



Article

The Burden of the Past: Globalized Crime, Trauma, and Patriarchal Violence in Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Moronga* (2018)

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Abstract: This article examines how trauma, crime, violence, and masculinity are connected in the novel *Moronga* (2018) by Honduran–Salvadoran author Horacio Castellanos Moya. The novel highlights the ways in which, thirty years after the signing of the Peace Accords, war trauma continues to oppress survivors of the civil war and determine their daily lives, beyond temporal and geographical borders. The novel points out how the transition into the neoliberal economy has transnationalized all aspects of the Salvadoran economy, including that of organized crime, which has undergone globalization, as have trauma and Salvadoran communities. Through the novel's depiction of violence and crime, the author suggests that only those who perpetuate patriarchal violence in postwar diasporic communities will thrive, whereas those who aspire to carry out memory labor and peacefully heal the emotional wounds of the past will be defeated by the perverse logic of the system.

Keywords: Horacio Castellanos Moya; *Moronga*; Central American fiction; memory; trauma; globalization; diaspora; Salvadoran civil war; violence; gender; masculinity



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1. Introduction

“Y aunque pasan los años y pasan los meses, de mi pasado no me desentiendo, de esta nueva vida no me hago a la idea”. (*A veces despierto temblando*, Santaolalla Santaolalla 2022, p. 98)

The Chapultepec Accords, signed in 1992, put an end to 12 years of civil war in El Salvador. The truth commission report that the United Nations. Commission on the Truth for El Salvador (1993) published the following year, *From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador*, estimated that 75,000 people—1.4% of the national population—had lost their lives in the conflict. The transition into peace allowed the country to enter transnational markets and adopt a neoliberal economy model (Robinson 2003). This economic transition did not ameliorate the deep social inequalities that had been the cause of war in the first place. Instead, it sharpened them, while the country also faced several new challenges, such as the lack of opportunities for those who were transitioning into civil life after years of war, the emergence of the infamous *maras* or gangs, and political corruption (Robinson 2003; Wolf 2017, p. 38; Rodríguez 2009, p. 202). Thus, a considerable portion of Salvadorans saw themselves forced to migrate, fleeing poverty, violence, and the lack of opportunities (Wolf 2017, p. 2). Additionally, historical memory has generally been relegated to oblivion, victims of war crimes have typically been unable to seek justice, and a great portion of the public arena is dominated by a negationist perspective on those crimes (Hatcher 2018).

In this article, I explore Honduran–Salvadoran author Horacio Castellanos Moya's novel *Moronga* (2018). This is the first novel in his extensive production whose plot unfolds in the United States and is the penultimate of his saga devoted to the Aragón family.¹ The novel is divided into three parts: the first two are long and narrated in the first person, each

by a different exiled Salvadoran in his fifties. Both, José Zeledón and Erasmo Aragón,² live in a small fictional Midwest college town, Merlow City. The first part, narrated by Zeledón, takes place throughout the 2009–2010 academic year, while the second one, narrated by Aragón, covers five days in June of 2010. The novel closes with a third and much shorter part, a brief police report translated from English that revolves around clarifying a shooting that took place in Chicago in June of 2010: in this shooting, the destinies of both protagonists finally collide.

The plot, then, revolves around the experiences of two civil war survivors who live in the U.S. Midwest in the year 2010. Both men live under the enormous weight of the trauma caused by the violence of the past conflict, yet this trauma manifests itself through their actions and speech in completely opposite manners: while Zeledón, who was an active guerrilla, is self-disciplined, continues to use the safety measures he learned for clandestine life and combat, and speaks concisely, Aragón,³ who went into Mexico after most of his friends were killed, is extremely anxious and impulsive, and his narration is accordingly chaotic, digressive, and emotionally expressive. They are both involved in a criminal plot that highlights the way in which organized crime has also become globalized and entered transnational neoliberal markets. My analysis demonstrates that the way in which they navigate the diasporic criminal arena, and are either able to successfully manage it or are defeated by it, is directly linked to the type of masculinity they embody. Ultimately, the author suggests that only those who continue to perpetuate the patriarchal violence of war in its new neoliberal modalities will succeed in diasporic Salvadoran societies, whereas those who are not “macho” enough and attempt to move and lead a peaceful life, as well as investigating the war crimes, will be devoured by a system designed not to eradicate violence, but to merely transform it.

