

HOMESICK: EXPLORATIONS OF HEALTH ISSUES AND TRAUMA IN THE POSTWAR  
RELATIONSHIP WITH THE *PATRIA* IN CASTELLANOS MOYA'S *EL SUEÑO DEL  
RETORNO* AND ARIAS'S *ARIAS DE DON GIOVANNI*

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**I. Introduction**

There is a well-established corpus of Chicana/o/x/e, Mexican, and Central American narrative that focuses on the flight of isthmian refugees during the civil conflicts that ravaged their countries in the 1980s and 90s. This literature is important for its ability to unveil the devastating consequences of the civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua between 1960 and 1996. For example, these texts served as one leg of the social campaign in the United States at the end of the twentieth century to encourage solidarity for Central American refugees.<sup>1</sup> This fiction also lays bare the impact of wartime violence on Central American persons' health: we see descriptions of death and other consequences of interpersonal violence (such as injury and trauma), alongside narration of other health issues such as illness as a result of malnutrition or extreme stress due to tumultuous living conditions. What is of interest for me in this study, however, is the examination of literature that both prioritizes Central American voices and experiences, and uncovers a long-term correlation between civil war politics and health

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<sup>1</sup> A key example is the body of work that Ana Patricia Rodríguez calls solidarity fiction, which initially emerged as a wave of Chicana literature written in response to the outbreak of institutionalized violence (particularly civil wars) across Central America in the 1980s and 90s. Rodríguez explains that these texts, “dramatized the plight of Central Americans within the wider narratives of the Latin American diaspora, the disenfranchisement of local immigrant populations, and the history of U.S. imperialism and manifest destiny in relation to Central America at the end of the twentieth century” (151-52).

outcomes.<sup>2</sup> In Horacio Castellanos Moya's *El sueño del retorno* (2013), and Arturo Arias's *Arias de don Giovanni* (2010), the consequences of violence and sociopolitical pressure unfold across years for the migrant protagonists, and trauma manifests via a sense of extreme discomfort within their own bodies. The body and its health become the mode of representation of critical messaging about immigrants' ability to feel safe within their countries of origin – or outside of them. Ultimately, the two novels expose and denounce enduring trends of extreme marginalization and violence in Central America, even in the postwar period, and strategically elucidate the long-term consequences of trauma on marginalized peoples' health.

Beyond their explorations of the consequences of civil war on the individual who leaves their country of origin, these novels have several noteworthy similarities. First, they are each written by a Central American author and feature a Central American protagonist. The two texts are self-conscious and intimate, and recount the protagonists' experiences navigating health concerns in a country not their own. *El sueño del retorno* reads like a diary, prioritizing the protagonist Erasmo Aragón's first-person, stream-of-consciousness narrative voice. Erasmo is a Salvadoran exile living in Mexico, who becomes increasingly dependent upon his homeopathic doctor, another Salvadoran expatriate named don Chente Alvarado. What begins as a treatment program for pain in the liver and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) becomes a paranoia-ridden exploration of trauma spanning from Erasmo's childhood into his adult life. Erasmo's rambling monologue mirrors his frenetic thoughts, becoming more chaotic as his mental health

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to study work written by Central American authors in particular because despite its honorable goals, the Chicana solidarity literature of the 1980s and 90s can often be too homogenizing, failing to take into account unique contexts or realities, and that it can also take away agency from the Other who receives the acts of solidarity (Rodríguez 153). In this body of work, Central Americans often appear "as part of a larger hemispheric 'familia' and as 'relatives' in need of a helping hand," rather than as unique and independent agents (Rodríguez 154).

deteriorates (La Haije, “Volver” 6). Meanwhile, *Arias de don Giovanni* employs an epistolary style<sup>3</sup>: the Guatemalan immigrant Pacha’s numerous prolonged emails to their therapist document their attempts to come to terms with their transgender (male-to-female) identity after a barrage of sexual reassignment surgeries.<sup>4</sup> The emails swerve between memories of childhood and adulthood, and alternatively narrate feelings of insecurity and confidence, of shame and pleasure. The narrative focus given to the two protagonists’ first-person voices prioritizes the individual’s perception and power over one’s own identity and worldview. Furthermore, as Nanci Buiza observes in a study of Castellanos Moya’s *El asco* (1997), by aligning its structure and tone to the individual experience, this literature offers an “uncanny,” intimate space for reflection on mental health outcomes, forcing the reader to feel what the characters do, and thereby enabling the reader to “gain conscious, critical awareness” of the consequences of trauma (101, 106-07). Both protagonists also continue to be obsessed with their countries of origin, El Salvador and Guatemala, respectively, revisiting them in memory, and pondering a return there. This comparable framing of immigrant perspectives positions the relationship with the *patria* as a key component in these characters’ long-term health outcomes. Finally, and essentially to their critical functionality, the two novels are marked by an obsession with the body. The protagonists struggle with an identity revision process that seems to be rooted in how

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<sup>3</sup> By framing *Arias de don Giovanni* as an epistolary novel, Arias alludes to older texts of similar format that have treated violence and armed conflict in Central America, such as María Lourdes Pallais’ *La carta* (1996), which delves into the relationship between the U.S. and Nicaragua during the Cold War. Other texts, such as Gioconda Belli’s memoir *El país bajo mi piel: memorias de amor y guerra* (2000), do not employ the epistolary format but provide a similarly individual perspective of an experience, often war or political conflict, that impacts an entire nation.

