holds important meanings for the exiled community and is considered the cradle of Maya civilization. The distance from this ancestral home produces an acute nostalgia for a past that contrasts with the oppression of exile. The misery of the refugee camp is a continual reminder to the orphan of his loss of culture. Mayas from different regions have forgotten their own languages, ceased traditional religious practices, and no longer speak of their history. Outside influences gradually replace local customs and the presence of television, radio, and even products such as beer and cigarettes are reasons that traditions have fallen into disuse. The orphan acknowledges that life was not without difficulties before the flight to Chiapas, but given the unrelenting solitude of exile, the unity of family and community is greatly missed: “En el caso de mi familia, antes de nuestra huida, aunque pobres de todas maneras, al menos estábamos unidos, completos en aquel ranchito de la aldea” (109). Even in these harsh conditions the orphan speaks prophetically of delivery from

exile: “Por eso en la mente de los refugiados no estaba ese aquí en forma permanente, sino se está aquí pensando en un allá de nuevo, con añoranzas y esperanzas de volver” (100-01).

The final part, “Ox Tuqan” or “El regreso,” explores the repatriation of the orphan to his ancestral land. His arrival is a conflicting event: although he dreamed of return for many years, reconciling visions of the past and the discord of the present is a challenge. He barely recognizes the place and his initial impression is one of confusion and conflict. The legacy of repression against the Maya parallels the unsteady implementation of peace. The narrator switches from the past tense to the present as he examines the contemporary status of his people and their outlook for the future. After first reviewing the long history of solitude and dispersal perpetrated throughout the centuries, his attention is drawn to the contemporary setting and the fight for cultural and social renewal. A noteworthy feature of the text, and the Maya movement in general, is a positive stance towards the future and the ability to contribute to the nation in a legitimate role. The third part details steps to ensure Maya participation in postwar Guatemala. To prevail against abuse and discrimination, the orphan takes on a role as a leader in his community. His efforts to promote peace are driven by a firm commitment to education and the renaissance of Maya cultural practices. The return to his ancestral Ixcán region is the genesis of a new life previously considered an intractable puzzle: “desde donde comienzo ahora a reconstruir los fragmentos del rompecabezas de mi vida, fragmentos que voy recolectando aquí y allá como restos de harapos de una vida . . .” (4).

The analysis that follows is divided into four sections and the first considers *Retorno* as a novel of return. Scholarship on the novel emphasizes its relation to the testimonial genre and the narrative and thematic techniques that influence modern indigenous fiction.<sup>36</sup> After reviewing

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<sup>36</sup> Natalie Grimm stresses the function of the novel as a “testimonial narrative that replays a collective nightmare for many contemporary Maya” (110).

these approaches, this section demonstrates the importance of return from the unique perspective of a Maya protagonist. Orality and the inclusion of the Mayan language in contemporary fiction are contributions to the understanding of Maya customs, yet the presence of these details also illuminates return and its role in the modern Guatemalan social and political landscape.

The protagonist's repatriation is a pivotal moment but the realization that a heritage of marginalization has not changed in his absence tempers his enthusiasm. The second discussion examines return as a divisive confrontation with lingering elements of Ladino domination. In place of a joyous homecoming, the return is initially described as a struggle to understand the frustrations and failures of society. By calling into question centuries of injustice, the *meb'ixh* must contend with the continuation of pervasive resistance to societal change. The knowledge that the road ahead will be long and difficult affects his outlook. The period following return is a time of strife that reorients the *meb'ixh* to the challenges to justice that must be conquered to create a more equal society.

In the third analysis sentiments of despair are redirected towards a Maya cultural awakening that emphasizes Maya history, language use, education, and political participation.<sup>37</sup> Despite tremendous hardships, the protagonist is firmly committed to reestablishing his way of life in his local community. Emboldened by the experience gained in exile and the achievement of surviving the trip home, the *meb'ixh* begins to articulate his stance. Central to this quest is the integration of Maya culture in this rapidly changing era. Consequently, the novel is a response to the question of what it means to be Maya from the perspective of a long-displaced returnee. Several specific themes emerge on indigenous culture and its dynamic role in the periods of

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<sup>37</sup> Classical pre-Columbian Maya culture is commonly associated with features such as hieroglyphic writing, advanced knowledge of astronomy, and a highly complex religious structure based on universal cycles of birth and death (Coe 13).

return and the postwar era. Issues of naming, orphanhood, blame, and the dynamic impact of dreams and colors are central to the *meb'ixh*'s readjustment. Each of these topics provides insight into the intersection of return, cultural practices, and marginalization for exiles making their way back to territorial lands.

The fourth and final section explores the orphan's second return. After coming back to the Ixcán region, the protagonist reunites with a sister he assumed had died years earlier. As the two become reacquainted, they share a common desire to travel to their rural home community. The journey to their origins is at once a recollection of the past and a stirring factor in the program of renewal the *meb'ixh* promotes. In the process of reacquainting himself with his sister and viewing his home territory for the first time in decades, a spirit of renewal energizes his attitude towards the future. As he speaks Kanjobal for the first time in many years and compels his community to embrace their traditions, he establishes a firm commitment to the future of the Maya people.

### ***El retorno de los mayas as a Novel of Return***

Scholarly approaches to the works of González differ in their categorizations of genre and purpose. His 1992 novel *La otra cara* is a milestone in the growing field of Maya literature and is a best seller within Guatemala and as a survey of Maya cultural norms among academics in the United States. Along with *Retorno*, *La otra cara* is an important contribution to a genre that follows the success of the testimonial and merges lived experience and fiction. This section analyzes *Retorno* as a novel of return and proposes that repatriation is a crucial aspect of the Maya cultural emergence during the postwar period.

In *Retorno*, the *meb'ixh* begins his account with a short preamble introducing what he will share with the reader. In a series of frank statements, he explains that he will not be

discussing the features of Maya culture one would expect. Topics such as art, legends, history, natural beauty, and local traditions are relegated to the background as the text gives primacy to a personal vision of the past: “Debo hablar de lo que he visto, de lo que he vivido y de lo que me han hecho para que quede constancia, para que quede memoria de ello” (2). Through these words, he emphasizes his own voice as a tool to rewrite a history dominated by hostile or ignorant outsiders. More than simply a recounting of memories, his writing parallels the collective action of legitimizing indigenous perspectives and defying Ladino viewpoints. The K’iche’ Maya scholar Emilio del Valle Escalante views this attitude as a step towards narrative authority and as part of an effort to counteract dominant Ladino positions: “los pueblos indígenas quieren contar sus propias historias, narrar sus versiones de la realidad, ofrecer soluciones a sus problemas y en sus propios términos discursivos” (“Batallas” 18).

To this end, the narrator asserts the veracity of his saga, even describing his life as a testimonial that is true to the past and unclouded by extraneous material or biased accounts: “La historia de mi vida no es ficción. Es testimonio de una realidad, de una verdad viviente como la de otros miles de hermanos míos . . .” (5). In addition to proclaiming the accuracy of his vision, his words foreshadow a continuing theme. The character’s displacement is an apt description of the struggles of the Maya people during the years of armed conflict. The perspective of an indigenous author and protagonist is an evocative counterbalance to Ladino attitudes.

The relationship between the testimonial and *Retorno* is a prominent point of discussion among critics.<sup>38</sup> Ana Patricia Rodríguez labels *Retorno* as a “post-testimonio testimonial novel”

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<sup>38</sup> Like the *meb'ixh*, John Beverley’s study of the testimonial highlights the tendency of the genre to challenge the status quo: “Su punto de vista es desde abajo. A veces su producción obedece a fines políticos muy precisos. Pero aun cuando no tiene una intención política explicita, su naturaleza como genero siempre implica un reto al statu quo de una sociedad dada” (9).

and contradicts the narrator's mission of revealing the truth (110). Far from the stated desire to tell a true story, the *meb'ixh*'s admittedly incomplete memory and fragmented past are hallmarks of the controversial commitment to veracity in the genre. Rodríguez situates the novel as a fictional representation of a testimonial in which distortions of past events are the results of distress rather than flaws that diminish the value of the text. The post-*testimonio* novel is a “fictional evidence written under the duress of extreme trauma” and touches on diverse issues affecting contemporary indigenous communities such as impunity, trauma, memory, and violence (128). Rodríguez suggests that the orphan's return from exile is the cure for decades of trauma and loss. It is only when he reconnects with his familial and cultural roots that healing can begin, and the trauma of the past is overcome with a new outlook (115).

Michael Millar also reads *Retorno* in terms of its structural similarity to the testimonial. Although the testimonial is traditionally based on first-person accounts either told directly to the reader or interpreted by an interlocutor, the *meb'ixh* is based on González's experience working with young Guatemalan refugees in Mexican camps in the 1980s (Millar). The narrator's tale is an empowering act that defies the traditional invisibility of the Maya, and he achieves a newfound power by recounting his experiences. In writing his life story, he creates “un espacio literario dentro del cual puede expresar su historia y la importancia de compartirla” (Millar). The novel is both a dynamic defense of Maya cultural values and a record of local traditions. It also expresses an overlooked history and the importance of sharing it with the outside world.

The transformation of Maya activism coincides with the repatriation of the Maya in the 1990s. Despite the torment of exile, Millar stresses the experience as one of learning and adjustment that opens indigenous leaders to new forms of social mobilization. A gradual outcome of this sentiment was the collective movement from provincial tribalism to a more

inclusive attitude unified by a common desire for return (Millar). Rather than focusing solely on cultural elements or the narrative relation to testimonial literature, *Retorno* is a novel of return that reveals the complex convergence of indigenous life, models of identity, and cultural resistance to Ladino dominance among returnees in the postwar period.

The testimonial genre incorporates a range of approaches and the critic Hana Muzika Kahn cites orality as a key aspect of what she terms the post-colonial testimonial novel. By including examples of Kanjobal and a keen attention to the details of local traditions, González incorporates cultural elements in a hybrid novelistic genre. Different from previous generations of literature that only present the Maya as stock characters or superficial beings, in this new approach culture, orality, and indigenous language use are all potent models for the reformulation of Maya identity (117). Kahn's analysis centers on *La otra cara*, but in both this work and *Retorno*, the appearance of the post-colonial testimonial novel expands classifications of genre. In each novel the respective protagonist embodies the Maya people and the many refugees who return to Guatemala. The *meb'ixh's* memories of loss reflect the contemporary Maya experience and his repatriation calls for a revamped model of indigenous culture and social participation. As Kahn argues, this objective is accomplished through orality and the narration of cultural events, daily life, religious ceremonies, and direct speech between characters in Spanish and Kanjobal (124). In both of González's novels, the protagonist rises from humble origins to speak for the Maya people as an agent of change in the community and nation (122).

While critics stress the relationship between testimonial literature and recent indigenous fiction, Escalante studies the connections between genre and return in Maya literature. After indicating the prevalence of return as a theme in Latin America literature, Escalante references the many ways in which homecomings are portrayed in indigenous fiction and poetry. His

conclusion that a return to one's origins is a decolonial action disputes traditional power structures and prioritizes Maya voices in literature and society.<sup>39</sup>

Deconstructing generations of marginalization at the hands of a dominant Ladino class is a central concern of indigenous authors seeking to overturn a stifling colonial heritage. Whether seen as a reflection on the ancestral past, an attempt to stir distant memories, or the awakening of a forgotten culture, termed “recorridos imaginarios hacia el pasado” take on many forms (“Viaje” 352). This description of Maya literature as an imaginary voyage to the past reflects *Retorno*'s emphasis on return as a journey of awakening. For González and the writers of his generation, writing is a way of rising above the colonial order and rewriting the legacy of the Maya.<sup>40</sup>

Return in contemporary Maya fiction includes a multitude of motivations and meanings. In the poetry of the K'iche' Maya author Humberto Ak'bal return is a trip through the past that inspects the continuum between ancestral origins and modern-day issues (“Viaje” 352). As a challenge to the status quo, this fiction questions the foundations of Ladino society that rejects indigenous perspectives. Return is an important guidepost for reevaluating the value of Maya culture in the present day and overturning centuries of marginalization. As Escalante explains, the return is packed with symbolic meaning “para recuperar elementos que sirvan para dignificar no sólo ese pasado ancestral, sino también buscar la manera de reivindicar a un pueblo que por siglos ha vivido una experiencia colonial” (“Viaje” 353).

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<sup>39</sup> According to Escalante, the decolonial process involves the affirmation of a subjugated culture through the outright denial of dominant cultural norms and anti-capitalist resistance (“Viaje” 369).

<sup>40</sup> Other leading authors of Maya literature include Enrique Sam Colop, Leopoldo Tzián, and Maya Cu Choc.

This analysis makes special mention of the role of the mother figure. As a powerful metaphor for Maya culture, these maternal protagonists are symbols of loss and redemption. Mothers also display a commitment to tradition and the desire to conserve local worldviews. In *Retorno*, the *meb'ixh*'s mother fulfills this role as a bastion of traditional customs and practices. The death of his mother during the journey into exile is a pivotal moment indicative of the tenuous connection to the past that the orphan must rebuild. Although the *meb'ixh*'s life is a struggle to overcome a nomadic existence and the uncertainty that it entails, his mother is a devoted archetype of Maya language and culture. All communication between the *meb'ixh* and his mother takes place in Kanjobal and her prayers of deliverance upon leaving for exile are spoken in her native language instead of Spanish (16).

The mother is a unifying symbol of the agony of loss and the hope for resurgence. The maternal presence evokes images of the distant Maya past and a culture that is in peril of disappearing. Escalante signals the multiple meanings of the mother including orality, the depth of local tradition, a keen focus on history, resistance to outside influence, and an intimate connection to nature (“Viaje” 368). The following section discusses return as a painful encounter with an altered homeland. Like the torment the *meb'ixh* experiences due to the loss of his mother, the arrival in Guatemala is an initially overwhelming reintroduction to the past and the work that must be done to overcome prejudice and the disappearance of Maya traditions.

### **Return as Struggle and Confrontation**

The first two parts of *Retorno* narrate the orphan's plight as he witnesses the death of his family and flees his territory. As the third part opens, the protagonist completes the journey back to Ixcán region. Although he will eventually devote the next phase of his life to a social and cultural renaissance, his first impression of the homeland reinforces the enormity of the task

ahead. A number of obstacles temper his enthusiasm as he views the destruction of his ancestral homeland. The return brings into focus a narrow sense of national unity, discrimination against indigenous groups, the failures of the peace accords, and a legacy of violence. For the *meb'ixh* and the greater community of Maya repatriates, the journey is a struggle with issues of belonging and cultural agency stretching from the era of conquest to the present day. González suggests that in the face of conflict and strife, the Maya must endure hardship to establish a cultural resurgence.