This article elaborates on the extensive bibliography on the novel. Scholars such as Browitt (2019), Perkowska (2020), Bezhanova (2020, 2021), Jossa (2022), and Luna Sellés (2020) have already pointed out the core themes of violent masculinities, diasporic identities, and trauma in the novel, which has often been rightly studied as a work of crime fiction (Browitt 2019; Perkowska 2020; Luna Sellés 2020). Academics have also studied *Moronga* in the context of the Aragón saga, as well as in relation to the neoliberal transformations of the last decades in the Isthmus (Jossa 2022; Bezhanova 2021). My analysis is founded on trauma theory and masculinity studies. I understand trauma in Freudian (Freud 1961) terms, as a near-deadly experience that the psyche has been unable to properly process and will, therefore, come back again and again in various forms such as nightmares, torturing the survivor. As Caruth (1995) has pointed out, trauma is characterized by compulsive repetition. LaCapra (2014) has stated that trauma is not a “purely psychological or individual phenomenon. It has crucial connections to social and political conditions and can only be understood and engaged with respect to them” (p. xi). He distinguishes two modes of reacting to trauma: acting out and working through. The survivors who act out will stay stuck in the traumatic experience through its compulsive repetition, unable to heal and trapped in melancholia, while those who work through will eventually be able to end their mourning and move forward with their lives. The concept of hegemonic masculinity, coined by Connell (2020), will prove particularly productive for my analysis. It is defined as the kind of “masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations” (Connell 2020, p. 76) and, more specifically, “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 77). Scholars of Latin American cultural studies such as Robert McKee Irwin (2003) and Vinodh Venkatesh (2015) have significantly contributed to the field with their analyses of the representation of masculinities in Latin American cultural production. My study draws from their work, too.

2. Diasporic Trauma: The Globalized Wound of the Past

Both protagonists have been exposed to war, either as a combatant (Zeledón) or as a civilian (Aragón). War is the first traumatic experience listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM in what follows) as the cause for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder ([American Psychiatric Association 2013](#), p. 274). Diagnosing these fictional characters is, of course, not my aim, but it is worth noting that the DSM also lists many of their personal traits as frequent symptoms of trauma: dissociation, hypervigilance, depersonalization, and detachment are all experienced by both characters, who live under the tremendous unresolved pain of the past military conflict.

The two Salvadoran exiles live in the grip of past emotional injuries that torment them and determine their present lives. They live in a permanent state of alertness that prevents them from ever letting down their guard or establishing meaningful affective bonds, and they keep secret their past connection with the war. Thus, when anybody inquires about Zeledón's previous life, he tells an "antigua mentira" (p. 26), and when someone wants to know why he left the country, he mentions maras, political corruption, and the lack of labor opportunities, as an excuse to elude the truth about his involvement in the war as a former guerrilla. However, almost thirty years after the peace accords were signed, his life is profoundly marked by "[t]aras de la guerra" (p. 107): he goes everywhere with a gun fastened to his ankle, checks security cameras wherever he goes, keeps using a wristwatch, takes precautions in order to prevent from being followed, tells a lie when asked about the origin of a war scar, employs war interrogatory techniques in the Spanish lessons he teaches, pretends to never have shot a firearm when he is invited to a firing range, never opens encrypted messages when his software engineer roommate is home, continuously changes his passwords, and makes sure that he does not meet the same people in the same places too often. Not only is his name a false one, since after demobilization his entire guerrilla group adopted new identities using those of deceased guerrillas, but we never get to know his real name, which after all is now the name of another man, as he himself admits: "[n]i él [another former guerrilla] ni yo recuperaríamos jamás nuestros nombres originales. Nada tenían que ver ya con nosotros" (p. 15).

