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Abstract

This essay examines the production of a transisthmian literature of the extreme, emerging across the Northern Triangle of Central America in the twenty-first century. Produced in the context of the rise of authoritarianism in the region, literary works published by the Editorial Los Sin Pisto and others tell the varied stories of growing repression, precarity, and resistance across the isthmus. Particular attention is paid to Michelle Recinos's award-winning collection, *Sustancia de hígado* (2022), which not only challenges the State of Exception in El Salvador, but also uncovers the workings of the regimes of truth permeating the isthmus.

Keywords: Central America, Northern Triangle, State of Exception, Impunity, Resistance.

Resumen

Este ensayo examina la producción de una literatura extrema transístmica que emerge en el Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica en el siglo veintiuno. Producidos en el contexto del creciente autoritarismo en la región, los textos literarios publicados por Editorial Los Sin Pisto y otras imprentas presentan historias variadas de la represión, precariedad y resistencia en aumento a través del istmo. Se trata de un enfoque en los cuentos galardonados de Michelle Recinos en *Sustancia de hígado* (2022), los cuales no solo retan el régimen de excepción en El Salvador, sino que ponen en tela de juicio los regímenes de la verdad que permean el istmo.

Palabras claves: Centroamérica, Triángulo Norte, régimen de excepción, impunidad, resistencia.

Unraveling regimes of truth: The extreme literature of the Northern Triangle

This essay is premised on the idea that there is a need to examine critically the pasts, presents, and futures of Central America as transnational sociocultural fields, connecting the isthmus and its diasporas. As students of Central America in the North and South, we need to develop and use critical transnational, or, rather, to invoke the words of A. P. Rodríguez (2009), *transisthmian* tools to bridge U.S. Central American studies and Central American isthmian scholarship and keep abreast of intersecting material, social, and cultural developments in the region (A.P. Rodríguez, 2009, 2017). This essay begins with a look back at the *Central America 2020 Regional Workshop on Migration and Transnationalism* and forward to the representations of the so-called Northern Triangle in recent literary publications by the Editorial Los Sin Pisto and F&G Editores, set in the current state of failing democracies, rising regimes, and growing precarity in Central America.

Focusing on Los Sin Pisto's short story collection *Territorios olvidados: Quince cuentos del Triángulo Norte y uno más al sur* (2021) and Michelle Recinos's *Sustancia de hígado* (2022),[1] I examine the production of a transisthmian literature of the extreme and in resistance to the contemporary *regimes of truth* in Central America, as manifested especially by Recinos's award-winning story, "Barberos en huelga". Ultimately, I make a call to scholars of transnational Central American studies to pivot forward to the narratives of the current moment without forgetting our pasts seeped in civil wars, intergenerational traumas, and far-reaching silences (Abrego, 2017). Just like testimonio served as the "narrative textuality" of the civil war era (Arias, 2007, pp. xiv-xv), the extreme narratives of the current period, especially the short story and novella, textualize the greater crises extending across the Central American *transisthmus* in the twenty-first century. The narratives analyzed herein not only demonstrate the discursive power of literature

1 All English translations from *Territorios olvidados: Quince cuentos del Triángulo Norte y uno más al sur* (2021) and Michelle Recinos's *Sustancia de hígado* (2022) are mine.

in a region nearly devoid of critical literacies but also unmask (unravel) repression with new and often experimental and extreme expressions of resistance.

Central America 2020

On July 5-6, 1999, a little-known gathering of experts on Central America convened in San Salvador for the *Central America 2020 Regional Workshop on Migration and Transnationalism*.[2] As a collective, participants from across the Central American countries, Mexico, and the United States were prompted to imagine scenarios for Central America twenty years into the future. At that turn of the millennium, scholars of Central America were weary yet hopeful about the future of the region. Just seven years from the signing of the Peace Accords, El Salvador, in 1999, was still emerging from its brutal civil war (1980-1992) and introducing state policies of national reconciliation and economic development, which resulted in the immensely consequential Amnesty Law of 1993, granting full immunity and impunity to many war criminals. Indeed, at that juncture, touted as the phoenix rising out of the ashes of war, El Salvador seemed headed toward a promising future.

In 1999, international aid was pouring in, remittances from immigrants abroad were ramping up, and the first waves of deported gang members were returning to a country hesitantly receiving them. El Salvador was on the verge of monumental transformation, or catastrophic ruination. Guatemala, too, had just ended its long civil war, signed its Peace Accords at the end of 1996, and world-renowned Maya Quiché activist Rigoberta Menchú Tum had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, offering a fleeting glimpse into the possibilities of peace and reconciliation in the Central American region.