Resistance is a subtle yet dynamic element in the return of the *meb'ixh* and his evolving attitude towards his homeland. As he sets foot in Guatemala after years of exile, he pivots from mourning his personal past to understanding what has taken place during his absence. As his life comes full circle, the narrator's attention is first focused on making sense of his inner thoughts and emotions. Still suffering the exhausting distress of war, trauma clouds his thoughts. Citing the Ixcán as the starting point of his existence, the orphan is obsessed with unraveling the tangled roots of memory: “Quiero poner en orden mis pensamientos, mis sentimientos y las experiencias para tratar de encontrar el sentido y las explicaciones de muchas cosas que ocurrieron en mi vida y en la de este pueblo. En maya se dice *txol, txolq'in*, por ejemplo, ordenamiento del tiempo” (127).

Caught between pureblooded Mayas and Spaniards, Ladinos since the colonial period have rejected any hint of mixed ancestry and in turn have sought to destroy links to a shared past. The insecurity of the Ladino worldview reflects these attitudes: “causándoles una profunda angustia de soledad y vacío en su existencia, a tal grado que ello motivó la planificación del exterminio de la imagen maya que se lleva en sí mismo, como queriendo borrar un testimonio vivo que no se desea reconocer” (128). The *meb'ixh* expresses this inferiority in specific terms

through his personal experiences of rejection and loss. The racial component of the recently ended civil war is especially emphasized. The narrator makes special mention of the scorched earth policy of the army as they raided rural villages and committed atrocities against the Maya population (129).

The *meb'ixh* decries his invisibility in contemporary Ladino society as he views his homeland for the first time in many years: “Los mayas que tienen su propia historia, que tienen su cultura, que tienen su identidad, no entran en el esquema ni la escala de valoración de los gobernantes, ni les permiten el acceso a los mayas a compartir el poder económico y político” (136). With the arrival of peace, the orphan asserts his desire that division between dominant and subordinate cultures will give way to a more equitable relationship. However, the failure of peace to bring about real change and the absence of Maya political presence dampens his momentary optimism.

The return is encapsulated as a confrontation with a society that perpetuates inequality. Before cultural renewal can begin, the narrator must express his deep dissatisfaction. Speaking to the reader through the mocking voice of a stereotypical Ladino, the orphan specifies the resistance he faces as modern-day Mayas are systematically differentiated from those of the ancient past: “Nada de mayas, eso no, los antiguos mayas que fueron científicos, astrólogos, artistas, matemáticos, arquitectos, hace tiempo que desaparecieron de la tierra. Ahora ya no hay mayas, lo único que queda son un montón de indios iletrados que nada tienen que ver con la antigua civilización maya . . .” (139). Informed by his painful memories, the return is a motivating factor in achieving a more united Guatemala that does not divide its populations based on ethnicity or class. As he explains, national unity will only arrive when distinctions between Ladinos and Mayas are put aside in order to create an impartial society. Intolerance,

impunity, political privilege, and noncompliance with the rule of law are all issues that must be resolved to reverse endemic struggles (131-32).

In *Retorno*, the narrator voices the discouragement of Maya repatriates in the face of an inchoate democracy hesitant to include non-Ladino influences. The arrival home sparks feelings of nostalgia, but the *meb'ixh*'s initial response is a harsh rebuttal of the peace process and its uneven impact. The discriminatory tactics of negotiators and a legacy of passivity overshadow opportunities to establish a presence on the national stage. As the agreement reaches its final stages, the results are unimpressive to the newly arrived narrator. In a biting critique, he questions the lack of a Maya voice in dialogues between the government and rebel forces. The assertion that the Maya are once again excluded from the political stage affirms the argument that return and resettlement are arduous tasks rife with conflict. Peace is designated as solely a Ladino product, insensitive to and dismissive of the needs of the indigenous community. The grave condition of his community consumes the *meb'ixh* while politicians, generals, and business leaders finalize negotiations: "Mientras tanto, yo con mi montón de muertos. Mi montón de viudas, cementerios clandestinos que van apareciendo, huérfanos que se van multiplicando, desplazados, exiliados, lisiados, enfermos, tristes y desamparados" (134). In surveying the wreckage of mass graves and broken families, the orphan's dejection reinforces the struggles of the Maya in the spheres of political involvement and social belonging.

The *meb'ixh*'s return parallels the progress of peace in that both the journey home and the accords come after long periods of struggle. For the protagonist, peace is eagerly anticipated as a sign of change but is also a damning indictment of deeply rooted inequality. The accords reflect this situation as a "paz de papel" that does not effectively implement social change or dismantle barriers to political participation (142). In contrast, the true peace that the *meb'ixh* proposes is

inclusive of all segments of Guatemalan life and is defined by significant societal alterations. The difference between a one-sided reconciliation and a more inclusive solution involves addressing the abuses of recent history. As the narrator asserts, real progress does not come from written documents, but from an earnest effort to learn from and confront the past. A peace tinged with the bloodshed of war is untenable: “ésa que vi en tantos cadáveres durante mi huida, esa paz de los cementerios clandestinos, como producto del silencio y la mordaza al hombre que no reclama sus derechos, esa paz que hace más pobre el espíritu, no. La paz que busco es aquella resultante de la convivencia en respeto, armonía, unidad” (146). A firm commitment to change implies confrontation in place of reconciliation and passivity. By fighting the ingrained stereotype of the Maya as weak and reliant on Ladinos, the *meb'ixh* declares a break from tradition and a new beginning for indigenous activity. He sarcastically mocks the ways in which his people are asked to forget prejudice in the name of reconciliation: “¡Qué fácil! Se me pide ahora olvidar el pasado en nombre de una reconciliación en donde siempre salgo perdiendo” (147). Making amends with Ladino forces is a losing battle for the Maya, and the protagonist shows an unwillingness to succumb to Ladino domination in the postwar era.

After discussing Guatemala's legacy of violence and discrimination, the narrator concentrates on his return to Ixcán. The journey was not motivated by pressure from the government or promises of federal assistance, but instead grew from a common yearning to reclaim a homeland. He cautions Ladinos that the territory is his rightful home and carries great historical and religious importance. Consequently, the voyage is the product of a desire to break with an oppressive history and to construct a peaceful and progressive community. Thus, return is an act of defiance to counteract stereotypes and build a self-sufficient community: “es porque creo que sólo aquí en el país puedo iniciar una vida diferente de paz, de progreso, de libertad e

igualdad que la voy a construir exigiendo el cumplimiento de mis derechos como ser humano y como grupo que busca su propia identidad de pueblo” (142-43). In this quest, the narrator makes special mention of martyrs who have battled against oppression in the region. By invoking the legacies of Monseñor Oscar Romero, Manuel Saquic Vásquez, Myrna Mack, and others who died opposing oppressive regimes, the narrator links the struggle of the Maya to a wider history of resistance and sacrifice. United in spirit with these martyrs by a stubborn defiance of injustice, the *meb'ixh* emphasizes the importance of coming together to restore the cultural heritage of his ancestors and a unique identity based on resistance: “Creemos que somos un gran pueblo unido que puede retornar a lo suyo, a lo que nos legaron nuestros ancestros y a nuestros valores, reconquistar nuestra verdadera identidad, basada en la resistencia hacia las imposiciones” (153).

As a final reflection on the scars of the past, the *meb'ixh* briefly recounts the physical journey from exile to Ixcán. The narrator is reminded that as his group arrived in Guatemala and neared the capital, they were instructed to travel via a remote mountain path to avoid contact with the city. Told that their presence would be a source of embarrassment to urban residents, the community leaders resisted and were eventually allowed to follow their predetermined route (153). The anecdote indicates the continued Ladino reluctance to acknowledge the indigenous population. It also speaks to the resiliency of Maya leadership to resist the arbitrary decisions of Ladino leaders and forge a new path. The next section examines the cultural impact of the return and the ways in which repatriation contributes to a spirit of awakening.

### **Towards Awakening: What does it mean to be Maya?**

The previous discussion examined the conflictive nature of return and the ongoing struggle against prejudice during the implementation of peace agreements. Throughout this readjustment, the protagonist must reckon with his uncertain identity and its association with an

ever-developing notion of what it means to be Maya. Returning to a physical and spiritual homeland left in shambles, the *meb'ixh*'s introspection on his personal meaning personifies the search for respect. The turn from confrontation to awakening is a central aim of the Maya movement. A series of reappearing cultural elements in *Retorno* highlights the plight of the returnee who must battle to stimulate an emergent culture. The *meb'ixh*'s arrival in Ixcán crystallizes aspects of the Maya experience including names, orphanhood, blame, dreams, and colors as examples of the divisive nature of Maya existence in the immediate postwar period.

The Maya movement confronts the long tradition of imbalance between Ladinos and Mayas. One of the most important aspects of González's fiction is the fact that a Maya author can express his cultural and literary vision as a Kanjobal and Spanish-speaking intellectual firsthand. González speaks openly about the differences between Ladino and Maya viewpoints:

La cultura es el modo de pensar, el modo de sentir, el modo de creer y el modo de ser de un grupo humano en determinado lugar en determinada época. Los mayas tienen su historia de miles de años forjada en esta parte del mundo. Y su modo de pensar propio. Su modo de sentir, de creer y ser son propios. El otro grupo que surge, se crea en el vacío. No tiene historia. No tiene una base ecológica, una base filosófica ni una base ideológica propia. (Sitler "Entrevista")

In González's view, no ideological barrier stands between the ancestral past and the modern-day Maya. A goal of the Maya movement is to unite the achievements of the pre-Columbian society with its modern descendants. On the subject of Ladino values, he adds: "Están desconectados con su tierra. Han perdido ese 'cordón umbilical' de unión con la tierra que es básica para la cultura" (Sitler "Entrevista"). Flight due to the horrors of war shatters the special bond between the Maya and their territory and repatriation represents the reconnection of the Maya to their homeland.

Once the physical return is completed, the protagonist turns his attention to the revival of his community. The revitalization of a distinctly Maya way of life is an outgrowth of the

orphan's attitude towards the future and the defense of traditions against the ongoing Ladino threat (Sitler "Entrevista"). The return of refugees from foreign lands and internal displacement was a key component of peace negotiations.<sup>41</sup> Although the contributions of returnees are often overlooked, indigenous returnees to Guatemala had an appreciable impact on the course of events: "The means by which they negotiated their return had an impact on the form of the subsequent peace agreement. Thus the refugees should be viewed not as objects of charity, but as agents of change" (Jamal 6).

As agents of change rather than humble refugees, Mayas took an active role in formulating postwar cultural and social adaptations. Arturo Arias defines Maya cultural agency as a method of denoting the changes in power between competing entities. Cultural agency "has often been used to denote concrete processes dealing with the reconfiguration of cultural spaces that enable subjects, often peripheral or subaltern, to empower themselves" ("The Maya Movement" 1). Agency is thus closely linked to the exploration of marginalized subjects and how they legitimize themselves in the public arena through a wide range of applications (1).

The relationship between cultural agency and awakening is a prominent feature of *Retorno*. The selected cultural aspects of the novel (names, orphanhood, blame, dreams, and colors) indicate the delicate balance between basic survival and regeneration. Analogous to the ongoing goals of the Maya movement, these elements are a battleground on which identity is constructed and continually transformed.

The first symbol of cultural agency is the usage of names. A name is a marker of belonging, but in *Retorno* the protagonist's anonymity insinuates a hollow existence. "Names

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<sup>41</sup> The first returnees arrived in Guatemala in 1992 as talks between representatives and government officials progressed. Military control of the rural population was a cause of great concern as returnees feared continued high levels of violence. These worries were confirmed when eleven returnees were massacred on October 5, 1995 by military forces in Xamán (Riess 14).

and naming mean power,” cites Arias in his discussion of the protagonists of González’s novels that either lack names or refuse Hispanicized labels (“Kotz’ib” 20). Accordingly, by using Maya names for cities, people, and religious customs, the author prioritizes the values of the indigenous world.<sup>42</sup> A name is a marker of belonging that signifies uniqueness and a sense of communal belonging. Although he demonstrates a firm commitment to rebuilding his community, the *meb’ixh*’s inability to define himself with a true name accentuates the muted presence of the Maya. His birth name, “*Lajun Kixkab’*,” or “Diez Terremoto,” is a distant memory usurped by Ladino prejudice: “Según la tradición, en realidad, éste debió ser mi nombre, pero a causa de este proceso que hemos sufrido, trajeron nuevos nombres de santos y fue parte de lo que nos impusieron” (27). Called “Juan” by Ladinos, this Spanish name is nothing more than a generic placeholder devoid of meaning. He plainly rejects his Hispanicized name as shameful and artificial: “Yo no tengo nombre. Él que llevo también es un nombre postizo, genérico, el nombre de los que se quedan sin nombre propio, de los que ya no alcanzan nombre” (155).

The carefully constructed use of names in *Retorno* reflects the contentious dynamics at play between indigenous and Ladino cultures. The term “Maya” has undergone much change in meaning in recent decades. Until recent efforts to revive indigenous culture, the expression was mainly used by foreign scholars such as anthropologists and archaeologists to refer to the ancient civilization that flourished in the pre-Columbian era in Mesoamerica (Montejo *Renaissance* 71). In contrast is the highly pejorative term *indio*, which implies the inferiority assigned to indigenous populations by Spaniards during the eras of conquest and colonization (Montejo *Renaissance* 2). To be indigenous is to be unknown and to exist outside the rights and customs

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<sup>42</sup> Luin, the principal character in González’s novel *La otra cara*, rejects the Hispanicized name “Pedro Miguel” arbitrarily bestowed on him by Ladinos (*Cara* 106).

afforded to society. Like the practice of sharply dividing ancient romanticized civilizations from the modern-day Maya, an *indio* is symbolically separated from all aspects of a rich Maya cultural heritage.

This double-namelessness, without either a personal name or an appropriate communal identification, is a void that does not retain any remnants of a distinctive history: “el nombre que llevamos es como un vacío; no llena nuestras necesidades de identidad, porque no conocemos su origen, la historia, ni el significado de nuestros nombres” (28). The inability to draw cultural or religious significance from a name mirrors the disintegrated state of Maya cultural practices and their marginalized status. The relegation of Maya speakers by the majority Spanish-speaking population is a major betrayal of Maya heritage in an unequal relationship. Repatriation encourages the *meb'ixh* to question the imbalance between Maya and Ladino traditions and to challenge the status quo. Rather than referring to himself with his given Hispanic name, he instead prefers to be anonymous in defiance of the dominant culture.

The use of Spanish for the names of towns, roads, and public places is also intensely contested. Speaking in a hypothetical Ladino voice, the narrator demonstrates the intransigence towards the use of Maya-language names:

Nada de nombres mayas en este país, mejor a los lugares, calles, pueblos y nombres comerciales pongámosles nombres extranjeros, en idiomas hegemónicos, no en dialectos indios porque nos da vergüenza utilizarlos: qué deshonra, qué vergüenza para nosotros ponerle la calle *Cikumba*, o la avenida Tulum o el parque *Toninha*. (140)

The shame associated with the designation of public places indicates the commonplace attitudes that the Maya movement seeks to overturn. Repatriation is always a complex experience of remembrance and readjustment and the *meb'ixh* must navigate a society in which the presence of Maya names signifies inferiority.