Zeledón lives under an unceasing fear of being chased, watched, unmasked, and attacked, but the reader never gets to know who he is fearful of, since he seems to not have any outstanding business with his past guerrilla and narco connections. His life is marked by a permanent state of hypervigilance, a common symptom of trauma according to the DSM and characterized by

a perpetual scanning of the environment to search for sights, sounds, people, behaviours, smells, or anything else that is reminiscent of threat of trauma. The individual is placed on high alert in order to be certain danger is not near. Hypervigilance can lead to a variety of obsessive behavior patterns, as well as producing difficulties with social interaction and relationships. ([American Psychiatric Association 2013](#), p. 823)

Zeledón stays trapped in the behaviors of safety and compartmentalization learned a long time ago, the kind of "a los compañeros, lo necesario; a los demás, nada"⁴ tactics that once guaranteed his safety. However, these routines have not only become unnecessary, they prevent him from carrying out a regular life, and he seems unable to shed these behavioral patterns. Fear and alertness are simply a habit profoundly rooted in his life. Consequently, he is cold, distant, and self-controlled, as is his speech. He expresses himself in a concise manner, employing short sentences, and, in general, is an external and objective narrator who focuses on actions and factual information rather than on emotions and thoughts: he applies the same disciplined control over his language and all of his daily activities.

Despite distancing himself as much as possible, both geographically and temporally, from war, it tirelessly chases him. Thus, the novel starts in medias res with a scene in which Zeledón, about to move to Illinois from Texas, runs into a man whom he believes he knows

from the war years. Later, his memory clicks: “era un campesino de La Laguna a quien incorporamos como enfermero al campamento, un rostro sin nombre” (p. 14). When he is in Chicago, taking part in a hustle, he spots Robocop on the street, a demobilized soldier with whom he worked right after the war watching over a poppy field, a story narrated in the novel *El arma en el hombre* (2001).

Zeledón cannot escape painful memories of the war that torment him when he least expects them, even though he makes every effort to live a disciplined life with a military temper and occupy his mind all of the time with work, TV shows, and Internet browsing. As Freud (1961) puts it, trauma survivors do not tend to dedicate themselves to remembering their traumatic experiences (p. 7). Thus, when Zeledón and Rudy, an old guerrilla comrade who has helped him get a job in Merlow City, meet after years of not seeing each other, they stay “un rato en silencio, sin ganas de hablar de la otra vida que habíamos compartido” (p. 16). Freud (1961) states that trauma survivors are not “much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident. Perhaps they are more concerned with not thinking of it” (p. 7), as in the case with Zeledón. In spite of this, he sometimes goes into trances that disconnect him from reality:

No recuerdo con precisión cuándo comenzó a sucederme. Cerraba la laptop y me tiraba en la cama, exhausto, embotado, como si hubiese consumido todas mis energías. Perdía el sentido del tiempo. Yacía hecho un guiñapo, sin saber si tendría fuerzas para volver a ponerme de pie y seguir adelante, hasta que por fin volvía en mí. (p. 26)

Scenes like this one are common and serve to emphasize that Zeledón suffers from some sort of psychological or physical illness, as in this passage: “cuando iba a ponerme de pie, el cuerpo no me respondió; estaba sin energía. Permanecí tirado de espalda en la cama, inerte, como si un bicho estuviese succionando mi espina dorsal, alimentándose con mis fluidos” (p. 38). On another occasion, he has plans to go out with his new friends in Merlow City, but eventually is defeated by the “malestar: estuve tendido en cama, sin energía, a ratos dormitando” (p. 53). Later he makes himself a sandwich, although he “sentía sin ganas de hacer nada, lejos de todo” (p. 54). Zeledón seems to be suffering episodes of dissociation, one of the most common symptoms among those who have survived repeated extremely traumatic experiences. When the traumatic event takes place, the brain employs dissociation as a survival strategy, disconnecting the psyche from what is going on: this way, the survivor perceives the actions as if they were watching them from afar, rather than experiencing them first-hand. When traumatic situations occur repeatedly, survivors start employing dissociation as a maladaptive defense mechanism, applying it indiscriminately to all sorts of situations. Thus, Zeledón states in several instances that he feels as if he is outside of what is happening: “Me sentía extraño: como si una película transparente me separara de lo que sucedía a mi alrededor” (p. 73). Or: “Me sentí raro, como si no fuese yo el que andaba en ese ajeteo o como si estuviese viendo el capítulo de una serie” (p. 118) and “a veces sentía como si mi cuerpo no fuese mi cuerpo, no lo reconocía” (p. 76).