<sup>4</sup> I use the pronouns them/their to refer to Arias’s protagonist Pacha in an effort to be inclusive of a nonbinary identity. Within the novel itself, pronouns used for this character vary. In Pacha’s recount of childhood memories, masculine pronouns are almost always used, while in narration of memories during adulthood, pronoun use fluctuates, although feminine pronouns are used most frequently.

the body feels, as well as the way that the body interacts with and is perceived by the world. The characters' focus on the body is reminiscent of somatization, a key symptom of complex trauma, which entails the emergence of bodily symptoms or dysfunctions as an expression of emotional distress.<sup>5</sup> Trauma, defined as the physical and mental symptoms an individual experiences in response to a disturbing event, is an essential thread throughout the two novels. Castellanos Moya's and Arias's implementation of specific narrative perspectives and approaches to the human body – and to the representation of trauma – work in tandem to offer a unique lens for our reading of violence and marginalization's long-term impact on health outcomes.

The two protagonists' bodies function in the novels as conduits through which to explore how one's health and sense of identity are affected by violence and related migration, including mental health outcomes and one's relationship to their nation of origin. "The body exists as a site of enunciation," theorizes Vinodh Venkatesh, "upon which the subject can experiment in order to [...] negotiate one's own existence in the world" (6). Both Castellanos Moya's Erasmo Aragón and Arias's Pacha "experiment" on their bodies: Erasmo plunges ever deeper into alcoholism, and later commences a series of homeopathic remedies to change the way he feels, while Pacha undergoes surgical alterations to their body to bring it closer to conventional female anatomy. These bodily-focused actions can represent, as Venkatesh suggests, the protagonists' attempts to understand and manage their place in the world postwar and post-migration. The novels' main characters also reckon with the physical and mental aftermath of long-term trauma, which manifests via a range of coping mechanisms that influence their thinking and behavior,

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<sup>5</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Trauma and Traumatic Stress Disorders* defines somatization as "the presence of chronic painful medical symptoms [...] that stem directly from past or recent severe emotional distress" (243).

including signs of dissociation – defined by *The Encyclopedia of Trauma and Traumatic Stress Disorders* as a sense of disconnection from one’s feelings, memories, and surroundings, which can occur after a traumatic event and can affect one’s sense of identity (104). Significantly, as Marileen La Haije notes in a study of Castellanos Moya’s *Insensatez* (2004), this is not the first time that the author affiliates violence in Central America with mental health issues, which La Haije analyzes as “the feature of madness” (“Narration” 153). Finally, Michel Foucault’s canonical conceptualization of biopower acknowledges trends of sociopolitical control over the body<sup>6</sup> – it is this external influence with which the two novels’ protagonists dialogue and contend. In other words, Erasmo and Pacha as individuals negotiate with collective forces of influence based in the ideals of their society and politics of origin, even after their emigration. The protagonists’ bodies’ physical and mental health outcomes reveal the state of their relationship with common identity markers, such as their nationality and sociopolitical norms surrounding sex/sexuality/gender. Erasmo and Pacha’s similar demonstrations of insecurity about and unwellness within their bodies correlate to their uncertainty about how to untangle their lives from the effects of long-term marginalization in a postwar society.

## **II. Systemic Violence and Related Health Outcomes, or, the Consequences of Biopower**

The two protagonists’ recurrent thoughts about their home countries, and about the historical and current capacity for bodies (theirs, or any) to be well there, expose a situation of systemic violence in Central America that is not limited to the civil war period. Slavoj Žižek explains systemic violence as “the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical

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<sup>6</sup> In a 1978 lecture, Foucault defined biopower as “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power” (1).

violence but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence” (8). The novels depict El Salvador and Guatemala, respectively, as the setting of numerous deaths and other acts of violence committed by the conservative state, but also portray them more broadly as nations whose citizens live in fear. The two countries, as geographical and symbolic sites, thus function as reference points for biopower on two levels. First, they are consistently associated with civil war, which is a clear manifestation of strategic political power over human bodies. Second, they also represent in the fictional imaginary a long-term cultural normalization of sociopolitical control over and marginalization of human bodies, and consequent impacts on health.

In this context, it is significant that in *El sueño del retorno* Erasmo Aragón’s early thoughts about the possibility of a return to El Salvador as the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords materialize seem optimistic: “comencé a fantasear con lo que haría al regresar a San Salvador, con la disciplina gimnástica a la que me sometería para reconstituir mi cuerpo tan maltrecho” (30). The verb “fantasear” alludes to a sense of hope and a positive emotional affiliation with the *patria*. Erasmo recounts a pleasant tickling sensation in his body at this daydream’s offset, accompanied by thoughts of renewed professional success and the prospect of developing a sexual relationship with a desirable woman. Erasmo’s musings here echo what Yvette Aparicio calls “an affective attachment to and a nostalgia for a Salvadoran national home” common in the work of postwar writers (151). However, this fantasy includes a requisite control over the body, a “disciplina gimnástica” with which Erasmo must reconstruct his battered body. Erasmo’s account of what this discipline entails is brief, limited to a fleeting thought of getting sober for a while. More striking is the absence of any reflection at this moment of how his body has come to be in such a poor state, which signifies a lack of “critical distance” in Erasmo’s nostalgic reverie,

essential within the more cognizant reflective processes that Aparicio identifies in other works' poetic voices (151). In comparison, a passage in the novel's first chapter refers to the stress of living in exile. Erasmo's idyllic conceptualization of postwar life in El Salvador in this later scene reflects a process of idealization, which is one of many cognitive shifts that can occur in response to traumatic stress as a way of coping with what has transpired.<sup>7</sup> Within the context of trauma, idealization, through which Erasmo attributes unrealistically positive characteristics to El Salvador, can signal uncertainty or negative emotions toward something (or someone) that was once cherished. The lingering sentiment that the body must be regulated and changed as a condition for achieving success in El Salvador is therefore a warning sign, emerging despite idealization, that alludes to Erasmo's ongoing fear about his security there.