The *meb'ixh*'s lack of a unique name is not his only marker of isolation. His condition is best described as an orphan, a fugitive, and a solitary figure that frequently laments his itinerant existence. Resettlement further complicates his rootless life. The *meb'ixh* faces a paradoxical mission: a search for his own meaning in an unfamiliar landscape complicates his unwavering commitment to a Maya cultural renaissance. Even returning is undertaken anonymously as traces of the orphan's family have been wiped out: "Regresamos sin averiguar mi nombre original, sin encontrar a un lejano pariente, sin encontrar rastros de nosotros ni los restos de nuestros antepasados muertos. De nuevo nos vamos a confundir con otros seres anónimos en esas comunidades modelos en donde se pierde la identidad..." (162). The unsettled nature of the protagonist disconnected from his name, family, community, or links to a lost culture illustrates the pressing fear of permanent disappearance.

The death of the orphan's mother cements his spiritual separation from familial origins. She dies from sickness and exhaustion as she flees in a frantic flight north and her passing signals a moment of complete abandonment: "sino aquella otra orfandad del espíritu en la que se siente y se describe el más absoluto abandono y la solitaria soledad" (63). The text treats the death of the mother as a form of return from a unique Maya point of view. The mother's passing is a definitive, final journey in line with the Maya concept of death as a spiritual return to the religious homeland: "Ese regreso es un retorno hacia alguna parte en forma definitiva, retornar es irse de aquí para siempre '*paxi*', que no tiene vuelta, no tiene cambio, no venir otra vez, lo contrario a un irme pero regreso, *hoquin paxoq*" (63). As the narrator laments his solitude, the devastating loss of his mother severs connections to a forgotten homeland.

Seclusion is not limited to the absence of a given name or the forced flight to Mexico. While these themes stress the position of the character as a representative of the Maya

community, his vulnerability is a key aspect of the return. In a novel featuring Maya cultural agency, it is striking that González chooses a lowly *meb'ixh* to evoke an identity that must be rebuilt from the ground up.

An existential solitude that mirrors the experience of Maya returnees manifests the protagonist's profound loneliness. Memories of the orphan's mother illustrate a double solitude, in which he feels abandoned by his family and any semblance of his identity as a Maya (8). His seclusion is not merely biological but also includes spiritual connotations, and he compares his inner self to a desert with no hope of rescue. Looking back on his first experiences of violence, he is unable to distinguish his enemies nor their motivations: “no comprendía los motivos de nuestra persecución, ni quiénes eran nuestros enemigos, ni por qué eran nuestros enemigos, ni cuáles eran nuestras culpas ante ellos” (38-39).

Reminders of loneliness appear frequently in the orphan's daily life. The importance of maize as a spiritual symbol and the inability to harvest in exile evokes a rudderless path towards death: “sin nuestra madre maíz somos como seres abandonados en un abismo, con dirección hacia la muerte” (50). The lack of maize is not the only effect of exile. While living in refugee camps in Chiapas, the narrator notes that the collective identity of the Maya has disintegrated into nothingness and the exiles have become “ensimismadas, espíritus apocados, taciturnas, desconfiadas, defensivas, sin hambre, sin sueño, sin ilusiones . . .” (94).

Upon arriving in Ixcán, the *meb'ixh* is consumed by memories of the past and correlates these remembrances with his longstanding abandonment. An encounter with the familiar landmarks including trees, well-worn paths, and mountains is a painful sight. As he shouts into the chasm of the mountains he is reminded of his fragmented youth and empty life in exile: “pero sólo los ecos de mis angustias me contestan, como provenientes desde la lejanía de mi niñez

donde quedaron extraviadas” (64). Despite returning to their lands, the Maya are a people without purpose and fundamentally separated from their spiritual connection with the territory: “Éramos como rebaño sin pastor, como hijos sin padres, porque no teníamos un *ajtxum* que nos guiara” (112).

In addition to the *meb'ixh*'s lack of self-determination, he must also bear the brunt of blame for the past. Forced into a life defined by loss, he compares his existence to that of the waves of the sea, constantly coming and going with no permanent place to call home. Threatening waves symbolize his life and especially the return to Guatemala: “Otra ola desconocida e invisible del destino, la ola impersonal que me ha arrojado hasta esta playa en donde tendré que buscar una parte más segura para no naufragar” (137). The image of an indifferent sea tossing a helpless individual is an apt comparison for the recent Maya social and political situation. Added to this sense of powerlessness is the devastating suggestion that the Maya are to blame not only for their suffering but for all the nation's ills.

The text prominently describes the misfortunate existence of the *meb'ixh* as an anonymous member of a persecuted indigenous community. Although it is logical to assign responsibility for these myriad struggles to outside forces such as the armed forces, leftist rebels, or the centuries-long history of inequality, the Maya are designated as responsible for the legacy of violence and underdevelopment afflicting Guatemala. In this view, it is easy to place the blame in the hands of the disadvantaged class: “Es fácil echarle la culpa a aquél que no puede hablar, al considerado último en la escala social, al que siempre se le ha despojado...” (138). As an easy scapegoat, the Maya are even asked to beg forgiveness for the strife of the past. The *meb'ixh*'s reaction to this situation is a stunning disbelief of his guilt. As a member of the population that was dispersed and suffered tremendous casualties, the idea of forgiveness is a

difficult concept to square with the abuses of his experience. Returning reveals the immense injustices that pervade society and blame is an easy method of sidestepping the root causes of discord.

To expose the reader to the Ladino train of thought concerning the role of the Maya, the text demonstrates the culpability that indigenous populations experience: “Siempre un prófugo, ya que me consideran el culpable de todo esto que ha ocurrido. Yo que soy ese ser ignorante excluido del sistema que planifica y elabora los procesos y los sistemas: un indio, analfabeto, pobre. Yo soy quien carga con la culpa de una ideología que provocó la guerra ...” (137).

Through the eyes of the Ladino community, the *meb'ixh* and his people are to blame for the troubles that plague the nation. As a scapegoat, the Maya are discriminated against for their difference of race and ethnicity in addition to their low social standing and lack of education. Similar to the portrayal of indigenous characters as facile background material in literary works or as the powerless *indios* recruited into subordinate positions by revolutionaries, opinions of Maya inferiority are still persistently held. The repatriated protagonist of *Retorno* must grapple with his personal challenges of anonymity and isolation but must also shoulder the unjust blame for national shortcomings. The essence of being Maya is denigrated as a sin that disturbs the natural order of society: “llevo el sello del pecado original de ser indio, de ser maya y de estorbar los planes de los que no me quieren” (53).

While naming, orphanhood, and blame are features of the mutable presence of the Maya, dreams and colors are striking cultural elements tied to the angst of displacement and return. In *Retorno*, literary imagery illustrates exile and return through vivid illustrations of dreams and

colors. These allusions are a fitting portrayal of the trauma of return and its significance in the Maya religious context.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout the text, frequent reference is made to return as an awakening from a long dream. This dream echoes the sentiments of solitude and pain present during exile and epitomizes the shift in attitude between the past and present: “Ahora despierto como de un sueño largo, tan largo que se prolonga a más de veinte años atrás. Una noche tenebrosa, llena de pesadillas y sobresaltos, de nubes negras y aires fríos” (127). For a returnee initially unfamiliar with the lands that he was forced to flee, the return is an experience of individual awakening in a very real sense.

Dreams are a rich illusory reference to the traumatic past and the start of a new cycle of hope. Horrible nightmares portray disjointed memories of a forgotten youth. At the same time, exile is compared to the freedom experienced in visions of access to ancestral territories. The harsh realities of a stalled peace process contrast with visions of a better Guatemala. Due to their rich symbolic importance in Maya religion, the protagonist relates fantastic dreams that contrast sharply with a humbling life of constant flight. For example, with the assistance of his *k'exel*, or spiritual namesake, he travels to faraway lands: “Había algunos señores de cabellos blancos que me visitaban en mi sueño y que me llevaban a lugares maravillosos” (17). But dreams are not just an ethereal escape from the tortured existence of exile. These visions parallel the resettlement of the Maya and cultural awakening similarly signals the end of the nightmares of the past.

A rich variety of allusions to colors and religious elements reinforce repatriation as a symbolic renaissance. As an exile, the *meb'ixh*'s dreams are transformed into agonizing

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<sup>43</sup> According to Maya legend, the arrival of the Spanish in Mesoamerica was prophesized by fateful premonitions and nightmares. Dreams may also portend death or coming violence through visions of animals such as wolves, owls, foxes, or “mysterious balls of fire rolling in the sky” (Montejo *Voices* 46-48).

memories rendered only in black and white: “No pude nunca soñar a colores: siempre fue en blanco y negro” (6). A more tangible example of the rudimentary lifestyle in exile is the dearth of colorful materials used to make traditional Maya dress. The narrator explains that the vivid images of Maya life and culture depicted in clothing can no longer be produced: “los pájaros, venados, abejas, peces, colibríes, flores, follajes, vegetaciones y lianas dibujados y esculpidos sobre la ropa que llevábamos sobre el cuerpo anteriormente, eran la réplica de un mundo interior lleno de alegría y lleno de colorido igual que la vida que hay en la naturaleza” (106). Images of native flora and fauna typify an interior world and remind the narrator of a peaceful home. The disappearance of these symbols demonstrates the dreary and unforgiving existence of exiles. In *Retorno*, the colorless world of nightmares gives way to a rebirth of Maya heritage as a result of the narrator’s return to a nearly forgotten homeland. Like rising from a dream, repatriation is an extensive progression of reviving a vulnerable culture and promoting a new cycle of inclusion.

### **Beyond Return: The Journey to Origins**

The long road from exile to return does not end when the protagonist sets foot in Guatemala. Repatriation uniquely informs the *meb'ixh*'s resistance to Ladino dominance and the push for an indigenous renaissance. The transition from a rootless identity to a project of social participation is an ongoing task. After arriving in his territory, one final journey remains. Consumed by the desire to visit the isolated village of his birth, this second return is a formative experience in leading the Maya toward a new position of legitimacy. By meeting his long-lost sister, relearning his native language, and contemplating the steps he will take to become a community leader, the narrator establishes a firm commitment to his family and community.

The future is an omnipresent aspect of return in the novel. Beyond the *meb'ixh*'s personal history and struggle to survive, his presence in the Ixcán region opens a new era of optimism.

Accordingly, the novels of González and the corpus of recent literature by Maya authors place a great deal of emphasis on the position of the Maya in the near future. In place of a simple denunciation of Ladinos and the atrocities they committed, González and his peers look towards the future (Millar). Arias compares contemporary Maya literature to the “critical excavation of clandestine cemeteries” and this metaphor succinctly expresses the mission of concurrently addressing the wrongs of the past while demonstrating a keen interest in promoting dialogue and development (“Kotz’ib” 23).

In great part, this attitude has its origins in the role of the Maya over the past five decades as participants in Guatemala’s armed conflict. During the war, Marxist revolutionary groups consisting of Ladinos claimed a position of leadership in resisting the right-wing policies and escalating violence of government forces. As a result, the Maya were viewed as subservient participants and little more than “cannon-fodder” in an inferior position to that of Ladino revolutionaries (“The Maya Movement” 3). However, Maya participants in the conflict viewed the situation differently. Instead of merely supporting Ladino forces, these individuals saw their involvement as an act of agency that eventually set the stage for the Maya movement and the drive for greater equality.

Beyond the stated goals of the revolutionary movement, indigenous participants quietly voiced hidden motivations for fighting as “La conspiración dentro de la conspiración” (“The Maya Movement” 3). As a result, modern Maya perspectives on the war and its aftermath display a positivity surprisingly disassociated with the ominous memories of recent history. Like the intention of González and his peers to narrate Maya life without the interference of Ladino intermediaries, the indigenous account of the war portrays the Maya not as helpless victims, but as a group determined to forge a new future from the ashes of the past. Not content with the

legacy of an oppressive status, contemporary Maya intellectuals, authors, political leaders, and community organizers are instrumental in reshaping the position of the Maya in society.<sup>44</sup>

The sanguine approach to postwar life promoted by leaders of the Maya movement is paralleled in the *meb'ixh*'s journey to Pananlaq, the isolated community of his birth. As the narrator travels to his origins, his long-lost sister accompanies him. The unexpected visit is a symbolically important way of bringing a vicious cycle of flight, exile, and suffering to a close. During a chance meeting with a woman named María Aguirre, the two initially have difficulty communicating in Kanjobal and the revelation that she is the protagonist's sister comes as an unexpected shock. As the *meb'ixh* explains, his return is a bewildering reintroduction to a language and culture abandoned years earlier. Although he mentions speaking with the spirits of the dead in Kanjobal, his mastery of the language diminished greatly during exile.

María's identity is directly tied to the circumstances of her name. After the death of her parents, she was arbitrarily assigned the name by disinterested Ladinos: "Me pusieron el primer nombre que se les ocurrió, como María es tan común, eso me pusieron" (155). The shared anonymity of the two siblings binds them together as they seek to rebuild their lives. As the two begin their journey, they are motivated by a desire to return to their roots and reaffirm an identity beleaguered by the fragmentation of exile. The *meb'ixh* makes clear his desire to confront arduous memories by reconnecting with the physical remnants of shattered past. By coming back to a homeland only maintained in disjointed memories, he seeks to "reafirmar también nuestra personalidad que se fue construyendo en puntos indeterminados a lo largo de nuestras vidas" (157).

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<sup>44</sup> For example, in 1993 Alfredo Tay Tocooy was named minister of education and became Guatemala's first Maya cabinet member (Arias "The Maya Movement" 259).

When the siblings finally arrive in their birthplace, the contrast between nebulous memories and the reality of the present is jarring. The impressions of Pananlaq are disorienting and reflect the harsh realities of resettlement. Unorganized groups have usurped lands and are unwilling to move, diverse communities of different languages are intermixed, and a divergence of cultures, religions, and political sentiments threaten Maya cohesion. Illustrated as a hostile society lacking any sense of solidarity, the intimidating atmosphere is depicted by a pervasive “mirada hostil hacia el desconocido” (159). It is this attitude of resignation that the protagonist must overcome to preserve his heritage and create new political and social opportunities. The *meb'ixh* is insistent in facing the divisive issues that impede his future plans. Even his sister is taken aback by his resolute persistence in confronting the situation: “Mi hermana mira con cierta duda y desconfianza mi terquedad e insistencia por hurgar aquel lugar ajeno a nosotros ya, aquel lugar en donde busco todo y nada a la vez, como quien anda frente a una gran tienda con la vista perdida sin saber lo que está buscando” (159). The admission of simultaneously seeking everything and nothing indicates the ambiguous background and tenuous future of the Maya.

The contrast between youthful memories and the altered state of the village in the modern day leaves a lasting impression. The return sparks a bittersweet nostalgia of imprecise visions: “iban apareciendo los manuscritos originales de mi largo sueño de niño, pero incompletos, tachados, con múltiples borrones, con espacios vacíos, con asteriscos sobresalientes de cosas nuevas y con ausencia de fragmentos borrados” (160). During the visit to Pananlaq the narrator’s youth surfaces as a long dream that is unable to recall the past in sharp images. Instead of dwelling on the discontinuous nature of his youth, the decision to continue struggling to create a more just future is symptomatic of the optimism of the Maya movement. The arduous experiences that shape his life are a worn parchment “carcomido por la amnesia de tiempo” and

squaring this incomplete memory with the turbulent progress of postwar society is an ongoing endeavor (160). At times unsure that he is even in the right village, the distance of exile blurs the *meb'ixh*'s image of home and his place within it.