In this context, the participants of the *Central America 2020 Regional Workshop* ventured to speculate on the futures of Central America and its diasporic communities. Would Central America reach new heights at the turn of the millennium, or plummet further into misery? How would

2 The Central America 2020 Regional Workshop "Migration and Transnationalism," July 5-6, 1999, was organized by Professor Sarah J. Mahler, Florida International University, http://ca2020.fiu.edu/Workshops/Salvador_Workshop/S_Mahler_WS.html

the Central American countries fare in the new millennium? What roles would Central American immigrants play in the greater reconstruction of the isthmus? Projections in 1999 at the *Central America 2020 Regional Workshop* cautiously predicted a return to democracy, expansion of neoliberal economies, and continued migration to the United States. Experts at the workshop, however, could not foresee the levels of social violence, economic disparity, mass migration, environmental degradation, political repression, and the return to authoritarianism across the isthmus by 2020, as represented by the re/election of Nayib Bukele as president of El Salvador. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, Central America, particularly its northern countries, finds itself in rapidly declining sociopolitical and economic conditions and human rights violations, with deep roots in past and present U.S. economic, military, and political interventions (Orozco, 2022; Orozco & Yansura, 2015). Shaped by extreme, "new conditions of global capitalism" (Robinson, 2003, p. 3), Central American societies grapple with past and present crises, moving from one war to a more devastating one waged by global and local forces against the poor majority of Central America.

The Northern Triangle as Transisthmian Cultural and Literary Space

In *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures*, A.P. Rodríguez introduces "the trope of the transisthmus—an imaginary yet material space—as a spatial periodizing term and a 'cultural provision' for reading Central American literatures and cultures outside of categories that up to now have elided larger regional complexities" (2009, p. 2). Conceived as a transnational tool of analysis to connect literary or cultural texts across the Central American isthmus and its diasporas and to read these in relation to the historical material realities that made them possible, the transisthmus is also designed as a method for reading against national literatures, official histories, and regimes of truths. The objective, for Rodríguez, is to challenge national literary traditions and discourses (regimes of truth) and to examine other "transisthmian and transnational cultural and literary spaces" (2009, 2022). This essay now extends the notion of the ever-shifting

symbolic and historically-situated transisthmus to examine emerging literary texts of the Northern Triangle.[3]

With Rodríguez, this essay suggests that we read "texts produced in economic, political, and symbolic relationship to the physical geographic location of Central America" (2009, p. 2), or rather that we begin to think of a Northern Triangle literary and cultural production articulating the greater concerns of the region in the first half of the twenty-first century. Herein, transisthmian Northern Triangle literature is used to refer to a corpus of texts emerging from the region (and its diasporas) under neoliberal regimes headed by Bukele in El Salvador (and his immediate predecessors of different political parties); Jimmy Morales and Alejandro Giammattei in Guatemala; Juan Orlando Hernández followed by Xiomara Castro in Honduras; and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, all of whom have enacted repressive, authoritarian policies and rule in their respective countries and across the Northern Triangle.[4]

Extreme Literature

In what follows, I discuss literary works of the Northern Triangle, focusing particularly on an extreme aesthetics of impunity, violence, precarity, and migration, which permeate the region and its cultural and literary production. While the critic Beatriz Cortez (2009) claimed that an "aesthetic of cynicism" marked the turn in Central American literature from transformative narratives that previously informed revolutionary struggles in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s toward an ethos of *desencanto* (disenchantment), cynicism (doubt), and despair in the postwar period (pp. 23-25), the latest round of literature points to extreme material, social, and affective conditions naturalized across a great part of Central America. An extreme time requires an extreme literature, as Betina González (2013) suggests in the prologue to her aptly titled book, *Extreme Fiction*, which includes the short story "On Wednesday Night" by Salvadoran writer Claudia Hernández (2006,

3 For more on the literature of the "Northern Triangle," see A.P. Rodríguez (2022, pp. 251-261).

4 To the best of my knowledge, the term "Northern Triangle" is associated with the *Plan for the Alliance for Prosperity* (AP4) entered into agreement by then Presidents Salvador Sánchez de Cerén (El Salvador), Otto Pérez Molina (Guatemala), and Juan Orlando Hernández (Honduras) in July 2014 (J.O. Hernández, 2016, p. 13). The term was generalized by the media and public.

2007, 2013, 2018, 2021), one of the forerunners of Northern Triangle extreme literature (A.P. Rodríguez, 2022).