Erasmo's increasing paranoia, as the novel progresses, about his safety upon returning to El Salvador reveals more clearly his traumatized state. The style of Castellanos Moya's prose reinforces the depiction of declining mental health: Erasmo's frenetic narration of his thoughts and memories, both recent and more distant, "vivifies the experience of feeling overwhelmed by anxiety" (Buiza 106). A drunken conversation with his uncle, also exiled in Mexico, provokes Erasmo to develop a new understanding of the death of his cousin (his uncle's son) Albertico, who was tortured and then assassinated by the Salvadoran national police eleven years earlier, in 1980. Erasmo had previously deemed this event irrelevant to his own wellbeing: "no había valorado en su justa dimensión las consecuencias que el asesinato de Albertico había tenido en mi psiquis" (125). The denial of the psychological impact of his cousin's murder speaks to a

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<sup>7</sup> Idealization is defined as the demonstration of "inaccurate rationalizations, idealizations, or justifications of the perpetrator's behavior, particularly if the perpetrator is or was a caregiver" (*Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services* 66).

process of intellectualization, a defense mechanism common within dissociation, in which a person employs logic to avoid confrontation with a mental conflict and its accompanying emotional stress (*Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services* 69). This dissociative state through which Erasmo evades an emotional reckoning with the horrors of his past is broken by the spontaneous chat with his uncle, which functions as a trigger for a flood of intrusive thoughts: “adquirió luego el asesinato de Albertico una dimensión de fatalidad que me agobiaría cada vez que lo recordaba” (125). These types of invasive thoughts and memories are often disruptive, and can prompt marked emotional and behavioral responses, as if the trauma were recurring in the present (*Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services* 66). In Erasmo’s case, the thoughts interfere with his ability to proceed with his daily routine: he collapses into bed in the fetal position, experiences feelings of terror, and wishes to disappear from the world: “tuve ganas de desaparecer, de esfumarme en el aire” (128). This desire to simply vanish, even without specific intent to take one’s own life, is characteristic of passive suicidality, another hallmark of trauma. So, too, are difficulty managing daily responsibilities and the use of unhealthy strategies to cope: preparing breakfast seems to Erasmo a herculean task, punctuated by ongoing intrusive thoughts, and the character resorts to another familiar coping mechanism – alcohol. Paranoia persists, however, and the planned return to El Salvador, first perceived as a fantastical path to healing and contentment, now becomes a death sentence: “comprendí que ése era el destino que a mí también me esperaba, ser desaparecido por los militares al nomás aterrizar en el aeropuerto de Comalapa” (127). Erasmo’s fearful prediction serves a dual purpose. First, it reveals the influence that enduring fear has on Central American immigrants’ decision processes related to their home countries. Second, it alludes again to the systemic violence (through which the government’s power can emerge ubiquitously, including in an international



airport) that Castellanos Moya's text suggests still grips El Salvador even as the war supposedly comes to an end. In sum, the range of negative feelings that Erasmo experiences here as he considers a return to El Salvador – spanning from dissociative intellectualization, to anxiety, terror, and dysfunction, to suicidality – demonstrates the lasting impact of trauma on his personal sense of security and on his relationship with his country of origin.

*Arias de don Giovanni* depicts a comparable state of trauma and associated negative feelings toward one's country of origin (in this case, Guatemala). Erasmo's views of El Salvador shift back and forth, despite often trending negatively; meanwhile, Pacha consistently associates Guatemala with violence and concurrent danger. Pacha recalls signifiers of violence through the temporal lens of "before" and "after," time frames designated by the start of the civil war: "En esa época no había guerrilla todavía. Se podía subir todavía y ver el aeropuerto. Después, ya todo eso lo custodiaban soldados armados hasta los dientes y uno era cadáver si tan siquiera se acercaba" (46). This memory connects violence and exclusion with a particular time period and setting: during the armed conflict in Guatemala, murder becomes an appropriate means of controlling people's behavior, of restricting their access to certain spaces or inhibiting them from undesired actions. Pacha's references to snapshots of violence that were visible in their daily life in the City of Guatemala during childhood and adolescence paint a picture of a multi-pronged force of marginalization that grips the entire country. Pacha's emails to their therapist feature brusque references to the presence of soldiers in the streets, an abrupt memory of the sight of airplanes in the sky on November 13, 1960 – which corresponded to a military movement against the Guatemalan president – and countless comments about unexplained cadavers. The regularity of casual remarks about the physical signs of violence in Guatemala underlines the permanence of violence in Pacha's life prior to emigration, as well as a sense of apathy in response to it.

Violence becomes routine in Pacha's childhood: "Las bombas se volvieron tan rutinarias como mirar al panadero en bicicleta anunciando sus franceses" (267). Although Pacha does not idealize their home country in the way that Erasmo sometimes does, a nonetheless similar pattern of dissociative thoughts about the *patria* occurs. Pacha's comments are grim and sometimes clever, incorporating wordplay, but are relatively emotionless and thus reminiscent of the trauma-based defense mechanism, intellectualization.<sup>8</sup> Pacha describes wartime violence in a matter-of-fact tone which serves two purposes: first, it allows for emotional distancing from traumatic events, since, after all, they occurred in a different time (the past) and place (Guatemala, which is no longer Pacha's country of residence). Second, these descriptions logically justify Pacha's reluctance to return to Guatemala, with no need for difficult emotional processing of long-term consequences of a traumatic upbringing there.