After coming face to face with an unfamiliar home and a sibling that he has difficulty communicating with, the discussion of the trip to Pananlaq segues into a far-reaching strategy for revitalizing the community. Instead of lingering on the pain of exile, a comprehensive and forward-thinking plan emerges. Once again, names are a key facet of this transition and the decision to change the names of local towns from Spanish to their original indigenous forms signals a renewed emphasis on combatting Ladino dominance. Other measures such as choosing new local leaders, opening schools, teaching Mayan languages, and reseeded fields that laid dormant during the war are all proactive steps intended to establish the Maya as a self-sufficient group. The narrator's description of the first harvest epitomizes the resurgent community and its ability to overcome the scars of the past. The harvest is illustrated as a festive scene that, like the return, is an awakening from a long dream: "como los sonos de marimba que nos ubican de nuevo con su melodía en medio de nuestro contexto como el despertar de este prolongado sueño" (154).

Hard work and education are the pillars of the *meb'ixh*'s strategy of resurgence. Like a return that gives way to new beginnings, the development of Maya identity and cultural agency surges from the ashes of the past: "Entre el rescoldo del pasado surgirá, lo aseguro, un futuro próspero" (163). In looking back on his suffering, the *meb'ixh* suggests that although the destruction of the past cannot be forgotten, the final result is an innovative program of cultural recovery and belonging: "El camino de un calvario que les he narrado, tuvo un final en muchos

muertos que ya no volverán, pero su sangre ha fertilizado las tierras de Yichkan para que den frutos de paz y prosperidad” (163).

The narrator’s goals coincide with the efforts of the Maya movement to rewrite Guatemalan history to include the contributions of indigenous groups while also promoting an increased national presence. The dual missions of simultaneously looking back and planning for the future are a complex task and returning to the essence of what it means to be Maya is at the heart of the *meb’ixh*’s repatriation. He strives to convince the outside world that the Maya have not ceased to exist. Coming back to his ancestral territory and rekindling a threatened culture lays the foundation for renewal: “Esta vez también volvemos a lo nuestro, volveremos a lo maya como el ciervo retorna al manantial a beber el líquido que lo conforta y lo anima” (164). In his closing words, an enduring faith in humanity is a sign of the potential for a more just future: “Prefiero creer que el hombre no es del todo malo, dañino ni cruel. Prefiero mantener esta llama de fe en la humanidad” (167).

### **Conclusion**

In the preface to *Retorno*, Susan Giersbach Rascón writes that the orphan’s return to Guatemala “nos parece imposible pero a la vez inevitable; es un retorno físico, espiritual, cultural, político y literario” (iii). Returns invoke a myriad of responses and in González’s novel the journey to Guatemala juxtaposes the pain of the past with the ardent desire to create a new future. It is a significant achievement that in *Retorno* an indigenous author relates the events of his life without a Ladino intermediary. Repatriation spurs new hopes of a promising future for Guatemala and the Maya in the rapidly changing environment of peace negotiations and the end of armed conflict.

Although the publication of *Retorno* follows the prime popularity of the testimonial, the influence of this genre is clear. As the novel opens, the narrator confirms the veracity of the text based on personal experience and a past obscured by others: “Y mi testimonio es la verdad, una verdad negada por otros” (2). González’s fiction has been ascribed variously as a post-testimonial novel, a “testinovela,” and a fictional representation of the author’s own life. But as a novel of return, the *meb’ixh*’s journey melds the Mayan language, allusions to dreams, colors, and names, and the theme of orality into a fictional testimonial novel. The testimonial technique permits the author to voice his frustrations with the failures of peace and discrimination against the Maya in a familiar literary form. Yet the novelistic form of the narrative also allows a certain freedom to create without the constraining limits of veracity that the testimonial invites.

As he views the ravaged landscape, the orphan must come to terms with the loss of his family, the destruction of his ancestral territory, and the decline of his culture. The driving force of hope counterbalances these sentiments of frustration. With the goal of achieving a social and cultural transformation, the *meb’ixh* shares his personal narrative to “expresar una demanda de justicia social, un grito literario en nombre de todos los que sufrieron la violencia, la huida, el exilio y la muerte descritos en sus páginas” (Millar).

González’s literary production reflects the aims of the Maya movement and seeks to unite a Maya community loosely associated by a common history. The movement is devoted to cultural revitalization through initiatives focused on a greater role for indigenous cultural expression. The study of Maya culture is a key aspect of the program. In a strong break with past attempts to define the Maya and their way of life by biased Ladinos or foreigners, for the first time Maya scholars and writers address the outside world to subvert traditional assumptions: “Their goal is clear: to undermine the authoritativeness of non-Maya, or *kaxlan*, accounts—be

they Guatemalan Ladinos or foreigners—which, until the recent indigenous activism and resistance surfaces, monopolized the representation of Maya culture and national history” (Warren 37).

The *meb'ixh*'s return informs a wider understanding of Maya cultural agency and the struggles that the indigenous community faces in the postwar period. Names invoke important symbolic meanings and the protagonist's lack of a specific name identifies him as an anonymous member of an overlooked group. In addition to his anonymity, the *meb'ixh* is an orphan whose family has died in the violence of war and the flight to Mexico. Upon his return to Guatemala, the orphan must reckon with a palpable isolation from his community and heritage.

Blame cast on the Maya community by Ladinos complicates the reestablishment of refugees. Responsibility for poverty, endemic violence, and the nation's shortcomings is placed on the Maya. In response, the protagonist stresses the importance of education and work as tools to overcome decades of discrimination. Similarly, dreams and colors illuminate the *meb'ixh*'s return in vibrant descriptions. After the long nightmare of exile, the *meb'ixh*'s journey is an awakening that leaves behind painful memories lacking bright colors or the verdant landscape of his Guatemalan homeland.

The protagonist's perspective on his life transforms into a newfound energy to create a vibrant future for the Maya. A key facet of the *meb'ixh*'s return is the physical and spiritual journey from desperation to hope. As he surveys his native lands and begins a program of renewal defined by hard work and education, it is clear that the return to Guatemala enlightens the orphan's worldview and galvanizes his work towards creating a more hopeful future.

## CHAPTER 4

### “UNA MIRADA FEMENINA SOBRE LA HISTORIA”: EXILE AND RETURN IN *CON PASIÓN ABSOLUTA* BY CAROL ZARDETTO

In Carol Zardetto’s 2005 novel *Con pasión absoluta*, return is an awakening to a long-ignored past that links Guatemalan history, an unknown family background, and an unanchored personal identity. The author’s real-life experiences are the basis of a fictional narration that explores the exile and return of a female protagonist. The polyphonic narration weaves family histories through personal asides and haunting memories of exile. An overpowering sense of insecurity defines the life of Irene Ferrara, the novel’s protagonist, and the return is a pivotal event in her discovery of self and nation.

The exploration of history is an important outcome of the journey home and sheds new light on the overlooked role of women in Guatemala.<sup>45</sup> Zardetto highlights the relation between feminism and history in the novel: “mi novela arroja una mirada femenina sobre la Historia. Eso también fue fundamental para las mujeres, que parecían excluidas de la tragedia que hemos vivido” (Fernández Hall “Carol”). Exploring the past is an important theme in the struggles of women in the nation. It is insightful that “Historia” is capitalized and refers to the sweeping passages of time and defining moments that exclude the contributions of women. By framing the

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<sup>45</sup> Zamora Sauma Rocío highlights the connections between history and collective memory in the novel: “Realiza una escenificación de los procesos de entrecruzamiento colectivo de la memoria y de la percepción, elemento que nos muestra la dificultad de plantear la memoria como ‘adecuación’ entre lo que recordamos y lo que ‘realmente’ sucedió” (“Terra”).

novel as a tragedy, Zardetto affirms the act of writing as an important step in discovering and reshaping the past.<sup>46</sup>

*Con pasión absoluta* begins with Irene's return after a lengthy period of exile. The imminent death of her grandmother, Victoria, is the sole motivating factor. As the novel merges the lives of the Ferraras with national history, a long string of abusive male figures subjugates the women of the family. As landholders, coffee plantation owners, drunkards, and womanizers, these husbands and lovers are symbols of power and wealth that their female counterparts must resist to survive. Ángel Ferrara, the father of Irene and her brother, Turín, sends his children into exile as the nation descends into civil war in the decade of the 1960s. In a life described as "desaforada e impredecible" by his daughter, Ferrara represents the authoritative and overbearing male figures that Irene and her family must resist (332).

Irene's return ignites an interest in her family and the national past of Guatemala comes to life in a range of narrations. The nineteenth century is presented through the memories of Mama Juana, Irene's great-great grandmother. The death of her husband leads Juana to resettle in the isolated town of Barberena, and it is only through her hard work and determination that the family survives. The story of Amparo, Juana's daughter and later the mother of Victoria, takes place at the dawn of the twentieth century during the rise of the coffee industry. Her life is set against the impending power of coffee growers who buy large tracts of land and take advantage of cheap indigenous labor to produce coffee for export and profit. The importance of the coffee industry occurs within the context of the brutal repression and government interference required to keep large segments of the population in check as planters become increasingly wealthy. As

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<sup>46</sup> Zardetto signals the power of historical consciousness to convert passivity to action: "Cuando el individuo desarrolla una conciencia 'histórica' deja de ser un sujeto pasivo de las circunstancias" (Fernández Hall "Carol").

Irene learns more about the background of her ailing grandmother, Victoria's life is interspersed with segments detailing the process of coffee cultivation and the tyrannical rule of dictator Jorge Ubico in the 1930s and 40s. With a prominent coffee exporter as her father and a mother that is relegated to the domain of the household, Victoria fades to the background as a symbol of how women are disparaged.

Irene's arrival brings to light the lives of Juana, Amparo, Victoria, and other distant family members. The shocking marriage of Victoria's daughter Ibis to an unnamed mulatto shows the unpredictable behavior of the women of the Ferrara family. Irene's exile in Vancouver is preceded by her initial flight to Los Angeles, California as a child. As Irene gradually learns the fate of her family within the context of the tumultuous Guatemala of the past two centuries, her life contrasts with a vast background: "Tantas historias y sin embargo nunca supe infinidad de cosas. Las historias están llenas de agujeros" (135). Irene's return is an awakening to issues of personal identity that include gender roles and her uncertain place in contemporary Guatemala. She learns of the atrocities committed during the civil war while reading a copy of *Guatemala: nunca más* in exile. Similarly, she explores the struggles of women in a patriarchal society through the tales of her mother and grandmother and experiences the violence of the present first hand as an innocent bystander in a drive-by shooting in Guatemala City. By the end of the novel, Irene's fate is unclear and the enormity of her newfound knowledge weighs heavily. She succinctly summarizes her life as an ever-evolving and incomplete process that mirrors the instability of return: "Como quien espía por una rendija un panorama que queda, sin remedio, incompleto" (135).

The first section of this chapter proposes that the sensations of the tropics that greet Irene have a tremendous impact on her journey of discovery. As the novel's plot oscillates from return

to memories of exile, the narration viscerally depicts the environment and its influence on Irene's emotional state. Her response to the tropics sparks a search for meaning that is in great contrast to the dreary atmosphere of exile in Vancouver.

In a similar vein, the second section discusses the role of eroticism. In the literature produced by Central American female writers in recent decades, the erotic takes on special meaning as a method of subverting traditional gender roles and calling into question established social norms of patriarchal societies. During Irene's return, erotic themes are a key facet of the struggle to make sense of a chaotic personal life.

The third discussion analyzes return from the perspective of travel writing. As a literary genre, travel writing is notoriously difficult to define given the expansive range of themes, points of view, and approaches to exile and displacement. Especially notable is the persistent interplay between fiction and reality as travel accounts are remembered and transcribed. In *Con pasión absoluta*, Irene's identity is defined in large part by her lack of a firm individuality: from her broken family life to her exile, trips throughout Latin America, and eventual return, travel is an ever-present facet of her emergent sense of self. When viewed as a traveler, Irene's outlook on her displacement and journey home take on new meaning. As the narration merges accounts of the Ferrara family set against the background of Guatemala, Irene's travel places her in a unique position as both an insider familiar with home and as a visitor perceiving her return through the lens of exile. Irene is uniquely situated to demonstrate the intersections of travel, gender, exile, and the consequences of return.

The final section studies the function of life writing in the novel. Like travel writing, texts that incorporate notions of the self are as varied as they are commonplace. For female authors such as Zardetto, life writing is a valuable tool to express personal experiences of displacement

ignored in other literary fields. Noted for the use of non-traditional sources and techniques, the genre integrates varied source material such as diaries, oral histories, and an assortment of texts of varied degrees of formality. As Zardetto brings her experiences to life through the fictional world of the Ferrara family, life writing informs the impact of return and its long-term ramifications through the eyes of a fictional female protagonist.

Parallels between Zardetto's life and the novel's protagonist are unmistakable. A lawyer by training, Zardetto worked as a vice minister of education and for the Guatemalan General Consul in Vancouver from 1997 to 2000 before returning to Guatemala and dedicating herself to literature full time. Zardetto's arrival in Guatemala produced a sudden interest in the memories of her youth and the histories of her family. As she describes her recollection of becoming soaked during a rainstorm while standing in the *Avenida de La Reforma*, the aroma of the tropics sparks a special interest in her origins: "Había vivido mucho tiempo fuera de Guatemala, y ese olor me despertó memorias, sobre todo de la infancia, y esa necesidad de comprender a esa Guatemala con la que me vine a encontrar" (Mauricio Martínez).

*Con pasión absoluta* is her first novel and a valuable contribution to the emerging field of Central American fiction written by women. In Zardetto's words, "...existe una transformación poderosa que sucede cuando la mujer hace la transición de 'objeto de la literatura' a sujeto que narra el mundo por medio de la palabra" ("Literatura femenina"). For Zardetto, and in turn Irene, writing is a crucial factor in the adjustment to the contemporary landscape. Transforming emotions into the written word awakens a newfound empowerment. In the case of Irene, this process involves a discovery of familial roots and an inward examination of her status as a returnee and woman in a male-dominated world.

### **The Return to the Tropics**

One of the most striking aspects of *Con pasión absoluta* is the sensation of the tropics. From the first pages of the novel, these physical and emotional perceptions are an integral facet of return. Far from the gray climate of Vancouver, the return to Guatemala is an immersion into a vibrant environment that awakens an instinctive sensorial response: “Estoy sumergida en Guatemala. La siento. La oigo, la veo, la huelo desde esta clara liquidez. No opongo límites, su carne elemental hecha de volcán y de agua es la medicina que abre la puerta de mi libertad. Dejo de pensar, de sentir, ¡oh, alivio!” (142). Through a lyrical and highly poetic literary style, the narrator’s descriptions awaken dormant memories that contrast Vancouver with the vibrant ambiance of Guatemala. Zardetto’s remarks on Central American literature correspond to these visceral descriptions: “Creo que la literatura centroamericana es muy fresca. Somos países intensos, volcánicos y crudos” (Fernández Hall “Carol”). This view of an incipient literature set against the intensity of an explosive volcanic landscape is an apt summary of the robust sensorial experience of return in the novel.