According to González (2013), extreme fiction uses "moderation in form" (e.g., language, figures, images, and other literary strategies) while "exaggerating or taking the human situation to an extreme until they obtain something different: not a mirror-realism but rather, a magnifying glass which through distortion confronts us with a new lucidity regarding that which we believed we knew." In this writing, while the language may be subtle, precise, and measured, the referential situations are exaggerated, extreme, and often far from realistic. The extreme is produced in the verbal irony produced between the unrealistic situations or context and the "moderate" literary language, tropes, and figures deployed to represent that referential matter. Produced in the post-conflict fallout of extreme precarity, these texts are generally marked and shaped by the prevalence of violence, corruption, and impunity in postwar Central America; the global and neoliberal economic forces impinging on all aspects of life in Central America (e.g., CAFTA-DR, 2007; *Plan for the Alliance for Prosperity*-AP4; State of Exception, etc.); and the afterlives of empire-building in the region (Hardt & Negri, 2000). In this literature, marginalized and diverse subjectivities are pushed to the limits of what is considered human. Texts are populated by the incarcerated, callejeros (houseless), pandilleros (gang members), border crossers, and everyday marginalized folks pushed to extreme situations, in sum the rightless "multitude" (Negri & Hardt, 2000).

Almost forensic in practice, the extreme literature of the Northern Triangle picks at the residual traumas of past wars and conflicts and prods the ongoing violence, especially in the everyday lived experiences of Central Americans. Texts have taken the shape of a diverse array of genres, including memoir, crónica, crime fiction, noir, true crime, thrillers, speculative fiction, the fantastic, and other experimentations in writing, perspective, voice, and subjectivity, especially in the novel, novella, and short story. Prevalent themes in this literature include wars and their afterlives, violence, trauma, impunity, corruption, repression, migration, death, loss, memory / remembering, micro struggles and resistances, diverse and inclusive identities, and the post-human vis-à-vis the animal

that is more human than humans. As in the case of Claudia Hernández's work (2006, 2007, 2013), monstrous creatures often cohabit with humans in extreme situations, calling thus into question what is animal and what is human in the forsaken territories of Central America.

Los Sin Pisto: Territorios Olvidados (Forsaken Territories)

In the short story anthology *Territorios olvidados: Quince cuentos del Triángulo Norte y uno más al sur*, the editors of Los Sin Pisto introduce the work of diverse, new, and seasoned writers of the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras) and Nicaragua. While the press focuses on publishing the first works of emerging writers, it seeks to open and make space for writers who would otherwise be excluded from what it calls the "maquinaria industrial" (the publishing culture industry) (Rauda Zablah & Nóchez, 2019). Since its humble beginnings, the press has produced "artisanal" texts in print and in electronic format sold via Amazon and markets them via word of mouth, social media and WhatsApp, and blogs like *Revista Café Irlandés*. One of Los Sin Pisto's most notable anthologies, *Territorios olvidados* challenges mainstream editorial conventions and includes the work of a number of transisthmian writers who would be otherwise ignored by national, regional, and international presses (Robbins, 2004). Contrary to conventional paratextual conventions like title pages, forewords, and other extra-literary devices (Genette, 1997), the title page of *Territorios olvidados* eschews the names of singular editors and announces the publication as a joint venture of smaller presses in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, curating the work of authors from across the northern region of Central America:

> La presente edición de Editorial Los Sin Pisto se publica simultáneamente en El Salvador, Honduras y Guatemala en ediciones propias de las editoriales que conforman la TriNorte Triángulo Norte Editores: Editorial X, Los Sin Pisto, Mimala**Palabra**.
>
> [The present edition of Editores Los Sin Pisto is published simultaneously in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala at presses that constitute the TriNorte Northern Triangle Editores: Editorial X, Los Sin Pisto, Mimala**Palabra**.] (*Territorios olvidados*, title page).

The authors of the sixteen short stories, who seem to retain copyright for their respective material as indicated by the © symbol alongside their names, are listed as authors of the anthology. There are five authors from Honduras, five from Guatemala, five from El Salvador, and one from Nicaragua (the "*uno más al sur*", or one story from further south). Each story is preceded by a short biography of the author, describing their previous work, literary affiliations, birth country, and other miscellaneous information. Most of the authors were born between 1961 and 1997, that is, during or immediately after the period of armed conflict and postwar in Central America.