While Pacha's negative comments about the war in Guatemala can be interpreted as a sign of intellectualization, the protagonist's intermittent refusal to discuss the war is also significant for the text's critical messages about systemic violence in the country and related mental health outcomes. Pacha's choice not to analyze wartime violence in detail signifies a profound disillusionment with the country's treatment of this time period, even into the narrative present. (Lasting unrest in response to the Guatemalan civil war manifested in an internationally visible way as recently as 2018, when four military officers and an ex-soldier were convicted for war crimes and sentenced, collectively, to over two centuries in prison).<sup>9</sup> Of the nation's bloody

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<sup>8</sup> While describing *Arias de don Giovanni*'s cynical approach to Guatemala, Karen Poe highlights Arias's play with names for Guatemala as a rhetorical strategy that reinforces a negative perspective of Guatemala and its history while also depicting the narrative voice as clever, and therefore a potentially more reliable source (153).

<sup>9</sup> See article by Sofia Menchu in *Reuters*, May 23, 2018, entitled "Guatemala Sentences Four Military Officers for Civil War Crimes."

history, Pacha quips, “Lo único ganado por la Guatehorror en toda su tristonada historia es el campeonato mundial de desaparecidos, de asesinatos y de corrupción, pero le dije que de eso no le iba a hablar por irracional que pueda parecerle a estas alturas de mi escabrosa vida” (83).

Pacha’s description points broadly to the results of systemic violence in Guatemala with a casual tone that suggests that detail is unnecessary, since this reality is assumedly well known.

Meanwhile, the rapid redirection represents an essential juxtaposition in Arias’s narrative:

namely, despite the clear prominence of violence in Guatemala, it often manifests as a calculatedly censored subject across Pacha’s emails. By depicting a character that chooses not to painstakingly examine the outbreak and spread of violence in Guatemala across the 1960s and after, Arias’s text serves to insinuate that there is nothing to be gained in doing so. The novel compares the Guatemala of Pacha’s youth to the country in present-day to suggest that violence continues to reign there despite the armed conflict’s official end. For example, Pacha reflects:

“Era [...] la época cuando todavía se veían muchos zopilotes en el cielo. Ya casi han desaparecido ahora a pesar de la abundancia de cadáveres” (47). Since death continues to be the norm in the country, the novel implies, returning to memories of the war is unhelpful, because no lesson has been learned despite the horrors of the past. Pacha’s purposeful silence also functions as a means of claiming agency: to reference Spivak’s canonical 1983 essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” there is a difference between the subaltern being unable to speak or speaking from an altered mental state, and the subaltern choosing not to speak about certain topics. In this case, Pacha’s ability to choose what to discuss can represent an effort to regain a sense of control that was lost during traumatizing events, namely, long-term marginalization and violence.

### **III. Gender Norms, Their Social Policing, and Resulting Insecurity in the Body**

Castellanos Moya's and Arias's novels articulate the reality of biopower principally through allusions like those studied above to the civil wars in Central America. Alongside political forces, familial emphasis on traditional gender roles works to regiment the protagonists' bodies via certain expectations. The predominant social value that influences the characters' behavior is *machismo*, which posits a code of ideals and conduct apt for heterosexual males.<sup>10</sup> The key enforcers for these gendered behavioral codes in both novels are the protagonists' family members, which aligns with Foucault's understanding of mechanisms of power as an intrinsic part of all relationships (2). The protagonists' turmoil over their families' censorship is indicative of the influence of familism, an ideology common in Latin American culture in which loyalty to and harmony within the family is prioritized over the individual's needs.<sup>11</sup> Critics also suggest that the cultural emphasis on a gendered behavioral model is linked with biopower. For example, Ariana Vigil connects gendered standards of behavior to the Guatemalan civil war, explaining that, "Rhetoric that encourages 'toughness' in a military setting [...] normalizes particular performances of gender" (9). In this sense, the strict regulation of bodies both in the context of civil war and within the family dynamic represents a national standard, upheld across sociopolitical strata, of bodily behavior that a person must meet in order to be accepted and safe. The ubiquitous force in the two novels that denounces inappropriate behavior and calls attention to it is symbolic violence. According to Žižek, symbolic violence is "embodied in language and

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<sup>10</sup> "*Machismo* is the conventional term for the codes, ideals, behaviors, and appearances by which masculinity is structured and assumes meaning in Latin American and Latino/a societies... *machismo* designates a Latin American 'cult of virility'... [which is] characterized by aggressive and 'intransigent' relations between men that also overdetermine men's sexually aggressive and arrogant treatment of women" (Allatson 146).

<sup>11</sup> "Familismo, a Latino cultural value, refers to the importance of strong family loyalty, closeness, and getting along with and contributing to the wellbeing of the nuclear family, extended family, and kinship networks" (Ayón et. al 3).

its forms” (1). In the most basic sense, this could be the terminology with which Erasmo’s and Pacha’s family members criticize them when they act in “unmasculine” ways. Stephania Padilla Ugalde, in an analysis of the role of language in *Arias de don Giovanni*, suggests that regulatory language – whether in regards to correct grammar, acceptable vocabulary, or the use of subject pronouns or gendered adjectives – has significant power in determining social interactions. She explains, “El peso del género presente en la lengua es tan significativo que puede llegar a influir en los modos de vida y las percepciones del mundo” (9). Accordingly, symbolic violence also corresponds to the system of cultural symbols and signs that guide these family members and others to think that the protagonists’ behaviors are wrong and need to be corrected or punished (Bourdieu, “Symbolic” 80; Žižek 57). In Castellanos Moya’s and Arias’s novels, systemic violence is an external cause of fear and hesitation about returning to a home country that is still dangerous. Meanwhile, symbolic violence leads to the internalization of a critical voice that influences the protagonists’ behaviors and sense of self (and self-esteem) for years to come.