Returns after long periods of armed conflict are a defining element of Central America in recent decades. In Guatemala alone, over ten percent of the total population was displaced by civil war in the 1980s (Jonas *Centaurs* 28). In both Guatemala and El Salvador, the decade of the 1990s witnessed the gradual close of war with the signing of peace agreements. Resembling the circumstances of displacement and return found in *Con pasión absoluta*, Beth and Steve Cagan investigate the repatriation of a Salvadoran community in the early 1990s in their study *This Promised Land, El Salvador*. For the many refugees—some displaced for nearly a decade in the inadequate conditions of Honduran refugee camps—the eventual voyage back to their native Morazán Department was an indication of the desire to become an active participant in communal life. The return was also a poignant reminder of the positive effects that exile often

entails. The shift from helpless nomads to proactive exiles determined to establish themselves is evident in the accounts of the community: “By their own description, they had arrived as frightened, illiterate, backward, and miserable refugees; now they were prepared to return as trained, self-confident, experienced cooperators” (Cagan and Cagan 114-15). For this refugee group, the homecoming was an exciting declaration of agency and showed the potential to participate actively in the struggle for a better life.

After completing the journey, one of the first acts of the community was to gather local fruits for everyone to eat. Children were sent into the nearby fields to buy bananas, oranges, or pick mangoes in what the authors describe as “an almost inconceivable burden of symbolic meaning” (Cagan and Cagan 140). In addition to the rediscovery of desired fruits that were in short supply and sorely missed during the years of exile, the produce also embodied the regaining of individual rights and the freedom to make independent choices rather than simply accept supplies from outsiders. As the authors of the study conclude, “Little wonder that for the next few weeks, until the season ended, the community went a little crazy in what one ex-refugee later called ‘the euphoria of the oranges’” (Cagan and Cagan 141).

Just as the bananas, oranges, and mangoes provided a taste of home in both a literal and figurative sense, in *Con pasión absoluta* Irene’s arrival is an encounter with the sensuous tropical atmosphere forgotten after years of exile in the depressing Canadian climate. But in contrast to the Morazán refugees, Irene’s return does not immediately signify a revitalized self-sufficiency. Instead, the sumptuous imagery of Guatemala sparks a fresh interrogation into an obscure past.

Through lyrical illustrations of the sights and sensations of home, Irene must face her growing isolation and the unsettled history of her family. Irene goes to great lengths to contrast the sensorial differences between Vancouver and her native country. From a window seat on the

flight home, the view of a volcano suggests a sudden change of ambiance: “Los volcanes fue lo primero que vi, esa madrugada desde la ventanilla empañada del avión” (13). As a symbol of majestic beauty with connotations of danger and unease, the glimpse of the volcano is a precursor to the sensory overload that occurs when Irene finally sees her home. From the moment of arrival, the text focuses on these sensations and the struggle to comprehend the Guatemala of her youth. From the window of a taxi, she observes a busy city street that is a marker of how different her surroundings are from the Guatemala she remembers. Overcrowded and dirty, full of advertisements in English, bright lights, and pedestrians wearing vividly colored clothing, the drive from the airport into town is a rude welcome to the hectic pace of life in Guatemala City: “El bullicio, el movimiento, el tráfico agobiante, marean. Polvo y humo entran en convivencia. Forman una nube difusa que no deja respirar” (26).

Like the fluid process of awakening, Irene’s interpretation of the tropical environment is at times contradictory. Even as she comments in astonishment at the rundown appearance of her neighborhood, the remark that “No recordaba lo hermoso de este paisaje” affirms an affinity for the pleasing physical aspect of the land (51). Like the polyphonic narrative technique and weaving of the themes of family and history, in *Con pasión absoluta* the return to the tropics is a conflicting experience. Visions merge as the text vacillates between the radiant imagery and the worn-down state of modern city. Upon viewing her home for the first time in many years, Irene states “Se confunden los tiempos, las visiones” (44). Irene’s youth is intertwined with her family’s past and contemporary postwar Guatemala in frequent alternations of time and space. In her eyes, time is a fluid and mysterious concept that is obscured by her unanchored life as an exile and returnee: “El tiempo es inmediato y vertiginoso y desconocido. Las historias son hilos de tiempo que quieren tejerse y destejerse. Tejerse y destejerse, en la infinita espera” (224).

While Irene tends to her grandmother during her final days, a steady stream of memories of the many influential female members of the family come flooding back. Arriving at the hair salon managed by her aunts and mother for many years, Irene is disheartened to discover that the building is now abandoned. In contrast to memories of her aunt Ibis as extravagant and deceitful, Irene fondly remembers her grandmother Victoria. Like the sensations of the tropics that illuminate Irene's return, memories of her grandmother's fantastic tales inform the Guatemala of the past. Colorful stories of mythological Guatemalan figures such as La Llorona, El Cadejo, La Ciguanaba, and El Sombrerón recall the close relationship between Victoria and her granddaughter: "Pasaba horas escuchándola y ella, con infinita paciencia, repetía una y otra vez los vericuetos y senderos que me sabía de memoria. Caminos de un mundo perdido que traían su vertiente a mi mar" (20). While Victoria was a formative influence for Irene, her imminent death is the close of a cycle. As a strong influence in her grandchildren's lives, Victoria's passing ruptures Irene's ties to the past and leads her to reevaluate her conceptions of her personal identity within recent Guatemalan history. Her grandmother's statement that legends such as La Llorona do not appear in the present day due to modern technology such as electric lights reflects her dissatisfaction: "Ahora, todo es al revés . . ." (21).

The family home is a specific example of remembrance in which the smell of cooking food brings to mind the grandmother's work in the kitchen and her subordinate status in the household: "El reino *benigno* de las mujeres es la cocina" (23). Irene comments that her grandmother's presence contributes to her recollections of the past and to the ambiance of the home: "Ahora que llego, su presencia transforma la casa y la atmósfera se vuelve densa" (25-26). Physical descriptions emphasize the house's dated appearance and awaken Irene's senses. The extensive account of a sudden downpour changes the tone of the house: "En cuanto viene la

lluvia, la casa cambia de tono” (32). The home resembles the nation when both are described as “agobiante” and contributes to Irene’s discomfort with her return and the memories it arouses (139).

In contrast to the vivid descriptions and memories of Guatemala, Vancouver is at first remembered as a blank slate to be quickly forgotten. However, upon her return to Guatemala City, Irene’s memories of exile slowly evolve. The response to return transforms Vancouver from a shadowy, obscure location to an important sensorial aspect of Irene’s life. These reflections depict Vancouver in lyrical, flowing language: “Yo tenía casa en Vancouver, metida en las montañas infinitamente verdes. En los días azules, las águilas dibujaban círculos en el cielo mientras el viento resbalaba la palma de su mano sobre la suavidad de las laderas que se abrían a la caricia” (363). By the final pages of the novel, the preoccupation with contemporary Guatemala is a primary concern but it is clear that exile has profoundly shaped Irene’s worldview. Her statement that “Vancouver . . . es ya sólo recuerdo” is not to be taken at its word since the interrogation is uniquely informed by her displacement and awakening from afar (365). As opposed to the lush, sensory overload of Guatemala, memories of Vancouver are summoned by spontaneous thoughts: “Aún hoy, cuando camino por sus veredas con los pasos de la memoria, algo me abraza. ¿Será el aire lleno de olores? Pino, tierra húmeda, moho. ¿O esa llamada a ver pasar el tiempo mientras miro correr el agua?” (365). Even after returning, Irene’s past remains an important facet of her identity as an exile. When she states that an ambiguous and mysterious sensation embraces her, it is apparent that the passage of time has not diminished her memories of a prolonged physical and psychological distance.

Like Irene, Zardetto describes the importance of sensory experience as the novel’s raw material:

Regresar a Guatemala “a la fuerza”, como yo me lo planteaba en aquel entonces, fue entrar en un embudo. La contracción produjo una explosión interna muy poderosa. Un factor importante en este proceso fue el trópico. Los colores, olores, la tibieza del ambiente fueron despertando una memoria aletargada que me llevaba de la mano a la infancia y, por ende, al encuentro con Guatemala. (Fernández Hall “Carol”)

For both the author and the protagonist, exile is a distancing from a previous life. Zardetto notes the expanding of her frontiers while in Canada, and Irene’s return is also an ongoing process of discovery of her familial roots and developing personal identity.

As part of her ongoing development of a fragmented sense of self, Irene is exposed to lyrical descriptions of her family history. For example, Ibis narrates the struggles of her family in the years before Irene’s birth as they journeyed through the countryside in search of work. Along with her mother Victoria and her sisters Aurora and Nena, Ibis must cross a river while traveling. Her description of the ordeal includes sensuous naked bodies that reveal glimmering skin and tanned muscles (71). Ibis’ recollections of the river paint a vivid picture of the early morning: “Esos árboles sucedáneos llenos de pájaros, el viento perfumado con el salitre . . . irrumpen en la placidez del horizonte lineal y quieto” (77). Ibis’ lyrical account demonstrates her mother’s ability to lead her family without the support of a strong husband or dominant male figure. But in addition to serving as a role model for her children and grandchildren, Irene remembers Victoria primarily for the physical and symbolic significance of her body. Like the sumptuous descriptions of the physical environment, the corporeal presence of her grandmother is notable: “mi abuela era, para mí, su cuerpo, ese lugar de refugio repartido en sus piernas, sus brazos, su pecho, esa calidez de su respiración cerca de mis orejas, ese resuello en la noche que me mantenía tranquila, pero sobre todo esas manos que estaban por todas partes, haciendo comida, lavando trapos, doblando ropa . . .” (354). Victoria’s presence stands out as an anchor in a constantly changing world. Her aura of stubborn perseverance is one of the few models of

certainty in Irene's life. Set against her granddaughter's transitory life and ephemeral search for love, Victoria is an unflappable paragon of steadfastness and in the words of Irene, "Poniendo en orden el caos" (354).

Irene expresses disappointment with the dilapidated state of Guatemala City and a deep dissatisfaction with the lack of progress of postwar society: "Todo estaba sucio, decadente, como si un enorme sufrimiento hubiese impregnado las paredes, los pisos, la taza del inodoro, la cocina" (307). At the same time, lavish natural beauty links the return to a tumultuous personal past: "El paisaje me recoge con su tibieza que se levanta del suelo como un susurro. Se convierte en la única voz que escucho. Es una puerta, es un camino, un secreto que habla del amor. Y yo me abro, como las flores, como las hojas, como las alas blancas" (145). The return to Guatemala inspires Irene's profound personal awakening and the tropical sensations of Guatemala are a crucial factor in this process. The local terrain is a passageway to a previously unknown era with hidden histories and enigmatic notions of love and passion.

While the return ignites thoughts of an overlooked home, it also juxtaposes the natural beauty of the tropics with the endemic issues affecting the nation. The Guatemala of the present has little in common with the initially seductive portrayals: "Guatemala es asfixiante y cruda como la más exasperante de las pesadillas. Un universo sin alas, un paraíso cercenado y sangrante, el halito maloliente de todas las miserias y todas las desesperanzas" (261). The following section explores lyrical and sensual language as a tool to delve into this contradiction of beauty and a pessimistic attitude toward the future of Guatemala.

### **Eroticism, Gender, and Awakening**

Like the lush tropical climate, the theme of eroticism also plays a key role in *Con pasión absoluta*. The love stories of relatives from the distant past, remembrances of brief romances,

and erotic imagery are all prominently featured. In contemporary Central American fiction, eroticism frequently appears as an important element of works written by female writers. In reference to the rich tradition of politically committed literature and the more recent trend of innovative works that examine the role of underrepresented groups, eroticism serves a socially and culturally important function.

As Arturo Arias notes, eroticism offers a vision of reality unique from long-established principals: “Parte de la función del erotismo es jugar un papel simbólico, como visión del mundo alternativa, caracterizado por el socavamiento lúdico de las normas convencionales. El cuerpo retoma un lugar central como elemento del juego que disuelve el dogma, el autoritarismo, la seriedad estrecha que implica siempre jerarquías sociales” (“Gioconda” 315). In *Con pasión absoluta* eroticism proposes an alternative vision of reality through the eyes of a returning exile. This perspective is expressed through a rebellion against societal conventions, especially regarding norms of gender and sexuality within Guatemalan society. Irene frequently refers to this stifling social environment and her quest for emotional and erotic freedom: “Nacida en un país mojigato y castrador, me sentía francamente libre, dueña de mi cuerpo y sobre todo, de mi curiosidad” (90).

As a way of undermining these strict roles, the novel emphasizes the overlooked struggle of women to survive in an inflexible environment. The challenges that the women of Irene’s family face over the course of many decades illustrate the ways these individuals confront injustice and misogyny at the hands of abusive male counterparts.

Zardetto’s comments of the roles of women leave little question of the inflexibility of sexual roles in Guatemala. In the author’s view, masculinity is an unscrupulous and juvenile construction that undervalues women: “Los roles y los ritos son rígidos y castradores, por un

lado, pero también amorales y sin ningún respeto por el otro” (Fernández Hall “Carol”). An underlying frustration with regressive gender roles and the aberrant nature of sexuality in Guatemala is a significant thematic focus in the novel. Littered with failed marriages, fleeting romances, and vivid erotic imagery, the place of women is continually explored and challenged.

In recent Central American fiction, the erotic is a wide-ranging strategy that explores the position of women in patriarchal societies and offers fresh perspectives on negotiations of identity and agency.<sup>47</sup> As the critic Laura Barbas-Rhoden suggests, eroticism counters stereotypical ideas of feminine submissiveness to “reclaim a colonized memory, place women in forbidden places and roles, and suggest an alternative interpretation of Central American reality” (*Writing* 50). The women of *Con pasión absoluta* are not subservient to men and the presence of the erotic in their lives is a compelling countermeasure to prejudice and strict social norms. Zardetto utilizes the erotic to broach the silence of generations of women as a form of resistance to the patriarchal worldview. It is through Irene’s return that the erotic awakens dormant emotions and explores familial ties. This action plunges her headfirst into a forgotten atmosphere that is represented in overtly sensual language. Upon arriving in Guatemala City, the erotic emerges as an important theme involving physical desire and the uneven relation between men and women.