Despite asserting that the material published in its anthologies does not ascribe to any pre-determined criteria or themes outside of "quality," the Editorial Los Sin Pisto provides a literary mapping of the contemporary Northern Triangle in *Territorios olvidados*. The title points to a highly neglected, forgotten, or forsaken (olvidado) literary and cultural region, something that Arias (2007) long-noted in his book *Taking Their Words: Literature and Signs of Central America*, when one of his colleagues asked ironically, "but is there even such a thing as a Central American literature?" (p. ix). The question points to the fact that through the present day, Central American and U.S. Central American literatures, for the most part, continue to be excluded from the corpus of global literature, as stressed by Chacón and Albizúrez Gil (2022). Published under the title referencing the cultural and temporal location of the Northern Triangle, *Territorios olvidados* maps out a cultural zone diverse in themes, settings, and voices, and speaks to transisthmian geo-political, economic, and sociocultural contexts. For example, in the only story from Nicaragua, "Cuento de camino" [Story of the Road], Luis Baéz uses the popular Central American literary genre often associated with folktales, chronicles, and travel narratives to excavate the residual trauma of recent wars in the region and to revisit the past.

In Báez's "Cuento de camino," set in the backroads from Managua to Masaya, two young Nicaraguan call-center employees traveling in a discontinued Yaris pick up three back-packers from Switzerland, Austria, and Northern Ireland and settle in for a night of ghost stories at a local hostel. There, another traveler don Manuel Fermín Estébez tells the story of how his twenty-year old uncle Pencho, a field worker, was

forced to witness the rape, torture, killing, and torching of thirty villagers by the Nicaraguan National Guard on a fateful night during the Sandinista Insurrection of 1979 (Baéz, *Territorios olvidados*, p. 33). Once Pencho had buried the thirty bodies at the command of the Guardia (p. 35), he was left on the side of the road, haunted by a ghoulish woman, recalling the legends of *la Segua* and *la Chancha*, who entrust him with a monstrous baby, *el Maligno*. After attacking Pencho, *el Maligno* scurries away into the forest, perhaps signifying the war traumas with which many Central Americans continue to grapple. In the tradition of the *cuentos de camino* or fables of the road (Ramírez, 1982, 14), Pencho is left demented to wander the streets of his town, reliving the massacre and lamenting the dead (p. 38). In the context of the recent history of Nicaragua and the Northern Triangle at-large, "Cuento de camino" alludes to the collective trauma, memory, and haunting of the region in the wake of recent genocides, massacres, and civil wars.

In another story in *Territorios olvidados*, titled "Devolución" [Return], the Guatemala writer Álvaro Sánchez tells of the day that "La Muerte se hartó de todo" [Death became fed up with everything] and the dead begin to return mysteriously to the narrator's hometown. Perhaps an allegory of the naturalization of violence and death in the contemporary Northern Triangle, Sánchez's story uses the fantastic to depict dead bodies seemingly dropping from the skies without explanation and resuming their lives among the living, who happily accept them back. At his local café, upon hearing the voice of the long-deceased owner, the narrator asks: "¿Cómo se saluda a un muerto que regresa a la vida?" [How do you greet the dead who return to life?] (Sánchez, *Territorios olvidados*, p. 223).

At the end of the story, the narrator's dead father and cat return home while the narrator lays inert on the floor like un "cuerpo tirado" (p. 225). As proposed by B. González (2013) for the extreme literature of Latin America, Sánchez's story "magnifies" the lived realities of violence and death in Central America by creating contrasts in the narrator's "moderate" language and his unperturbed affect at the return of the dead in the story. At the end of the story, the narrator becomes one of the "undead," living with the dead who return to home, seeming to

confirm the naturalization of death and violence in the present-day Northern Triangle.

Similarly, in the crime story "Los sueños no me dejan dormir," by Honduran writer Giovanni Rodríguez, two childhood friends meet to reminisce about their past over drinks. Dark mirrors of each other, the narrator has grown up to become a successful professional while the other (César) has long-dropped out of high school and society, and has been incarcerated for years. The story reflects on "el proceso en que un amigo de la infancia se convierte en un criminal" [the process by which a childhood friend becomes a criminal] (G. Rodríguez, *Territorios olvidados*, p. 206). The story ponders, as well, the construction and perception of criminality in Central American society. By the end of the night and story, César is killed, and, although the narrator witnesses the killing, he remains silent, refusing to help his former friend. Following the trend in Central American noir literature, the story seems to asks: Who is a criminal? What makes someone a criminal? Are we not all complicit in this story of crime and punishment, especially when society-at-large accepts and participates in the criminalization of others?