For both Erasmo and Pacha, symbolic violence in the form of gender-based pressure emerges in childhood, representing an additional source (alongside civil war) for recurring trauma. A key case of this type of censorship in *El sueño del retorno* is when Erasmo’s father is murdered for his suspected role within a political conflict when Erasmo is eleven years old. Erasmo’s family instructs him to withhold emotional expression to avoid upsetting his younger sibling, because “ya [es] un hombrecito,” and “podría contener[se], sin hacer comentarios o llorar” (46). This counsel aligns with familism, suggesting a prioritization of the family’s needs over the still-young Erasmo’s own emotional experience. It also directly supports the idea, upheld within the *machista* perspective, that men should be controlled and unemotional, even during moments of tragedy. The ongoing impact of this interaction in Erasmo’s adulthood

reflects an internalization of symbolic violence. Decades later, Erasmo still feels shame for his difficulty in attaining this supposed ideal of family responsibility and masculinity, and particularly, for his inability to manage his bodily responses to the despair that his father's death provokes. This embarrassment impedes his ability to be unguarded with his medical provider, don Chente. In his third appointment with don Chente, Erasmo reflects on the memory of his father's death, but: "no le conté nada de esto a don Chente porque cada vez que había querido hablar de [la muerte de mi padre] a lo largo de mi vida se me cerraba de nuevo el nudo en la garganta, los ojos se me inflamaban y me volvía un zombi, y no era este el momento para semejante numerito" (48). This passage exemplifies somatization, a coping mechanism through which Erasmo's emotional distress manifests via bodily symptoms. Because of the cultural stigma around masculine emotion, Erasmo is never able to process his feelings about this tragedy, and consequently is plagued for decades by uncomfortable physical symptoms around the memory. His internal thought process around this shame is revelatory. The diminutive "numerito" dismisses the validity of his emotional experience. Meanwhile, the comparison of self with a zombie suggests a symbolic dehumanization as a way of devaluing himself when he is unable to maintain certain standards of a masculine appearance within his bodily behaviors. Importantly, this choice to hide a personal experience from don Chente mirrors an earlier decision to not expose his discovery of his girlfriend's recent affair, which could also indicate a lack of manliness on Erasmo's part. Erasmo's shame about behaviors deemed unmasculine, coupled with a corresponding impact for his self-esteem and the inability to articulate these feelings in a therapeutic context, is indicative of the influence of symbolic violence into his adulthood.

Comparably, Pacha's earliest experiences with gender-based marginalization and its consequences also occur in childhood, again in relationship to their father. Pacha's father's critical voice throughout *Arias de don Giovanni* epitomizes the social restrictions on behavior and gender identity in Guatemala by outlining the normative paradigm of hegemonic masculinity via a *machista* code of behavior (Connell). During their youth, Pacha struggles to behave and maneuver their body according to their father's standards, which causes intense stress. For example, when Pacha's father forces them to ride a horse as a child, Pacha remembers their efforts to please their father by hiding their fear: "Yo me agarraba silenciosa a la manzana de la montura como desesperado, tratando de poner cara de palo para que el viejo no leyera mi pánico en el rostro y frunciera el ceño" (242). Gender identity plays out in the position of the body, physically dominating the horse, and the outward expression of the face: the "cara de palo" intends to convey Pacha's masculine bravery, in rejection of the "pánico" that would suggest femininity. When Pacha falls from the horse and begins to cry, Pacha's father rages against them: "¡Cállese ya! ¡Sea hombre!" (246). Pacha's tears function as a physical manifestation that separates them from the desired masculine identity. Pacha's father's disproportionately furious response to this perceived social error reveals the weight that traditional gender roles hold in Guatemalan culture, and alludes to the symbolic violence that defends this cultural value.

Another scene of *Arias de don Giovanni*, this time a memory of Pacha's adolescence, describes a notably similar interaction between Pacha and their father, which serves to further decode the conservative approach to gender identity in Guatemala. When Pacha fails to block a goal during an important soccer game, their father criticizes them: "¡Si se parte un hueso, lo llevo al IGSS y ya! ¡Pero aprenda a tirarse como los hombres, que no quiero que ensucien mi nombre al acusarlo a usted de...!" (114, my emphasis). Again, Pacha's father's mode of criticism

connects masculine identity to particular corporeal movements that must be learned and then applied. Venkatesh clarifies that “The Masculine is consecrated and assimilated through aesthetic, discursive, behavioral, and even sartorial cues and practices [... and] whatever does not lie within or loosely follow this specific epistemology of power is relegated to alternative and subservient roles and positions” (7). Since Pacha’s father repeatedly critiques certain types of behavior and associates these actions with a deeper skepticism about Pacha’s identity, these outbursts outline the restrictive limits of the binary social system of gender that exists in Guatemala during this time period. Traditional Guatemalan society is suspicious and critical of any behavior that does not correlate to a conventionally defined gender identity (which must, in turn, correspond to biological sex), and external appearances are prioritized over internal sentiments.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, *El sueño del retorno* and *Arias de don Giovanni* depict comparable systems of evaluation, control, and punishment of the body, whether these actions occur in the context of war or of societal standards (communicated by the family). Unsuitable behavior in the war setting leads to torture and probable death, while inappropriate conduct within the family environment provokes censorship and critique. Consequently, both protagonists experience negative mental health outcomes over the course of their lives, brought on by internalized pressure to moderate their bodies at all times.