As Irene attempts to readjust to the lush climate of her former home, its natural beauty is compared to the act of possessing a beautiful woman, resulting in “sólo el vago rastro del deseo” (51). The association of emotive descriptions of nature and a bountiful erotic symbolism is

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<sup>47</sup> In the works of the Nicaraguan writer Gioconda Belli, eroticism directly challenges visions of female passivity. In declaring the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua as an erotic act, Belli affirms the power of eroticism to disturb the social order and upend oppressive cultural models. Eroticism operates as “el acto de nombrar lo prohibido, de desacralizar los tabúes mediante la palabra, recurriendo a una escritura visual, corporal. Gioconda Belli juega con la frontera sagrado/profano” (Marchio).

analogous with the return. Sentimental language illustrates Guatemala and Irene's burdened emotional state. Expressive sketches become even more suggestive when the narration compares the environment with personal sensations of an unanchored existence: "Así me pasa en medio de este mar, de este río, de este lago, profusamente poblados por el trópico, sus vuelos de ave, sus frondosidades de verde, enredándose, trepando, arrastrándose por arriba, por debajo de los árboles" (51). The image of a rootless exile wandering through a metaphorical landscape of conflicting emotions with no fixed sense of self is an apt description of Irene as she struggles to readjust. As the description of the physical and symbolic encounter continues, erotic undertones highlight the overt sensual character of the tropics:

Las flores insólitas, de colores penetrantes y olorosos invaden mis sentidos con llamados diversos y policromos provocando un éxtasis que podría sólo compararse al que ocurre cuando mis dientes penetran con decisión la suave carnaza de un mango. El jugo cae escurriéndose por las comisuras de los labios, se desliza entre los dedos, a lo largo del brazo, sin dejar lugar a otro pensamiento, ni a otra sensación que no sea el invasor trópico lujurioso. (51-52)

This invasion of the senses is reminiscent of the euphoria of the fruits of the Morazán community discussed in the previous section. The overtly erotic narration of juice dripping from lips and sliding between the fingers enralls the protagonist in the euphoric action of consuming the fruit. Irene's erotic awakening is a rediscovery of both physical and emotional sensations intimately tied to the past.

The presence of the erotic as an outcome of return is not limited to symbolic language or passages of intense suggestive desire. As Irene struggles to make sense of life, the roles of men and women in society are interrogated. The patriarchal position of males is cast into doubt by a string of broken relationships and unfaithful men who desert the novel's female protagonists. Whether in flashbacks to an absent father, his replacement by the tyrannical Don Asunción, the unnamed mulatto who impregnates Irene's aunt Ibis, or Costa, Irene's fleeting lover, men appear

and disappear in the narrative background while their female counterparts occupy positions of importance. Chafing at the submissive place of women, Irene shows her frustration at the prospect of subservience: “¿Y las mujeres? A nosotras se nos enseña temprano la importancia de encontrar un puerto donde anclar nuestra nave. Un lugar seguro. La mujer espera. Cose y canta, dice la mitología” (52).

Cryptic passages on an unhappy marriage cloud Irene’s past and confuse attempts to make sense of her background throughout her return. Although she states on several occasions that she never intended to come back to Guatemala, Irene is especially adamant when the topic turns to her failed marriage. Her passing commentaries demonstrate the hypocrisy of an unhappy arrangement: “Salir vestida de blanco, cumplir con tanta hipocresía. Quería cumplir. . . . Me río de mí misma: la suerte me acompañó: sufrí un desengaño. Mi matrimonio podía ser un conjunto vacío, un espacio lleno de nada” (21). An unrewarding marriage reinforces the protagonist’s transitory identity. Irene casually explains that a driving force behind her marriage was a desire to begin a new life far from her familial roots. Like the most recent trip home, the marriage is not a fulfilling occasion offering easy resolutions: “Quizá por eso me casé, proyecto fallido que, de antemano sabía, terminaría en ruptura. Sólo para irme de una vez por todas” (26). Like her marriage, Irene’s aimless life and return are marked as failed projects. It is through the revelation of her familial history that a gradual awakening alters her viewpoint.

In comparison to an unfulfilled desire for love, Irene’s more recent memories transgress conservative boundaries and explore her erotic desires in an unrestrained fashion. In her visits to nightclubs and with her various dance partners, she exhibits a carnal freedom much different than her strict conservative upbringing. As a reflection of her erotic awakening, Irene’s ideal partner is anonymous and attentive to her physical desires: “alguien con quien bailar, sin un

nombre, sin un rostro, sin una historia que recordar al día siguiente. Ningún enredo personal, pero eso sí, que supiera bailar, que tomara mi cuerpo entre sus brazos y lo llevara con suavidad, con entendimiento, directamente hasta [. . .] el olvido” (82). In place of a partner that will provide a romantic connection or a long-term relationship, she merely seeks to be held and caressed to the point of oblivion.

While the narrative alternates between time periods, Irene’s thoughts continue the thread of erotic imagery. Reminiscing about her first boyfriend and experiences of love, Irene’s first kiss epitomizes the tendency to narrate the past in flowing, lyrical terms: “Me besó en el cine, pero su beso no fue sino una mariposa aleteando dentro de la oscuridad de mi boca” (146). Irene’s return to Guatemala is the catalyst for a series of memories of erotic encounters and unfulfilling romantic relationships that force her to confront her familial past. Her physical presence in the community of her youth and conversations with her dying grandmother are the impetus for a sweeping reevaluation of her family.

Extended examples of the life of Irene’s grandmother shed light on a distant past marked by issues of gender and eroticism. In the intricate weaving of histories, Victoria’s story is integrated with the rise of coffee as a leading export crop in the early twentieth century. The declaration that “Guatemala era, toda, una gran finca de café” refers to the obsession of upper-class plantation owners in establishing an exploitative agricultural industry (62). When Victoria falls in love with Manuel de la Rosa, the son of a prominent planter, her subservient position is contrasted with the power and prestige afforded to an elite family. As Irene looks back on her past, the vision of a Guatemala controlled by a small class of masculine elites is clear: “ésa era su ideología: que una élite condujera los destinos de la nación. El resto, rostros anónimos, masa informe, tendría que esperar. Ya le llegarían los frutos del progreso” (64).

When Victoria becomes pregnant at fourteen years old, the experience is tinged with substantial erotic undertones. Her memory of the event, as told by Irene, is one of fear and submission: “*la presencia del hombre en su cuerpo habló de ese olor penetrante, de esa sensación de sentirse abierta y descoyuntada*” (60). Victoria’s words imply an unstated submission to her male partner, especially given that he is a member of the coffee plantation elite. Her disjointedness will be mimicked by the following generations of females in her family.

The trajectory of Victoria’s isolation and self-reliance is mirrored in the life of Mama Juana. As Irene’s great-great grandmother, Juana exudes a fierce independence that overrides the need for a domineering man to manage her life. After resettling in Barberena with her children after the death of her husband, she is a prime example of how a strong female figure navigates a series of turbulent personal experiences. Juana combats the loneliness and ambivalence of life through hard work: “*Así, por distraída, nunca se dio cuenta de que se sentía solitaria*” (162). Juana’s independent spirit is a source of strength that helps her overcome difficult times but is also a divisive characteristic that nearly leads to her family’s ruin. A brief romantic relationship with her daughter Julia’s boyfriend represents Juana’s fearless attitude. In an act of revenge, Julia marries a retired employee of the United Fruit Company and her sister Amparo displays an equally wild streak. Irene is told that Amparo’s search for individuality led her to run away with a Garifuna man from Izbel and abandon her family. Remembered by later generations for her foolish temperament, she continues the string of nomadic and uprooted women in the family: “*Pero, Mama Amparo había heredado la vena necia y cimarrona de las mujeres de la familia*” (163).

“*Más que un padre, era una distancia*” are the words Irene uses to describe her father and his distant relationship (269). Almost exclusively defined by his absence and a dismissive

attitude, Ángel Ferrara is responsible for sending his daughter into exile in response to ominous threats of violence. After Irene has left Guatemala, her father once again disappears from her life. He fails to stay in touch with his daughter and is regarded for his authority and his perpetual remoteness from the family:

*Ferrara le decía mi madre, eludiendo llamarlo por su nombre, como si mi padre fuese un apellido y con ese apellido un poder abstracto. Así lo entendía yo, o más bien, así era como nunca pude entenderlo. Sólo sentía el miedo respetuoso que producía en mi madre su voluntad implacable y que por largos años creí era mi propio miedo. Así, temido e inapelable a los ojos de mi madre, estaba presente en mi vida, casi sin rostro. (268-69)*

The likening of Ferrara to an abstract power in name only is consistent with the novel's challenge of perceptions of gender relations. Ferrara's aloof distance from his family is a chief cause of Irene's unhappiness. By gradually transforming into "una imposibilidad," the relationship between the two is untenable due to a pressing physical and psychological distance (292). This vastness is not for a lack of desire on Irene's part. As she admits, "Quería acercarme y no sabía cómo. La distancia entre nosotros me parecía tan alambicada e incomprensible como un laberinto y, peor aún, envuelta en una oscura culpa sin nombre" (292).

As Irene's father fades from view, Don Asunción usurps his symbolic role as an authoritarian leader of the household. Asunción, the new partner of Irene's mother and by extension the de facto leader of the family, exudes an abusive nature that continues the cycle of absent and vicious men. Tyrannical and illogical, his lust for power hints at an unbalanced man bent on wielding total control: "como si quisiera demostrar que sin importar cuán absurdo fuera su deseo, podía imponerlo. Así comprendía Don Asunción el poder y él deseaba más que ninguna otra cosa ser un tipo poderoso" (281). Don Asunción's stance towards his wife is little better than the treatment that Irene receives. By desiring that she commit herself wholly to domestic chores and menial tasks, Don Asunción replaces in both spirit and practice the

oppressive presence of Ángel Ferrara. Don Asunción's desire for authority results in his abuses towards his family, reinforcing Zardetto's observation that gender roles in Guatemala restrict women to subservient positions and men to domineering models of masculinity.

For the women of the novel, expressing a heightened sexual sensibility via the erotic subverts the patriarchal worldview and provides females with a unique outlet of expression. As a way of evening the historical record, the novel places women at the forefront of society and demonstrates their strength in surviving.

### **Travel Writing and Return**

Viewing *Con pasión absoluta* through the lens of travel is a unique contribution to literature that focuses on the lives and struggles of marginalized women. *Con pasión absoluta* undermines and gradually reconstructs images of identity from within Guatemala and from the distance of exile. Travel—in both physical and symbolic terms—is a key facet of the return experience that questions assumptions of exile and especially that of a female traveler and writer.

Hayden White refers to travel narratives as “fictions of factual representations” and the linking of realistic and fictional elements is a defining characteristic of the travel writing genre (Thompson 30). Zardetto's status as a Guatemalan in Canada who later returns to her place of birth is closely paralleled in *Con pasión absoluta* and questions of writing, personal history, and exile are outcomes of the exilic experience. Irene's nomadic existence is a continual journey that does not neatly end with the arrival in Guatemala. Additionally, return as travel stresses themes associated with travel writing such as the interplay between autobiography and fiction, the function of writing, and the position of women writers who travel and record their experiences. In many cases a journey is a decisive method of exploring the past of both the place traveled to and the site of return after a significant period of absence. Rather than being labeled as an exile

whose life follows the patterns of displacement and return, Irene is a traveler torn among Guatemala, Canada, and locations in the United States and throughout Latin America. When she is moved by the tropical sensations of her home and gripped by a sudden interest in the past, she must consider a swirling confusion of memories influenced by her life as a traveler and returnee.

In its most basic form, travel is a movement through space that involves a negotiation of places and identities between the individual traveler and what is observed during the voyage (Thompson 9). The ever-present conflict of the self and the other is inevitably shaped by the state of mind of the traveler and the process of transferring the experience into a physical text: “Like a lens, therefore, travel writing necessarily distorts the world even as it brings it into view” (Thompson 62). It is common for a traveler to feel out of place when arriving in an unfamiliar location, and Irene shares this disorientation in Guatemala. As a traveler, Irene’s search encompasses shifting time periods that include various family histories and states of mind that are brought together in the intricate narration.

Return as travel opens new dialogues on texts that blend fictional and autobiographical elements within historical contexts. The return is one stage in a continuum of travels that sparks Irene’s interest in her family and identity. In *Con pasión absoluta*, return is a decisive moment of awakening that opens new inquiries into the past and prioritizes the relationship between writing and travel: “el viaje al país natal es el elemento que dispara la memoria. Viaje como escritura . . . y escritura como viaje . . .” (Grinberg Pla). What Valeria Grinberg Pla terms “la recuperación del pasado por medio de la memoria subjetiva” stresses the importance of a history that is of great interest but also ill-defined by a subjective and variable memory (Grinberg Pla).

Although travel writing is a centuries-old genre that incorporates variations of thematic content, authorial perspective, and degrees of fictional veracity, in contemporary works several

key topics are closely related to the focus of *Con pasión absoluta*. Linked to the development of postcolonialism, exiles studies, subaltern studies, and feminism in recent decades, approaches to travel writing challenge established theories and provide innovative alternatives.

In travel writing, displacement is a repeated theme that personifies the traveler as an exile in a foreign land (Youngs 79). The role of women in travel writing is traditionally undervalued and despite the label as “the most socially important of all literary genres,” the works of female travelers receive much less critical attention and commercial success (Youngs 1). Through the works of contemporary female Latin Americans such as Zardetto and Belli, literature takes on new meanings in content and style to overcome long-held stereotypes: “As is the case with postcolonial travelers, women travel writers face the challenge both of making their voice heard and of developing literary models for that purpose” (Youngs 132).

In *Con pasión absoluta*, the return is part of a larger journey that includes memories of a fragmented existence.<sup>48</sup> This journey intertwines the past and the present to create new spaces for women to write and share their visions of the world. Irene frequently mentions her trips throughout Latin America and the United States, including her short stay in Los Angeles on the way to Canada, vacations with lovers to South America, and a spiritually reaffirming tour of Machu Picchu. In each of these locations, Irene’s confused consciousness comes into contact with heartbreak and frustration. She later records her observations in a fictional context that prioritizes travel and its outcomes.

After returning to Guatemala, Irene demonstrates her uneasiness by considering going back to Canada or even leaving for an unspecified destination as a desperate act of adding purpose to her life. She employs highly symbolic language to remind herself that she is

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<sup>48</sup> Ivannia Barboza Brenes argues that fragmentation adds a sense of meaning to Irene’s existence: “Son varias Irene fragmentadas a un mismo tiempo, separadas y unidas de nuevo para definirla como sujeto. Esa pluralidad de fragmentos da sentido a su vida” (42).

emotionally unable to go back and must consequently remain in Guatemala: “A cualquier sitio menos allá. Estaba vivo en mi piel, su memoria era el mar en que sumergía mi cabeza para encontrar oxígeno. Sabía con claridad que no podía volver. Mi partida había sido un viaje sin posibilidad de retorno. La puerta estaba sellada” (80). When Irene refers to a trip with no possibility of return, her words echo the intrinsic difficulty of her homecoming and the open-ended nature of the undertaking in which physical and emotional ties are bound up in memory. Yet her assertion that further travels are impossible is inaccurate: by the end of the novel her destiny remains undetermined and the reader is left to question whether she will remain in Guatemala, go back to Vancouver, or begin her life anew in a new location. The uncertainty of her fate underscores the fundamental nature of return as a form of travel: Irene’s confused thoughts and actions repeatedly accentuate that it is anything but a concluding phase of exile. Instead, her youth, flight, assimilation, and return are all symbolically intermingled in a continually developing identity through the perspective of travel.