Finally, in the micro-story "5:57 P.M.," by one of the only two female authors whose work is included in *Territorios olvidados*, Michelle Recinos, from El Salvador, captures the sense of abandonment (olvido) of living in the Northern Triangle in the current moment. In "5:57 P.M.," Recinos writes of the moment of separation between a mother and daughter. Without context or backstory, the daughter departs alone with no explicit destination and for no apparent reason, but asserting her will and agency to depart. Tentatively, before setting off, the daughter hugs her mother and declares that on her journey she will collect and bring back cigarette buds in a glass jar. She departs taking with her all the light switches from the house.

All that remains from the farewell is a sense of deep loss and a void, perhaps signifying the prevailing affect of abandonment and oblivion (olvido) in the Northern Triangle, especially after the migration of so many Central Americans to other territories. This brief exposé of a few narratives in *Territorios olvidados* attempts to throw light on the extreme stories in the anthology, all of which touch upon major themes and issues in the Central American isthmus, including violence, trauma, impunity,

corruption, repression, migration, death, loss, memory / remembering, and the daily struggles to survive and resist, albeit covertly.

Regimes and Resistances in *Sustancia de hígado*

One of the most recognized writers, to date, to come out of the Los Sin Pisto collective is the aforementioned writer, Michelle Recinos. Born in San Salvador in 1997, Recinos is an investigative journalist and creative writer, who has published short stories in the blogs *Café Irlandés* and *Galerías del Alma*, the anthologies *Territorios olvidados* and *Lados B: Voces nuevas, Colección La buruca 1* (2019) and her first, sole-authored short story collection, *Flores que sonríen* (2021), all published by Los Sin Pisto. In 2022, she published *Sustancia de hígado* (F&G Editores), which includes the stories, "Daysi Miller," awarded the X Premio Carátula de Cuento Centroamericano at the Festival Centroamérica Cuenta, and "Barberos en huelga," recognized with the prestigious Premio Monteforte Toledo in 2022 by the Fundación Paiz (Carátula; Premio Montefort Toledo). Recinos was invited to present *Sustancia de hígado* at the XX Festival del Libro de Guatemala in July 2023, but the organizers of FILGUA rescinded the invitation due to pressure from the Salvadoran Ambassador in Guatemala and out of *diplomatic courtesy* to the government of El Salvador (Guevara, 2023; Silva Ávalos, 2023).

Starting with the title, Recinos's *Sustancia de hígado* gathers stories that represent the most toxic, noxious elements gnawing at the Salvadoran body politic, including political repression, corruption, precarity, and gender and social violence, among others. In the rapacious world of the stories, unsavory characters prey upon the misery of impoverished underage mothers and babies ("Casting"), young women with hopes and dreams ("La reina de la noche"), mothers of the disappeared ("Daysi Miller"), domestic abuse victims ("Por motivos de calidad," "Andrés 3000"), and every-day folks barely surviving ("Barberos en huelga"). Politicians are corrupt ("Hombre en pantalla"), people engage in all types of illicit activities ("Encargo"), and the workplace, be it call-centers or non-governmental organizations, capitalize on alienated, exploited labor ("Por motivos de calidad," "Smith," "Andrés 3000").

In the collection's title, the liver (hígado), an organ which cleanses the body, blood, and other fluids of toxins and replenishes cells, serves as a

metaphor of the nation as a living but dying organism, from which the *élan vital* or life force has been extracted. The values, character, history, culture, and innermost substance (sustancia), which define, identify, and make a nation, have been depleted. Just as the body cannot function without a healthy liver, a nation cannot thrive without its essential organs—the judicial, legislative, and executive branches—working for the good of the whole (nation). An unhealthy liver can generate toxins, cancers, and other ailments, as an unhealthy government can eat away at a nation and people, eventually contaminating it. Supplements, however, can be used to heal the body like animal-based liver broth (*sustancia de hígado*), or slices of cooked liver, which may be eaten for their high content in protein, vitamins, and minerals, particularly iron, to infuse the body with extra nourishment and healing. Recinos's book seems to ask: What toxic, noxious elements does El Salvador need to rid itself of? How can the nation be brought back to a healthy body politic? Set in Nayib Bukele's State of Exception, initiated on March 27, 2022, Recinos's story "Barberos en huelga" makes reference to the increasing militarization, massive incarceration, abrogation of constitutional rights, and violation of human rights, all under the guise of national security and popular consent.