Erasmus’s and Pacha’s internalization of the burden of a youth marked by wartime violence and inflexible social norms within their bodies reinforces the texts’ explorations of somatization. For example, Arias’s protagonist Pacha reflects, years after leaving Guatemala,

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<sup>12</sup> In addition to Venkatesh, see Bourdieu (2001), Butler (1999), and Connell (1993) for theorization on the binary gender divide, the performative nature of gender, and the differences between biological sex and gender identity.



that: “siempre pensaba que mi actitud pasmada, mudenca, *lo poco relajado de mi esfínter* se lo debía a [mi padre]” (238, my emphasis). Pacha connects both emotional and physical results for their person as an adult to childhood experiences, thus offering a multifaceted understanding of long-term mental health outcomes. For Erasmo, who is arguably less emotionally intelligent than Pacha (who at this point has undergone months, if not years, of psychological therapy), this connection is not so clear. It is Erasmo’s doctor don Chente who elucidates the mind-body connection which, interestingly, also affects Erasmo’s sphincter and intestinal health<sup>13</sup>:

La angustia y el control de los esfínteres están estrechamente relacionados. Si a un niño se le educa con métodos estrictos y se le reprime en ese momento, a lo largo de su vida llevará su angustia al esfínter y por lo mismo al colon. Y cuando como adulto tenga que tomar una decisión [...], sentirá angustia y esa angustia le hará apretar esfínter y tensionar su colon. De ahí viene la colitis nerviosa [...] Ése es el mal que usted padece.  
(20)

This explanation, more detailed than the one Pacha proposes, explicitly affiliates long-term anxiety (frequent in prolonged trauma, such as that which Pacha and Erasmo experience) with specific consequences for the body and how it feels over time and in different circumstances. Anthropologist Marta Lamas asserts that “La vivencia de lo social ocurre en el cuerpo” (159). In other words, the representation of the body, its conduct, and its condition reflects the social context in which one finds him or herself. For Pacha and Erasmo, the tense anal muscle insinuates that the two characters struggle to release the buildup of pressure that conservative

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<sup>13</sup> Irritable bowel syndrome, which is Erasmo Aragón’s chief initial complaint in *El sueño del retorno*, is named as one of the more common medical issues among those who have experienced a traumatic event (*The Encyclopedia of Trauma and Traumatic Stress Disorders* 243).

cultural rhetoric of gender identity (and sociopolitical standards of appropriate behavior during civil war) has caused – both within their bodies and their negotiations of identity. By connecting the cultural system of social evaluation and marginalization to the individual body, and specifically to the anus, the two novels work in tandem to personalize the consequences of cultural marginalization based on rigid social norms and problematize the sociopolitical propagation of certain tenets of social hierarchization.

#### **IV. (The Possibility of) Identity Reformation through Body Modification**

Both novels clearly connect the protagonists' experiences of violence, marginalization, and subsequent physical and mental health outcomes with the Guatemalan and Salvadoran civil wars and the characters' relationships with their families. More broadly, the novels expose common trends of division within Guatemalan and Salvadoran culture, thereby localizing the systemic and symbolic violence that victimizes and marginalizes those who are considered Other. This precise localization of health risks can facilitate affected persons' efforts to identify new pathways through which to achieve a better quality of life. For both Erasmo and Pacha, the first step is self-exile through emigration, which functions to distance them from biopower's immediate influence. The protagonists' subsequent failure and success, respectively, to realize additional agency and healing is revelatory for the novels' exploration of postwar health outcomes, including trauma and its varied effects on the migrant body. The two characters' final sentiments about their return to their home countries, at the novels' conclusion, cement the texts' critical studies of the long-term consequences of violence and sociopolitical pressure.

Though Erasmo gradually comes to recognize some affiliation between the insistent inculcation of certain values (such as traditional masculinity), his experience of particular traumatic events (such as wartime violence), and his physical ailments, he is unsure of how to

respond to this information independently. When his doctor abruptly returns to El Salvador, leaving Erasmo behind in Mexico, his IBS symptoms, alcoholic tendencies, and liver pain flare up, and his anxious indecision takes hold again. Erasmo's despair when he realizes that he may not be able to meet with don Chente again before departing for El Salvador reveals his ongoing reliance on his doctor's aid to counteract the impact of sociopolitical control on his body and mental health. In a state of rising panic, Erasmo refers to his increasingly faint hope that the doctor "alumbraría aquellas partes oscuras de mi psiquis que disturbaban mi tracto intestinal y eran culpables de ciertas sinuosidades en mi carácter" (82), and that through treatment, "quedaría curado por completo, limpio de las telarañas que me inflamaban el colon" (81). Erasmo's dependence on external guidance suggests that cultural norms of behavior are so entrenched for the Salvadoran exile that he has no idea of how to disempower them and move forward.