The return is a turning point in Irene’s unanchored identity. In Guatemala, she is shaken by the suspended state of her life and the utter inability to improve her circumstances: “Mi vida está suspendida. Con exasperación me percato de que no tengo voluntad para reinventar mi propia historia. El pasado abre su enorme boca, me traga. Quise borrarlo y, ahora comprendo, me miraba de regreso con su intangible reflejo” (69). The frustration inherent in this worldview is the culmination of a life of constant travels without a fixed home.

When Irene is exiled to Los Angeles as a child, her mother’s visit is an example of the contradictory nature of travel. Nena’s relationship with her daughter is complicated by a dispassionate animosity and a lack of detail: while the lives of Juana, Amparo, Victoria, and Ibis are highlighted, Nena is notable only for her inconspicuous absence from the family. Irene

explains that her mother was not initially told of her children's whereabouts after they had left Guatemala. After learning of their location, Nena's trip to Los Angeles to visit her children is an extraordinary undertaking that reinforces the family's isolation. The journey is an arduous ordeal: she arrives penniless, completely disoriented in a foreign land, and lacking a passport (302). Summarized as a "complicado rompecabezas," Nena demonstrates the fierce determination she has learned from the women of her family as she seeks to find her children in unfamiliar territory (302). Irene's initial reaction to her mother is emblematic of her isolation. Her statement that "No quiero verla," epitomizes the lack of family ties characteristic of an independent and unsettled life: "No podría sostener la pared que me resguardaba si veía a mi madre. Flaquearía, lloraría, no podría soportarlo. Tenía terror de que mi corazón desbocado corriera tras las huellas, tras la sombra, tras los restos de lo que había sido yo" (304). Nena's unexpected arrival is a link to home that a young Irene is unable to bear. The sight of her mother brings back memories of her flight from Guatemala and suggests the shattering of her innocence. In Irene's opinion, her mother doesn't realize the impact that exile has had on their relationship: "No se había percatado de lo que había hecho la distancia. Me había marchado de su lado, de su recuerdo, de su amor" (304). Isolation and uncertainty are lifelong struggles that Irene must endure in her peripatetic existence. As Irene's past comes more clearly into focus and her future remains uncertain, the toll of exile is apparent. Mirroring the grueling journey of her mother to Los Angeles, Irene's distance from her grandmother is again likened to an "indescifrable rompecabezas" in which the world of her youth is irreparably shattered: "El mundo de mi infancia se había roto y no se podía reparar" (283).

A set of travel luggage represents Irene's travels throughout the Americas and is a fitting symbol of her life as an exile. She implies in a letter to her family that she left for Canada only

carrying a worthless suitcase and a blank page in which to write her life history from scratch. She also states that she must continually write and re-write her life as she wanders through an unsettled existence (151). It is fitting that she relates her feelings to the act of opening a suitcase after returning from a long trip: “Me pasa como aquel que regresa de un largo viaje y tiene su equipaje recién abierto. Revueltas están las cosas nuevas, la ropa sucia, los recuerdos del viaje [. . .] Habrá que ponerlas en su sitio antes que dejen de parecer un desorden. Estoy en una etapa transitoria y nebulosa . . .” (152). The image of a traveler arriving home, opening a suitcase, and unpacking dirty clothes and travel supplies also refers to the heavy psychological baggage of return. These disordered experiences are the catalyst for bringing order to a tenuous self-identity. Allusions to travel intensify Irene’s vague feelings of belonging based on the lives of the female members of her family. As she declares in her letter, “Así que te escribo este mensaje para que sepas que soy una confusión de cosas, que no tengo forma, que no sé nada de mi vida y que cuando te hablo, tenés que entender que sólo digo intentos, aproximaciones . . .” (153). Irene’s fragile identity is linked to her unfamiliarity with modern Guatemala and status as a traveler who must constantly negotiate confusing or unknown spaces.

### **Life Writing as an Emancipatory Act**

The final discussion explores life writing in *Con pasión absoluta*. Life writing is not a new genre but early texts appearing in the eighteenth century were treated as narrow categories closely related to biography and autobiography.<sup>49</sup> According to Marlene Kadar, life writing is an all-encompassing genre that prioritizes the personal nature of texts and incorporates a range of narrative styles including letters, diaries, documents, and oral narratives of a private and less

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<sup>49</sup> Carl Thompson offers a succinct definition of life writing: “A collective term sometimes used to denote all the forms of writing which an individual may use to give an account of themselves, and to project an image of the self to a wider audience; so autobiography and memoir, most obviously, but also letters, journals, and many other genres as well” (201).

official nature (4). Loosely linked to autobiography by the pervasive presence of the self, novelistic examples of life writing such as *Con pasión absoluta* sidestep issues of veracity that writers and critics perpetually face.

A major feature of the novel's content is based on Zardetto's time in exile and her return to Guatemala to become a writer. Like Irene, Zardetto chooses writing as a method of putting her experiences into perspective and challenging established social norms. Existing in the imprecise space between autobiography and fiction, life writing permits the author to create a clearly fictional text largely based on factual or personal information. The analysis that follows argues that life writing is a unique tool to depict Irene's journey home as an indirect fictional reflection of the author's life.

Life writing offers several critical advantages to feminist writers and their proponents. Kadar acknowledges the intricate relationship shared by fiction and autobiography and suggests a continuum between the two fields: "'autobiographical' is a loaded word, the 'real' accuracy of which cannot be proved and does not equate with either 'objective' or 'subjective' truth. Instead, it is best viewed as a continuum that spreads unevenly and in combined forms from the so-called least fictive narration to the most fictive" (10). In autobiographies produced in the twentieth century, the pursuit of a firm sense of belonging proves elusive for authors whose work contains elements of their lives. Plagued by self-doubt and anxiety, the search for belonging is a long-standing issue: "the autobiographical subject seems to waver between private and public selves, between self and country, between historicity and fiction, between silence and eloquence as he or she attempts to find the models—of self and of writing—that might best represent it" (Kumaraswami 832-33).

Although life writing prioritizes the insertion of the self into texts of varying fictional content, the field is closely related to autobiographical fiction written by women. Valeria Grinberg Pla explores the relation of history to life writing, autobiography, and travel writing produced by women. Arguing that the presence of a journey leads to an exploration in *Con pasión absoluta*, writing is an axis that permits alternate observations of the past and present. In the same manner that Zardetto includes a vast and ever-changing narrative timeline, Grinberg Pla points out that the interplay between local histories and the wider national scale are a fundamental strategy of Spanish-American autobiographical writing (Grinberg Pla). What is unique about the novel is how histories are presented from the perspective of women whose gaze subverts social and literary norms. As “una práctica política emancipatoria,” life writing sheds light on the struggles of women to persevere and reimagine patriarchal societies. (Grinberg Pla).

As a fictionalized version of the author, Irene’s distinct phases of exile and return encapsulate Zardetto’s life in a literary realm. Like Zardetto, Irene’s return inspires an interest in writing as a possible future career and as a tool of self-expression. When reminiscing about the hair salon that her aunts Ibis and Aurora manage, Irene casually mentions that their names are fantastic enough to be taken from the pages of a novel. The role of memory in writing is brought to the forefront when Irene recalls her relationship with her former Uruguayan lover: their time together is described as a history that was written together yet plagued by a lack of commitment and an unsure fate. Irene’s inability to find solid footing in life with her paramour personifies her aimless existence. The fateful romance is a dead end whose outcome, like the many histories of the novel, is predestined: “En todo caso, ya está y no hay salida. Toda historia, una vez iniciada, conmina a un destino marcado” (49). Her ambivalent attitude towards love reveals a profound emptiness and in a series of contradictory statements, she first argues that love does not exist but

then says that “la vida sin amor será una total pérdida” (58). In doubting the existence of love, Irene stresses her itinerant past and doubts the chances of mending her broken spirit: “¿Pero, qué sé yo del amor? He caminado un largo camino tratando de encontrarlo. Siempre he sido un extranjero que hable una lengua extraña” (58).

As Irene becomes aware of the hidden background of her family, she is determined to record these memories through her writing. Despite this passion, writing is an arduous task and lays bare the difficulty of putting her situation into words. A constant torment, writing is a window into the past and a fitting example of her agony: “En la pantalla es blanco. *Debo escribir. Debo escribir.* Me fatiga esa voz obsesiva. Los días se escurren. Hace ya un par de meses estoy aquí y apenas unas líneas” (57). Irene’s difficulty in transcribing her life mirrors her distress as an exile whose world is subject to unpredictable upheaval. Although writing is a tortuous activity, Irene’s writing is a fundamental aspect of challenging the traditional pillars of Guatemalan society.

A vital topic in the Central American texts produced by women is “the search for antecedents and the confrontation of the lack of women’s history” and Irene’s return opens a new window to the exploration of these predecessors through writing (Barbas-Rhoden *Writing* 26). Re-writing personal and national histories to include women is an active undertaking that challenges perceptions of inferiority. Zardetto employs a female protagonist among a series of overshadowed yet empowered women whose lives are brought to the forefront through a strong commitment to recording their experiences. Literature is a vital tool in overcoming a fragile reality and transforming an exclusive and ill-defined history. Additionally, Irene’s life is adapted into the written word, she is emboldened by a self-empowerment that has been lacking during her exile: “Es decir, la convertí en literatura. Nunca me sentí tan dueña de mi destino” (308).

As the women of the Ferrara family are revealed, Irene reflects on the importance of writing and the reshaping of her worldview. As this far-reaching exploration comes to an end, her insistence on transforming history into words is a formidable tool that gives rise to a more secure self-belonging that has overcome lingering sentiments of fragmentation and distance: “El pasado iba a matarme. Debía aniquilarlo: ésta es la historia de un asesino. Sepulté un ayer que no tiene ya nada que decirme. Lo sepulté en este océano de palabras” (369). After an extensive inquiry, Irene’s perspective shifts as the novel comes to a close. A greater understating of her family and surroundings contributes to a sense of peace that conceals a troubled past. As an example of life writing, the comment that a menacing personal past is buried in an ocean of words confirms the author’s stated goal of reimagining return to include the presence and contributions of women.

## **Conclusion**

In *Con pasión absoluta*, the Guatemalan past is re-written to include the contributions of women through Irene’s return. In an elaborate merging of literary styles, texts, and voices, her journey evolves into a wide-ranging encounter with Guatemala: “(Re)encontrarse, (re)construirse y (re)experimentar para Irene son actos decisivos ahora” (Barboza Brenes 43).

Upon setting foot in Guatemala for the first time in many years, Irene exclaims, “He recorrido un círculo perfecto” (21). But when she is quickly overcome by the tropical sights and aromas of her home, it is apparent that the return is more representative of new beginnings than a conclusive ending. After the physical return has taken place, a new type of journey begins. The return is an exploration of the destinies of female family members and decisive historical moments in Guatemala set against the abusive nature of men. As the narration shifts among these subjects, Irene’s fragile identity resulting from her disjointed past becomes apparent. The text

stresses Irene's rootless identity due to her troubled home life and lack of a father figure. Her displacement impedes any sense of stability as she is depicted as a wandering soul tormented by her personal failures. Like Irene, the women of the Ferrara family struggle to establish themselves and bring an end to a nomadic life: "Vagar de un lugar a otro es un proceso de doble sentido: es espacial y temporal, posibilitando un sentido de ubicuidad para la protagonista" (Barboza Brenes 33).

As the novel comes to a close, Irene's fate remains in doubt. The final advice from her grandmother before passing away, "Haga su vida," signals a commitment to an active and independent role in determining her future (368). The novel's lyrical and erotic language accentuates the volatile family circumstances. The text boldly confronts a traditionally male-centered society and the literature it produces. The erotic presents an alternative version of reality and a rebellion against conventions by featuring intimate details of Irene's romantic adventures with past lovers and the passionate transgressions of her family. Like the role of the erotic, gender roles and responsibilities are disputed through the depiction of the novel's male figures. Among the long string of unfaithful husbands and illicit lovers, Irene's father exemplifies this inconsistency. Responsible for the decision for Irene and her brother to leave Guatemala, his disdainful attitude and absence is a palpable contribution to the family's unsettled situation.

In the same way that tropical sensations and the erotic trigger a questioning of Irene's past, viewing the protagonist as a traveler is an important step in altering perceptions of women in Central American literature. A never-ending series of voyages from home into exile, throughout the Americas, and eventually back to her place of birth define Irene's life. Her return ceases to be a final stage and is instead a jumping-off point to examine her life and family.

Although the novel's close leaves Irene's destiny in doubt, a renewed sense of belonging replaces the profound rootlessness that permeated her life in exile. Her closing words reflect these changes and the decree that "la vida merece compasión absoluta" implies a newfound optimism in both her future and her ability to flourish whether in Guatemala or in traveling to a new location to begin the next stage of her life (370).

## CONCLUSION

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO RETURN?

The analysis of the four novels in this study demonstrates that homecoming takes many forms and the collective themes that emerge constitute a rich genre of return. As a component of studies of exile and displacement, return reveals the range of experiences and traumas that returnees face. This project shows that homecomings vary widely in their outcomes and provide a unique vantage point for understanding contemporary Central America.

Return is a dynamic process that contrasts memories of origins with the sudden encounter with an altered home. An important factor is the underlying tension between what was left behind and the people or places that appear unfamiliar after an extended absence. This journey and its aftermath spark difficult encounters and myriad obstacles: “Experiences of return provide a startling jolt to that part of the sensibility of an exile that can become bound up in memory” (Rowe and Whitfield 236). This shock is a point of departure for studies of return. A central theme of this project is that exile and its effects do not cease once displacement comes to an end. The protagonists defy the assumption that exiles will seamlessly reengage with long-absent communities. In each novel, return is only the first step in a succession of trials and self-discoveries that continue long after arrival.

Criticism has overlooked the return, viewing it as a fixed closing that neatly ends displacement or fulfills the desire to come home. The later stages of exile have also escaped critics’ attention, leaving unstudied the aftereffects of exile and the many challenges of assimilation that define a genre of return (Hammond 227). The effects of exile, both positive and

negative, are not lost on returnees as they struggle to belong, confront the past, revitalize persecuted cultures, or simply survive:

In the course of protracted absence home develops, and so too do the people living away from home. Because of such transformations of place and identity, homecoming often contains elements of rupture, surprise and, perhaps, disillusionment, besides the variety of practical problems that returnees usually confront in their 'new/old' place. (Stefansson 4)

This project demonstrates that homecoming is just as meaningful and relevant as the preceding stages of flight and displacement. Issues associated with exile such as the trauma of dislocation and also positive connotations including the gaining of new skills and worldviews do not end when exile ceases.