In *Sustancia de hígado*, Recinos serves readers a *consomé* of stories representing the state of the Salvadoran society under the Bukele "regime of truth" (Foucault, 1977), whereby a president and his party exercise all-consuming power by propagating a narrative of truth and screen of reality, controlling constitutional rights and dissent, and manufacturing popular consent to the extent of a populace's own subjection to one party ideology (new / "nuevas ideas"). As Foucault argues throughout his work on discourse, power, and truth, we are subject and subjectified to, by, and within a regime of truth, propagating, enforcing, and reifying systems of power, until a regime such as that of Bukele's becomes an overarching reality. In "What is a 'Regime of Truth'?," Lorenzini (2015) sums up Foucault's critique of the alignment of truth and power, now deployed here to discuss Bukele's use of discursive power and the power of literary texts such as Recinos's to resist and incite the Bukele regime to censor her writing and force FILGUA organizers to excise the presentation of her book, *Sustancia de hígado*, from the Festival del Libro de Guatemala in July 2023. According

to Lorenzini, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, "speaking of the formation (within the new penal system in the 18th and 19th centuries) of a corpus of knowledge, techniques, 'scientific' discourses that became entangled with the practice of the power to punish, [Foucault] argues that a new 'regime of the truth' emerged" (2015, p. 1). Following this line of argument, it can be said that a new "regime of truth" has emerged under Bukele's "new ideas" and punitive reforms.

Since coming to power, Bukele has deployed a series of mediatic, technological, financial, military, policing, and other punitive policies fusing into what might be called a Salvadoran *chivo* "cool" or "feel good" national populism in the context of national insecurity and precarity in the country. To be *chivo* in El Salvador is to feel good, safe, at ease, and trusting that all is, or will be well in the country. Hence, the app and system introduced with Bitcoin was called the *Chivo Wallet*, offering each Salvadoran citizen $30 freely, easily, and safely within reach of an app and an automated teller (Chivo Wallet).

Dispelling the grievances against political corruption, social and gender violence, economic scarcity, environmental degradation, and other social ills in the country, the Bukele government offers highly mediated images of feeling good, cool, and safe, thereby, introducing a new regime of truth, lodged in the notion and affect that, *todo está bien*, or is and will be fine, if Bukelean new ideas, initiatives, and programs are accepted in El Salvador. This has led to the use of mediatic technologies vis-à-vis social media and apps to modernize daily functions; high tech imaging systems to project the future of the country; electronic currency such as Bitcoin to transform the economy; high technology armament and equipment to increase military force; and, finally, the construction of a maximum-security prison, dubbed the Terrorism Confinement Center, with the capacity to hold up to 40,000 prisoners, mainly youths and others identified by signs such as tattoos. The last serves as a means to clean and eliminate the so-called criminal element of the country.

In what follows, I analyze Michelle Recinos's critique of the regime of truth permeating all strata of Salvadoran society vis-à-vis Bukele's State of Exception and its *feel good and safe* regime, as represented in her story "Barberos en huelga." It is telling that repeatedly throughout the story the narrator refers to and is disabused of a *chivo* mentality, upon which

the story increasingly throws doubt through its use of verbal irony, where the narrator says one thing, but really means another. Case in point, on Day 30, well into the State of Exception, the narrator says: "Un soldado me llevó al trabajo. Hoy no hay ni cobrador ni motorista. *Está bien, pienso, porque la gente va en paz. No los miran a los ojos, pero van en paz*" [*It's good, I think, because the people go about peacefully. They don't look the soldiers in the eye, but they go in peace*] (Recinos, *Sustancia de hígado*, my emphasis, p. 27).

A satiric critique of the State of Exception in El Salvador imposed by the Nuevas Ideas government of Nayib Bukele, the short story "Barberos en huelga" comprises an anonymous narrator's arbitrary journal entries, dated Day 1 through Day 60. In his first entry, the narrator notes that soldiers begin to appear in his fictious city of San Carlos with the approval of a law authorizing the capture of "los maleantes" [the criminals] (p. 15). At first the nonchalant narrator thinks "es bueno, pienso" [I think it's good] (p. 15), having the soldiers watching, patrolling the streets, and helping the people. With the passing days, however, people begin to be arrested *en masse*, starting with Marvin, his neighbor and Elena's son (p. 19); a group of university students with protest signs (p. 20); his estranged cousin Alexis (p. 21); his neighborhood baker (p. 22); his barber Chino Alberto and his three assistants accused of "agrupaciones ilícitas" [illegal gatherings] (p. 23); his Route 42 bus driver and fare collector (p. 24, p. 27); Mauricio, the son of Mirna, his breakfast street food vendor (25); his two co-workers, Belmore and Willo, and his boss's youngest son (pp. 26-27, p. 31). The last to go are don Pedro, the store owner, and his son, the gas tank deliverer (p. 29, p. 30); plus "otros 30 jóvenes" [30 other youths] (p. 27); followed by another 12 and more unnamed detainees, all sporting the same haircut associated with a dangerous criminal (p. 27). A pattern begins to emerge: all those detained have the same mohawk-like haircut popularized by the beach soccer player Pedro Cabrita Lena, who is also arrested on Day 19 for allegedly belonging to the "estructuras criminales" [criminal structures] (p. 22). By Day 58, Cabrita Lena is killed in prison, after being declared innocent.