Like many other patients of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Zeledón also has nightmares. Once, he awakens “asustado, sudando, con palpitaciones” (p. 76) after dreaming about his grandmother and the Viking.⁵ In his dream, the grandmother is holding an agonized man, the Viking, in her arms. The look in her eyes “daba a entender que ella sabía que era yo quien le había disparado al tipo [. . .]. Y yo volví a sentir la emoción que había sentido en aquel momento” (pp. 75–76). Sometimes memories also return to him when he is awake and he becomes absorbed, trapped in the memories to the point that he forgets where he is and what he is doing, like the time he involuntarily remembers the tragic death of his young girlfriend Catarina, who stepped on an anti-personnel mine, leaving behind her “nada que llevarse a enterrar, sólo pedazos de carne dispersos, chamuscados, irreconocibles” (p. 97). Suddenly, Zeledón exits his daydreaming and returns to the car he is driving: “Casi me ensarto en el carro que iba delante” (p. 97). LaCapra (2014) has highlighted the tendency to collapse distinctions when acting out or reliving traumatic experiences, “including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able

to remember what happened to one in the past but realizes one is living in the here and now with future possibilities" (pp. 46–47). Zeledón falls within this pattern, as we can see, reliving past experience in such a manner that he confuses past and present and misses awareness of the now. On another occasion, he is warming up his dinner when he remembers the shooting in which he unwittingly killed his own mother: "El recuerdo del Land Rover que pasaba espantado mientras yo le disparaba se repetía como disco rayado cuando la sopa comenzó a hervir. Me espabilé" (p. 94). Through the common idiomatic comparison with the broken record, the character emphasizes how this memory insistently plays again and again in his mind. It is precisely the act of repetition that characterizes trauma, that near-death experience that was never properly processed and that, as a result, will become a recurrent torment:

Unlike the symptoms of a normal neurosis, whose painful manifestations can be understood ultimately in terms of the attempted avoidance of unpleasant conflict, the painful repetition of the flashback can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way. In trauma, that is, the outside has gone inside without any mediation. (Caruth 1995, p. 59)

Zeledón seems to be trapped in a traumatic experience, unable to process it and heal. According to LaCapra (2014), some survivors of trauma experience a mix of survivor guilt and devotion towards an experience that has ultimately become somewhat sacred and, thus, rendering a narrative about it would be a sacrilegious act. These survivors "experience post-traumatic phenomena, such as recurrent nightmares, not as symptoms to be worked through but as bonds or memorial practices linking them to the haunting presence of dead intimates" (p. xv). Leaving behind Catarina's and his mother's deaths might feel like a betrayal to Zeledón, who significantly refuses to establish any new emotional bonds with women aside from sporadic sexual encounters, staying emotionally loyal to Catarina, his youthful, revolutionary sweetheart:

Those traumatized by extreme events [...] may resist working through because of what might almost be termed as a fidelity to trauma, a feeling that one must somehow keep faith with it. Part of this feeling may be the melancholic sentiment that, in working through the past in a manner that enables survival or a reengagement in life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past. One's bond with the dead, especially with dead intimates, may invest trauma with value and make its reliving a painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound. This situation may create a more or less conscious desire to remain within trauma. (LaCapra 2014, pp. 22–23)

Aragón also suffers from mental health issues that are the direct result of traumatic experiences related to the civil war. He experiences high levels of anxiety and presents the usual symptoms that accompany it, such as excessive sweating, insomnia, and diarrhea. Like Zeledón, he also memorizes routes around a new place on Google Maps before going out. In the same way, many ordinary daily tasks trigger his anxiety: when crossing a turnstile with a suitcase in the subway, he fears that he will get trapped and will be laughed at (p. 139); when drinking water from a plastic bottle (p. 147) or when watching pornography, he fears that it will cause him to lose cognitive skills (p. 148).