The closing chapter of Castellanos Moya's novel, importantly, depicts a protagonist that is as driven by alternating desperation and fantasy as he has been since the text's first pages. Waiting in the airport for his return flight to El Salvador, Erasmo consumes alcohol to calm his jittery nerves as he anticipates the next, better, phase of his life, which he ironically imagines will be possible in the same country that has provoked such a complex of health issues: "por fin estaba a punto de emprender el viaje del retorno, a más tardar en una hora embarcaría en el avión que me llevaría a una nueva etapa en mi vida" (165). His sole conscious acknowledgment of his anxiety about the ongoing danger of life in El Salvador even as the civil war comes to an official close, excluding his "agitación" (165) and rapid consumption of alcohol, is eerily reminiscent of his daydream in the novel's second chapter. Coupled with his expectations for his imminent return is his plan "a enfrentar el reto de reinventarme en unas condiciones en las que el peligro cotidiano me obligaría a la lucidez, a ese control de mis energías que tanto anhelaba" (165). The

references here to self-reinvention, daily danger, and control of his energies echo Erasmo's earlier-defined parameters for a better life back in San Salvador, in which he must apply gymnastic discipline in order to reconstitute his body. The parallels between these daydreams imply that rather than achieving any notable growth across the novel, Erasmo has emerged from dissociation just long enough to realize the impact of trauma on his health and state of mind, only to voluntarily embrace dissociative idealization once again. The only shift in Erasmo's mode of considering his healing process is that he now links this course of reinvention to a hypothetical last treatment from the doctor don Chente, whom he plans to track down in El Salvador and who "me daría pistas sobre mí mismo, cuyas revelaciones me encauzarían hacia el equilibrio tan deseado" (165). For Erasmo, future well-being is inextricably tied to the ability to understand and thereby moderate himself to conform more readily to sociopolitical standards, rather than a lasting separation from the systemic and symbolic violence that have traumatized him.

Erasmo's final thoughts in the text of the role other people play in his future welfare confirm how entrenched gendered social values remain for his perception of self. His musings reveal an ongoing anxiety about being perceived as something less than the traditional strong male, as demonstrated in his rage at his girlfriend Eva's assertion that "mi obsesión por regresar a San Salvador ahora que la guerra estaba a punto de terminar era una forma de esconder mi cobardía, un gesto con el que yo pretendía cubrir el hecho de que durante la guerra nunca tuve el valor de ir a combatir a los frentes guerrilleros" (167). For the insecure Erasmo, his girlfriend's implication of his lack of manliness is anathema, and the only suitable response he can procure is to leave in anger and then purchase a half-gallon of vodka at the airport. His enduring ire is not appeased until an attractive young mother in a miniskirt appears in the waiting area. His lustful admiration of the woman seems to satisfactorily reassert, in his own mind, his masculinity. His

confidence wavers quickly, however, as he criticizes himself for not approaching the woman as he should, and then this train of thought is entirely interrupted when he spots don Chente walking toward the airport's exit. When his abrupt pursuit of his doctor is curtailed, he immediately returns to catch up to the beautiful woman once more, "con la certeza de que sólo ella escucharía con atención mi quebranto" (178). So concludes *El sueño del retorno*, leaving Erasmo's return to El Salvador imminent but hypothetical, and proposing in closure that Erasmo will upon this homecoming again embrace a *machista*, sex-driven approach to the world, which reasserts the value and power of the repression that has plagued him. In this denouement, Castellanos Moya's novel aligns with Central American postwar literature's trend of cynicism<sup>14</sup>, in which the individual believes himself to be free when in fact he is more subjugated than ever before to social norms and officially-approved modes of identification (Ortiz Wallner 88).

In comparison, the portrayal of Pacha's extreme path to a more rewarding life in *Arias de don Giovanni* works as a criticism of cultural violence in Guatemala and loosely outlines an alternative means for affected persons to find healing. Pacha attains agency through a dual manipulation of the body – they remove it from the restrictive confines of Guatemalan culture through emigration, and then reshape it through sexual reassignment surgery. Parallel to the role the body has played in the censorship that Pacha has faced for years, it is also the key for Pacha's reconstructed identity as an adult. Pacha's normative male body represents the culture of marginalization from which they flee: in the maintenance of conventionally masculine features and behaviors, Pacha would continue to subscribe to the identity forced upon them by their father. The reconstruction of the body becomes a method to circumvent a marginalizing cultural

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<sup>14</sup> See Cortez (2010).

system and find a new way forward. Pacha reflects: “¿Cómo pensar las diferencias sexuales, cómo explicar mi propio desplazamiento para encontrar mi lugar, un lugar donde pudiera ser yo? La naturaleza no podría ser mi ser. No podía seguir siempre preso en ese saco que eran los contornos de mi piel” (102-03). Pacha visualizes the existing and “natural” system as a prison: within this system, regimented by the body, they are “preso;” they are limited and confined. As Connell suggests with the theorization of the human condition of “the body inescapable,” the human perspective of the body as a filter for the construction and conception of [gender] identity becomes restrictive (52). Resulting distress leads to Pacha’s decision to take control of their identity through a sexual reassignment operation. In this action, Pacha demonstrates that even if gender were intrinsically linked to sex, they can control both sex and how others perceive their sex, and thus reject social marginalization based on a binary gender identity. Similarly, despite society’s power over the regulation of gender roles in Guatemala, Pacha is empowered to leave Guatemala, to remove their body from it, and thus change the environment in which and the lens through which their body is evaluated. The manipulation of the body in spaces beyond Guatemala’s border thus functions as an act of protest and liberation that denounces and rejects the marginalization that strict codes of social hierarchy and normative identity entail.