Every day the soldiers fill in the jobs left vacant by those incarcerated: they drive and collect fares on the buses; they deliver gas tanks; and they

cut hair at the barbershops. The State of Exception and the militarization of the streets initiated on Day 1 swing into full force, as the arrests of friends and neighbors and the presence of soldiers in the streets are normalized. One night on the news, a reporter declares: "Que al fin, en San Carlos, se podía caminar en paz. Que al fin estábamos en paz" [At last in San Carlos, one can walk in peace. At last, we are at peace] (p. 27). Indeed,

> Los soldados, no solo eran dueños de las calles y avenidas. Los soldados, ahora, manejaban buses y microbuses…Los murmullos del comedor se detiene cuando entran los soldados. Hoy son más. No pagaron el amuerzo.
>
> [The soldiers not only took over the streets and avenues. The soldiers, now, drive the buses and microbuses…The murmurs of the cafeteria stop when the soldiers enter. Today there are more. They did not pay for their lunch.] (pp. 25-28)

People begin to change their routines, cease normal activities, and avoid talking freely with one another, for fear of being arrested. Mothers participate in vigils and marches for their detained children: "17,000 hombres y mujeres…capturados a escala nacional en 29 días… esperando condena en cualquiera de los siete centros penales del país" [17,000 men and women...captured nationally in 29 days … awaiting trial in the seven penal centers of the country] (p. 26). As their business dwindles and their workers are detained, the barbers initiate a "huelga de brazos caídos" (labor strike) on Day 33 (p. 28), which the barbers of Oriente join on Day 47, demanding a stop to the arbitrary arrests (p. 30). In the meantime, many young men begun to sport a new haircut: "el pelo al ras," the buzz haircut (p. 30).

In the last journal entry, on Day 60, the narrator goes to the barbershop *La Esperanza* (Hope) to get a *corte a la ras* (military buzzcut) by a soldier barber. On that day, the government announces that the State of Exception in San Carlos will be extended indefinitely because "la población estaba feliz con los resultados del Régimen de Excepción en el país" [the population was happy with the results of the State of Exception in the country] (p. 31). A *fait accompli*, the State has imposed order by punishing its citizens and subjecting them into accepting a penal and punitive system that incarcerates anyone who shows signs of opposition. It consolidates the State of Exception, by which everyone

accepts the "new ideas" and the new regime of truth, as Foucault forewarns. Pedro Cabrito Lena's mohawk haircut (a foil for tattoos) serves as a sign of criminality, and the military buzzcut, in the end, signifies subjection to the regime of law, order, and truth in San Carlos.

Throughout "Barberos en huelga," there are references to the official media outlets that report daily on the regime's effort to contain criminality with measures under the State of Exception. The narrator regularly watches the news on television and reads the newspapers, which report on the arrests: "Hoy vi al Chino en las noticias de las 7. Lo presentaron bajo un *canopy* con el logo de la Policía … Dijeron que lo capturaron en flagrancia, junto a otros tres cristianos. Que estaban acusados de agrupaciones ilícitas" (p. 23). Captured along with three of his barber assistants, Chino is accused of illicit gatherings at his workplace. Scenes like this are marked by verbal irony, where the narrator casts doubt on the regime's accusations and actions, namely the incarcerations under the State of Exception. The story uses verbal irony, as I have suggested for the extreme literature of the Northern Triangle, to express resistance to the regime's official discourse. While the narrator of "Barberos en huelga" seems to succumb to the regime by cutting his hair in a military buzzcut at the end, he questions the regime throughout the text, sometimes in subtle and covert ways. For example, he questions the veracity of the official media controlled by the regime, calling them and their reporting "pendejadas" (bullshit). On Day 19, when the detentions are fully underway, he explains,

> Tenía bastante de no comprar un periódico. Es que, la verdad, solo pendejadas escriben. Hoy me dio por comprar uno [periódico] … Mi papa me enseñó a leer de atrás para adelante. Importaba más la selecta que lo que dijeran los viejos pendejos de la Asamblea Legislativa. Hoy empecé por la portada. Había fútbol en la sección de política.
>
> [I had not bought a newspaper in a long time. The truth is that they only write bullshit. Today I wanted to buy one … My father taught me to read from back to front. The selecta mattered more than what the old bullshitters of the Legislative Assembly said. Today I started with the front page. There was football in the politics section]. (p. 21)

The narrator reads that Cabrita Lena has been arrested, accused of being a criminal, when previously he had been declared a national sports hero.