In the second part of the novel, the Salvadoran professor narrates a research stay of five days in Washington D.C. There, he visits the CIA archives to research the cables related to Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton. Thus, in opposition to Zeledón, Aragón is preoccupied with Salvadoran history and its legacy, and is actively working on a project related to that. The professor is at least attempting to carry out some sort of memory labor and, with that, perhaps find healing: "Through memory work, especially the socially engaged memory work involved in working through, one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recognize something as having happened to one (or one's people) back then which

is related to, but not identical with, here and now" (LaCapra 2014, p. 66). Thus, Aragón's research work might open the door for therapeutic recovery. However, during his stay in Washington, he is barely able to complete any work due to the incapacitating degree of his own psychological problems that, like Zeledón's, are linked to the civil war. He continuously feels that is being chased, controlled, and spied on, and the sensation that he is trapped in some sort of conspiracy against him, due to his ties with the leftist Salvadoran diaspora during the war, takes him to the edge several times. Like Zeledón, he experiences a permanent state of paranoia and alertness, staying hypervigilant at all times. Thus, he states about D.C. that "es de conocimiento público que a cada extranjero que arriba a esta metrópoli se le somete a un intenso escrutinio" (p. 137) and repeatedly insists that he must be under surveillance:

vaya uno a saber la de meandros y torceduras que habrá entre quienes se dedican a vigilar la capital del imperio, de seguro ya estaban enterados de la visita de Mina a mi habitación y del número telefónico de Yesenia que le había entregado, y alguien estaría esta misma mañana redactando un cable al respecto. (p. 220)

Along the same lines as these paranoid ideations, he assumes that another man who is waiting for the bus next to him must be following him. Another time, he meets an attractive young woman in the subway and, later, when she does not answer his phone call and he cannot find her online, he concludes that she is a spy. In the CIA archives where he is carrying out research, he suffers a "sensación de claustrofobia [...] a causa tanto de los vigilantes que se paseaban entre las mesas de trabajo como de las numerosas cámaras" (p. 180). He then considers the possibility of masturbating in the restroom in order to relieve stress, but fears that he is going to be recorded (p. 180), and, later, when he is having lunch in the cafeteria, he does not leave the table when he feels like it because he thinks it will raise suspicions (p. 182). Furthermore, during his entire D.C. stay, he fears being secretly observed by his Airbnb host, George, or his daughter, Amanda, a Guatemalan adoptee.

He is paranoid not only during his stay in D.C. but overall in his daily life. Thus, he remembers the time that he was at his Merlow City apartment and was masturbating but suffered a panic attack, thinking that maybe he was being recorded in his home. The perceived surveillance triggers in him an unbearable panic, so that once "[se me] disparó la adrenalina y me sumió en una sensación de irrealidad, como si estuviese corriendo un peligro del que no había tenido conciencia hasta entonces" (p. 210). Like Zeledón, he does not use any social media and fears being unmasked: "No sé si por proceder del país del que procedo o si es algo constitutivo de mi persona, pero a menudo padezco el miedo de sentirme como un impostor o como un infiltrado, alguien que esconde su verdadera identidad y que en cualquier momento puede ser descubierto" (p. 179). However, it is never clear what the identity is he afraid might be unmasked, other than having participated in groups that supported FMLN guerrillas within the Salvadoran diasporic community in Mexico City in the eighties in the context of a war nobody in the U.S. seems to remember.

Indeed, Aragón spent several years in Mexico's capital after exiling himself due to the increase in violence in San Salvador, where almost all of his friends were murdered. Born in Honduras, he grew up in El Salvador and was raised in an economically privileged family, but his father was murdered while he was a child. The war-related violence started during his teens and "se nos vino la guerra encima, todos nos perdimos la pista en medio de ese merengue, nadie sabía ya quién era quién ni dónde encontrarse" (p. 231). We should note that the colloquial "nadie sabía ya quién era" not only expresses confusion and fear about the war, it also signals the destabilization of his own identity, his inability to trust others, as well as his future paranoia and fear of being unmasked, a fear probably related to that of being randomly selected for execution by a death squad. During his youth, he once went camping with some friends and they ended up being assaulted by the army. The soldiers wrongly assumed they were guerrillas (p. 234) and threatened one of them by putting a gun in his mouth (p. 235). This young man, Douglas, later exiled himself "por unos meses a Estados Unidos y a su regreso terminó colgado de un árbol [...] nadie supo decirme si él solo se había ahorcado u otros se lo habían escabechado, era tanta la matazón" (p. 231).