This perspective on exile and its aftermath is an informative vantage point from which to assess the trajectory of Central America in recent decades. With an emphasis on peace accords and their variable outcomes, Central American fiction of the contemporary period emphasizes pressing issues of violence, insecurity, and the drive to rethink formulations of nation and foundational myths. In a literature defined in great part by its cynicism and the failures of peace, genre plays an important role: "Es el género novelesco que toma cada vez más presencia, hecho que se comprueba tanto en el número de obras publicadas como en cuanto a su recepción por parte de los lectores como de la crítica" (Mackenbach). The variety of forms and focuses of recent fiction is indicative of the creative energy that Central American writers employ to describe a turbulent world. Adaptations of the testimonial novel, historical novels, the prevalence of urban settings, complex narrative techniques, an emerging feminist literature, works by indigenous authors, and a renewed interest in marginalized themes display the great diversity produced by regional writers in recent years (Mackenbach). Writing on the emergence of regional narratives, Arturo Arias underscores the especially innovative contribution to fiction in

the region by women and indigenous authors: “Vemos la emergencia de una literatura feminista e indígena, con resultados aún desiguales, pero cuya voz en el debate ya es de alguna importancia” (*Gestos* 276).

Change and continuity are contrasting features of the collection of thematic and technical forms of Central American fiction in the decade of the 1990s and 2000s. Denominated as a literature of rupture with the past that also strives for reinvention and creation, contemporary authors blend historical and cultural elements without overtly political frameworks in a break from the past: “Esta literatura centroamericana reciente se caracteriza por un recuperar y retomar de la ficción en todas sus dimensiones. La realidad se vuelve pretexto/pre-texto para poder escribir literatura, la literatura ya no es más subterfugio para poder hacer política” (Mackenbach). In novels of return, the recuperation of literature follows this path of denouncing outdated models and simultaneously reinventing new modes of expression. This genre engages in dialogues with the past while also redefining the meanings of home or the place of the individual within postwar societies. In this context, a genre of return surveys pressing social and political issues from the unique space between exile and return. With the knowledge gained through displacement in foreign lands, these protagonists journey back to their fractured origins and provide a unique gaze on contemporary society. Through projects of cultural emergence, reflections on pervasive orphanhood and isolation, or denunciations of ineffective peace accords, a genre of return uniquely balances origins and displacement in an ongoing reflection on formulations of Central American societies in the process of change.

### **A Genre of Return**

Homecomings bring to the fore the ways that returnees navigate fluid concepts of home described variously as “messy points of convergence” and “vexing intersections” (Markowitz

23). Each of the novels in this dissertation demonstrates the scope of responses to return and its aftermath, ranging from utter dejection to self-discovery and cultural emergence. For each protagonist, this process opens a window of discovery that is widely categorized as a genre deserving of its own recognition and merit. These protagonists, plagued to different extents by cynicism, uncertainty, ambivalence towards life, and rapid societal alterations, reflect the tumultuous postwar era of the 1990s in Central America. Consequently, a genre of return reveals the depths of change and the struggle of individuals to respond to these settings.

In Chapter 1, Horacio Castellanos Moya's *El asco* illustrates that Vega's return to El Salvador is an exercise in revulsion. Vega's only rationale for returning is the occasion of his mother's death and the collection of his inheritance. Set in the context of the protagonist's privileged exile in Canada and his position as a highly educated university professor, the return is at first glance an unwanted encounter with a society voluntarily abandoned years earlier. Yet beyond his bitter rants against Salvadoran life, Vega's return is a driving force that highlights the complexities of the postwar period in El Salvador. In terms of a genre of return, the novel succinctly captures the prevailing cynicism of the postwar period while also emphasizing spaces, origins, the role of literature, identity, and survival as defining themes.

By identifying El Salvador as a transitory non-space, Vega's trip is an ephemeral exercise. The airports, cabs, brothels, bars, and hotels of the novel are depicted as meaningless locations through which Vega passes with little concern. In this sense, the nation at large appears as a type of non-space where nothing of significance occurs and no consequential literature or art is produced. Extended rants against public areas such as local monuments and universities are examples of the downcast attitude that Vega projects towards the nation of his birth.

Vega's return to El Salvador is disconcerting beginning with his flight and arrival at the airport in San Salvador. His journey is defined by a constant tension between his diasporic life in Canada and his insufferable impression of El Salvador. As an originary destination, the nation is both a point of origin and a site of longing for the many Salvadorans distanced from their homeland. Yet for Vega, his origins are a point of contention and links to his family are readily denied. From this perspective, postwar El Salvador is a transitory site to be visited and an anchor for members of the international diaspora. Vega's insolent attitude towards fellow returnees and his desire to leave immediately for Canada reflect the protagonist's sense of shame towards his Salvadoran origins.

Like the imagery of non-spaces and transitory origins, in *El asco* literature illustrates the impact of return. Through a technical style directly based on the work of the Austrian author Thomas Bernhard, Castellanos Moya's text speaks extensively on the role of literature. The complex technical structure relies on the character Moya to interpret Vega's denunciations of El Salvador and relay these to the reader. While Moya has also returned to El Salvador and desires to continue his writing career, Vega frames this event as a humiliation instead of a calculated career decision.

Vega's stay is an insight into the state of Salvadoran identity and the ways in which hope has given way to despair in the years following peace agreements. At turns a biting criticism of political leaders and social institutions, a decrepit *salvadoreñidad* is contrasted with the stable setting of exile in Canada. To this end, survival takes precedent, as Vega desires to only to suffer through his visit and leave at the first possible opportunity. Read as a novel of return, this desire to survive is a common connection among works of the genre. Faced with uncertain circumstances and riddled with traumatic memories, the impetus to endure is a driving theme.

Whether read as a slyly humorous take on local culture, a stylistic exercise in the imitation of Bernhard, or as a cutting critique of a failed nation, *El asco* is a valuable contribution to a genre of return.

In Chapter 2, Carlos Cortés' *Cruz de olvido* defines return as a journey of demystification. As in *El asco*, death is once again an unexpected motivation as Martín Amador's chosen exile in Nicaragua is abruptly interrupted by a mysterious phone call alerting him to his son's death and calling for his immediate return to Costa Rica. The trip to his native San José is an arduous process defined by enigmatic characters and frightening scenes that contradict the nation's pristine reputation.

The novel explores return as a frustrated search for origins that opens a Pandora's box and questions the fundamental nature of Costa Rican society. Amador's arrival intensifies personal weaknesses such as orphanhood and blame along with a deeply rooted sense of powerlessness. The passage through San José in search of the truth about his son invites uncomfortable reflections of both self and nation. Menaced by an absent father and a distant family, Amador's return forces him to grapple with his failures. At once tormented by his son's destiny and his futile journalistic work in the service of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, the protagonist is overcome by doubt. Blame is a feature of novels of return and in *Cruz de olvido* the protagonist's homecoming triggers a consideration of the overwhelming guilt that plagues his life as he exclaims "La culpa es mi talón de Aquiles" (44).

As a novel of return, Cortés' work encompasses a series of journeys in both physical and psychological terms. From Amador's jeep ride to San José, his surreal travels through the corrupt underside of the capital, awkward encounters with family members, and a visit to his dilapidated childhood home, movement is a defining feature of return. Beyond these physical movements,

the experience is laden with a heavy emotional baggage. Encounters with the friends of his youth are complicated by their various misdeeds and corrupt political machinations. Additionally, an increasingly bizarre web of intrigue intensifies the incomprehensibility that clouds Amador's perspective and contributes to an unflattering portrayal of modern Costa Rica.

Amador's declaration that "El poder de las palabras es mentir" captures the incoherent and unreliable landscape of return to San José. In the same way that *El asco* adopts a multilayered narrative technique to comprehend a changing society, in *Cruz de olvido* literature and identity are intertwined. Dynamiting national myths of Costa Rican exceptionalism is a key aim of the novel as it scrutinizes traditional views that do not match Amador's perspective. By describing the role of journalists and writers as creators of a national mythology distanced from reality, Amador criticizes the implicit perpetuation of myths of peace and democratic prosperity: "Pretendieron que fuera la voz de un país que, para colmo, no existía . . ." (154).

With the goal of writing a Central American novel, Cortés employs a range of novelistic styles reminiscent of the detective stories, social critiques, and dreamlike settings found throughout Latin American fiction. As a novel of return, the mix of technical styles and thematic focuses add to the assortment of features of the genre. By shattering the illusion of exceptionalism, the theme of return creates a world of uncertainty that struggles to balance hope and despair and only finds meaning in the act of forgetting an unknowable past.

In *Cruz de olvido*, homecoming is an ongoing reinterpretation of the meanings of Costa Rican belonging. Through a constant series of journeys, Amador's familial origins are cast into doubt as notions of a wider identity are questioned by a nebulous search for the truth. As both a commentary on the hollow nature of tradition and the struggle to comprehend this reality on a personal level, return is a disturbing voyage of discovery.

In Chapter 3, Gaspar Pedro González's *El retorno de los mayas* is a unique contribution to a genre of return for several reasons. Unlike the previous two works in this project, the novel features an indigenous protagonist whose life symbolizes the arduous recent history of the Maya in Guatemala. While the nameless orphan, returning after the signing of peace accords, articulates a profound cynicism towards postwar society, his vision of the future embraces an optimistic perspective. For the orphan, return is a challenge to overcome the wounds of the past and promote a more inclusive society with legitimate Maya involvement in cultural and political realms.

The orphan's flight from Guatemala underscores the pain of separation that his community confronts in the face of interminable violence. His exile is tinged with a fatalism that lingers throughout his displacement and return. Once the protagonist abandons his ancestral home and the important spiritual symbolism it possesses, his time in exile is devoted to the dream of returning to reestablish his community and culture.

While the text may be read as a continuation of the testimonial form or a highly detailed insight into Maya beliefs and customs, as a novel of return González's work sheds light on the challenges of homecoming from the perspective of an indigenous character. The orphan's repatriation after years of hardship in refugee camps in Mexico is a long-awaited event. Haunted by the violent deaths of community members and his family, the orphan first views return as a confrontation with a hostile Ladino society. In each novel returnees face unexpected challenges, but in *Retorno* this struggle involves centuries of endemic racism against the Maya. Like the protagonist of *Cruz de olvido*, the indigenous orphan's life and return are consumed by a never-ending sequence of journeys of self-preservation.

After expressing his frustration with the imbalance of power and the inefficacy of the peace accords, the orphan turns his attention fully towards awakening. In *Retorno*, the protagonist's repatriation is a call to action reminiscent of the efforts of the Maya movement in Guatemala. As a representation of his community, the orphan compares return to waking from a long nightmare. Education and a firm commitment to justice are cornerstones of the emergence of Maya political participation and cultural revitalization. An important facet of this awakening is the exploration of Maya identity. Rather than succumb to superficial stereotypes or labels with racist or paternal connotations, return sparks an in-depth evaluation of what it means to be Maya. Discussions of the Maya calendar, usage of Kanjobal in place of Spanish, and interpretations of indigenous religious symbolism connect the orphan with the native lands of his distant youth.

Once the orphan has decried the injustices of the past and affirmed his optimistic commitment to the future, one final task remains. After a chance meeting with a sister presumed to have died years earlier, the two travel back to the village of their birth. Origins repeatedly appear as contested features of novels of return and the visit to Pananlaq shows the mix of anguish and optimism that encapsulates the orphan's point of view. While the two initially have difficulty communicating in Kanjobal due to the protagonist's unfamiliarity with his native language, the trip reinforces the idea that returns do not end abruptly and their impact continues long after arrival.

In Chapter 4, Carol Zardetto's *Con pasión absoluta* examines homecoming from the perspective of a female protagonist. After a formative youth spent in exile in the United States and Canada, Irene's return due to the impending death of her grandmother is the impetus for a sweeping interrogation of personal belonging and the lives of the female members of her family

over the course of the past century. The immediate postwar period in Guatemala is the setting for Irene's return as she strives to understand her place within this fractured society.

Spaces and places are reoccurring themes in novels of return, whether involving a crowded airline flight to San Salvador, the surreal setting of San José, or in the spiritual ties to ancestral homelands in Guatemala. In *Con pasión absoluta*, exile in the gray, rainy climate of Vancouver is sharply contrasted with the vivid sensations of the tropics. For Irene, homecoming is stimulating in visual, emotional, and erotic terms. The lush tropical climate arouses memories of home and sets in motion the profound journey to discover the hidden histories of the female members of the Ferrara family. As Irene views picturesque volcanoes on her return flight and passes through noisy streets on the taxi ride to her home in Guatemala City, she must balance visions of her youth with the contemporary landscape.

The interrogation that ensues is a highly sensual experience with erotic undertones and evocative memories. Former lovers, short-lived sexual encounters, and suggestive passages about the female members of Irene's family all suggest the erotic as an important facet of Irene's return. The return is the catalyst for Irene's evaluation of her standing as a single woman living an unanchored existence. In this work homecoming integrates an ever-developing self-awareness that fluctuates between erotically tinged memories and a longing for closure and understanding.

Travel is a salient theme of Irene's life. Beyond her return to Guatemala, past travels throughout Latin America, her flight into exile in California, and her life in Canada all impact her outlook. As these visions come into focus through Irene's return, travel sparks new inquiries into the past: "El regreso al país natal abre la reflexión sobre el pasado, una reflexión articulada en forma de escritura que a su vez da origen a la narración" (Grinberg Pla). These reflections

intertwine to demonstrate that return does not end with arrival. Instead, the narration merges the histories of the Ferrara family with Irene's continuing search for understanding.

Irene's return to Guatemala echoes Zardetto's life as an exile in Canada and as a writer seeking to understand her place in the realms of family and nation. As an example of life writing, the novel employs a variety of textual elements to reveal the protagonist's innermost desires and fears while also demonstrating the resilience of the women of the Ferrara family in the face of decades of hardships. Extensive histories detailed in diverse texts such as letters and newspaper articles weave personal narratives with the wider scope of national history. For example, the rise of the United Fruit Company in Guatemala is intermingled with personal narratives of Irene's family members during this period.

Past and present are contrasted as Irene's homecoming sparks an intense interest in her circumstances. The return to Guatemala City begins the complex process of discerning memory and its consequences. As Irene documents her life, the process becomes a liberating action that positions female writing as an act of empowerment. The novel's focus on life writing contributes the perspective of a female writer and protagonist who confronts the traditionally male-dominated worlds of literature and travel writing through the vantage point of return.

In conclusion, the four novels paint a picture of return as a critical feature of contemporary Central American literature. In recent decades writers from the region have distanced themselves from revolutionary concerns, resulting in a far-reaching fiction concerned with issues of ongoing violence, crime, the failures of peace, and the emergence of works by indigenous and female authors. Important among these themes are the continued movements of people due to factors ranging from economic security to fear of violent crime and social instability. A genre of return incorporates these narratives of displacement in an incipient

category of fiction that explores displacement as an ongoing process whose trauma does not end with return.

People leave their places of origin and later return for a plethora of reasons and this project investigates a sample of protagonists whose journeys to Central America vary in their reasons and responses to the situation. The novels confirm the genre of return as a pathway to confronting and reinterpreting perspectives of national identity, culture, personal belonging, and outlooks on the self and the future of Central America and its displaced populations. As a reflection of a complicated social reality and fictional reactions to unsettling homecomings, a genre of return is a valuable contribution to an emerging Central American literature.

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