Speaking between the lines, the narrator notes that Lena's haircut was used as an element of profiling: "¿Por qué no habrán puesto unas fotos más viejas, en donde el tipo no anda ese horroroso mohicano que lo hacía parecer cepillo de zapatos?" [Why didn't they use older photos in which he did not have the horrendous mohawk that made he look like a shoeshine brush?] (p. 22).

The narrator documents the detentions of people he is familiar with, "good people," as he calls them. He also comments on the *pendejadas* he hears and sees on the news: the news reporter who, after enumerating the 17,000 detentions of men and women on Day 29, praises the President of the Republic for "una jugada maestra" (a good play), bringing peace to San Carlos (p. 27). On that note, the narrator tells us that he turned off the TV and slept with the light on (p. 27), showing signs of fear, even PTSD. He tells us that, "los centros penales… cada día se asemejan más a los buses reventados de gente que los soldados también poseían. Hoy no desayuné" (p. 25). By that point, the State of Exception regulates and administers all aspects of the narrator's and his fellow citizens' bodily, mental, and emotional functions, or rather the biopolitics of sleep, eating, personal hygiene and style (e.g., haircuts), work, mobility, and death at the hands of the militarized regime. Notably, Pedro Cabrita Lena, with his mohawk haircut, is the first reported death under the State of Exception. His death models the possible outcome for all the citizens of San Carlos. The regime of truth, as Foucault stipulates, has overcome the citizens of San Carlos; no one is exempt from the State of Exception and all must comply, as signified by the now prevailing military buzz haircut worn by the young men of San Carlos.

While Recinos's "Barberos en huelga" critiques the State of Exception in El Salvador, the story is also a story of resistance, which challenges the mentality of siege, the false sense of peace and feeling good (chivo), and the mediatic performance by which the Salvadoran citizenry has subjected itself to Bukele's regime, ideas, and initiatives. The State of Exception is buttressed on a long chain of initiatives introduced by Bukele, from institutionalizing Bitcoin; gaining party control of the Legislative Assembly (Congress); infiltrating the Judicial System; strengthening military and police forces with armament and recruits, building a mega-prison with the capacity to hold up to 40,000 people; to

altering the constitution to permit consecutive presidential terms and positioning himself for reelection in a country with a long history of authoritarianism (Blizter, 2022).

In this context, Recinos has written investigative journalistic pieces reporting on political corruption, judicial irregularities, human right abuses, gender violence, and environmental justice in El Salvador for news outlets such as *La Prensa Gráfica* and *MalaYerba* (Recinos, Amaya, Luna, Díaz, & Orellana Solares, 2023). She was among the first courageous journalists to report on the feminicides in Chalchuapa in the northwestern department of Santa Ana, El Salvador (Rosales, Recinos, & Girón, 2021). It is thus obvious that her work poses a threat to Bukele, the elite superstructure, and the institutions which support him. In *Sustancia de hígado*, Recinos cleverly takes a jab at the supporting role of the Catholic Church in Bukele's State of Exception, as the fictious archbishop, in a fictious opinion editorial, praises the government's militarization plan, condemns modern haircuts as moral peril, and gaslights detainees for their own arrests because "los culpables eran los que se asemejaban a los criminals" [the guilty were the ones that looked like criminals] (p. 29). Satirizing the State of Exception, Recinos's "Barberos en huelga, indeed, unravels the punitive, noxious narratives of the Bukele regime, which led to the censorship of her work at the FILGUA, as mentioned earlier.

Conclusion

While the *Central America 2020 Regional Workshop* failed to foresee the rise of authoritarianism in the isthmus in the twenty-first century, the extreme literary texts examined herein can be read as signs of the present future of Central America. Recinos's "Barberos en huelga" and the stories in *Territorios olvidados* hold a magnifying lens to present conditions violence, impunity, corruption, repression, and human rights violations. Concomitantly, these texts represent not only sites of struggle for representation, memory, voice, and visibility, but also for the claim to human rights, environmental justice, food security, healthcare, education, and employment for the peoples of Central America and its diasporas beyond. The extreme transisthmian literature of the Northern Triangle calls Central American scholars in the North and South and all

those interested in the futures of Central America to focus on the present and reimagine the future, while always looking to the not-so distant past for lessons to be (un)learned.

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