The novel’s depiction of Pacha’s efforts to take authority over their own identity and self-representation attests to the value of giving marginalized peoples a space where their voices can be heard. Through the reconceptualization of the body, Pacha gains control over their own identity, instead of having to subscribe to certain social standards. Pacha is able to choose how to identify in a given moment; for example, they often refer to themselves with female pronouns and adjectives, but sometimes switch to male terminology. In regards to this oscillation of gendered pronouns across the narrative, Padilla Ugalde suggests that Arias intentionally pushes the bounds

of gendered language in *Arias de don Giovanni* to open a space for the multiple identities that cross the physical body, thus establishing a more inclusive framework for the perception of human identity (2). Accordingly, Pacha defends their ability to label themselves as they please: they tell their therapist that “[Juana m]e decía Pierrot cuando se ponía sarcástica. Yo le exigía ser llamada Charlotte” (142). This represents a freedom of perspective that Pacha’s lesbian companion, Juana, criticizes: “Preferís ser feminoide sólo en lo que te gusta pero seguir siendo masculimachote en lo que te conviene, cabronsote” (144). Other points in the narrative demonstrate that what Pacha wants is not to subscribe to a binary system in which they always identify as female, but rather, to avoid it entirely by identifying along a fluid spectrum, and enjoying a corresponding range of possible behaviors. For example, after an explicit description of Juana’s body, they include a doubtful aside to their psychologist: “Creo que me salió lo masculino. ¿Describiría una mujer a otra de esa manera? No me vuelva a regañar” (284). The fact that Pacha is most satisfied when they are at liberty to define themselves and behave flexibly suggests that marginalized peoples should be free to represent themselves as they wish, without being forced to respect the limitations that the dominant cultural norms would put upon them.<sup>15</sup>

Pacha’s return to Guatemala at the end of the novel confirms that Pacha has reinvented their identity and their perspective of the world through a combination of migration and sexual non-conformity. Pacha’s father, who is dying, does not recognize Pacha in their surgically-altered body. Pacha feels that they do not belong there anymore, and reflects: “En vez de tener dos culturas en realidad no tenía ninguna. Ni me asimilé a los USA ni era ya guatemalosa” (355).

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<sup>15</sup> Venkatesh explores the prominence of more fluid identities in twenty-first century literature, suggesting that parallel to how nationally-based identity construction has become practically moot in the face of a globalized, neoliberal economy, the manner in which gender is perceived and represented in Latin American literary production has also shifted and become markedly more fluctuant.

Vigil indicates that “Latinas/os are increasingly rejecting national identity markers for more expansive articulations of identity and community” (17). In this sense, Pacha’s severance from their Guatemalan nationality reflects a broader dissatisfaction with traditional identity markers. Instead of endeavoring to fix their relationship with their home country, like Erasmo in *El sueño del retorno*, Pacha leaves Guatemala with no intention of returning there in the future. Reflecting on this departure, they tell their psychologist that “por primera vez sentí un efectivo deseo de sanarme las heridas, las interiores” (363), by which they acknowledge the trauma that their history has caused them. However, Pacha does not want this process of healing to take place in Guatemala, but rather within their new identity as a sexual person. At the end of the novel, for example, after seeing their father, Pacha decides to abandon therapy, and they finally look toward their future (rather than their past) to confidently declare: “estoy segurísima que voy a encontrar una chavala joven [...que v]a a coger de lo más sabroso” (367). Therefore, while immigrants generally straddle a connection between their home country and the country to which they immigrate, Pacha rejects this binary, preferring to embrace a liberated identity based on sexual freedom rather than nationality or traditional gender roles. As Karen Poe asserts, *Arias de don Giovanni* “propone nuevos modos de relación, nuevos modos de vivir el cuerpo y de experimentar la sexualidad” (158). Pacha’s final series of decisions point to the culmination of a healing process via a new attitude toward life. They recognize biopower and sociopolitical marginalization’s long-term influence and feel empowered to move in a different direction, both in their geographical distancing and in the personal choice to continue pursuing a fluid gender identity and lesbian sexual encounters, which directly contradicts a *machista* approach to life.

## V. Conclusions



Convergences  
Erazo: Homesick

The comparative analysis of Castellanos Moya's *El sueño del retorno* and Arias's *Arias de don Giovanni* reaffirms the existence of deep concern by Central American postwar authors about the long-term repercussions of wartime politics and conservative social norms on health, both physical and mental. Although their precise circumstances are different, Castellanos Moya's and Arias's protagonists share comparable experiences reckoning with the repercussions of biopower and systemic violence in the form of civil war, as well as the consequences of symbolic violence centering around gender norms. The core of the two novels' critical message lies in the suggestion that trends of marginalization are so extreme in El Salvador and Guatemala, respectively, that marginalized peoples' health and way of perceiving the world and their place in it will suffer long-term impacts. Through their similar explorations of these health concerns in their migrant protagonists, the two texts bring awareness to psychosomatic health issues, and also offer a space to reflect upon the frequent probability of ongoing traumatic stress within migrants' relationships to their country of origin. The novels also present a stark criticism of networks of systemic and symbolic violence across Central America, several years after the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala have officially come to an end. The suggestion that Castellanos Moya's protagonist Erasmo is unable to achieve any meaningful separation from the restrictive standards imposed upon him by sociopolitical marginalization offers a desolate prognosis for the future safety and happiness of Central American immigrants. Meanwhile, in *Arias de don Giovanni*, Pacha's extreme efforts to distance himself from any vestiges of Guatemalan identity work to reveal the lasting disenchantment of an entire people with their *patria*'s failure to reverse ongoing processes of corruption and discrimination. Across the two novels, the traumatized human body becomes a vehicle for critical messaging about civil war and

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marginalization in Central America, and their lasting consequences for individuals who face forced migration.

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