On his flight back to Merlow City, Aragón remembers the tragic destiny of those friends from his youth: one “ametrallado desde un helicóptero” (p. 292), another “asesinado por órdenes de un capitán del ejército al que le encantaba” (p. 292) his lover, and another one “secuestrada por los escuadrones de la muerte” (p. 292). When the reader takes in Aragón’s past, it seems reasonable that he has become a highly anxious adult, haunted by the fear of being “uncovered,” even when there is nothing to uncover about him, and that he is a man who follows the law strictly.

Aragón is emotional, impulsive, chaotic, and disorganized, and all of these personality traits are accordingly reflected in his expressive richness, his vulnerability and honesty, and his uncontrollable “verbarrea”, characterized by extremely long digressions that employ hyphens, subordination, and juxtaposition of sentences. This uncontrollable speech can also be understood as a sign of trauma: as a man who was forced to live under the constant fear of being accused and murdered, he now feels the compulsion to over-explain and justify himself in order to guarantee his safety. He admits that “una vez que se me suelta la lengua me cuesta un mundo ponerla de nuevo en su sitio” (p. 170), and that “una vez que la compulsión por contar hace presa de mí sólo me callo hasta quedar exhausto” (p. 241).

Aragón is a chaotic narrator who jumps from one topic to another and who gives free rein to his verbal incontinence. He, furthermore, constantly refers not only to factual events, but also examines his own emotional state and, compared to Zeledón, is a very verbally expressive narrator. For instance, he employs an array of lexical and expressive resources with various humorous comparisons, such as “me espabilé como perro de aeropuerto” (p. 206). He also abundantly employs augmentative suffixes and prefixes such as “emocioncilla” (p. 141), “patadón” (p. 145), and “matazón” (p. 231). These not only provide an emotional tenor to the phrase, they also diminish the drama of certain scenes that contain high doses of violence. The comic element that the character continuously introduces in his speech also attenuates the drama in these scenes, while adding a layer of grotesque pathos, with which Aragón himself ends up being imbued. This occurs when, for instance, he talks about the chaos and violence of war as “ese merengue” (p. 231), or when he introduces all sorts of comical digressions when depicting the assault on his friends’ group when camping. A soldier states: “Los agarramos cagando” (p. 235), and Aragón proceeds to detail that this

era por completo impreciso, que si en realidad me hubiesen agarrado cagando detrás de uno de los árboles no sé la reacción que yo hubiese tenido, ya de por sí cagar al aire libre en el bosque me daba miedo, a causa de esas culebras que se llaman tepalcúas y se le meten a uno en el culo al menor descuido, tal como nos amedrentaban desde que éramos chicos, y aunque yo nunca hubiese visto una de esas culebras, la tensión que me produce cagar al aire libre quizá sea el motivo por el cual carezco de cualquier espíritu de excursionista, algo que no le iba a comentar al oficial en ese momento, que no estaba yo loco. . . (p. 235)

It should be noted that the digression starts at the interaction with the soldier, deviates from it, and eventually returns to the soldier and the moment of the action in a circular structure that is aptly repeated throughout the entire novel, so that past and present are linked with transitions that iterate the same word or idea, such as with the word *violencia* in the following example. Like Zeledón, Aragón has problems in properly differentiating past from present, a clear sign of acting out: “In acting out, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed” (LaCapra 2014, p. 70). While remembering this assault, Aragón is having a drink at a café and the barista asks him if he would like anything else. By talking to him and interrupting his thoughts, the barista brings him “con violencia de regreso a la barra del bar de la librería Kramer, no con la misma violencia que sufrimos aquel horrendo día, cuando. . .” (p. 235). Here, the author shows off his mastery of both analepsis and stream of consciousness that he had previously employed with first-person narrators in *Insensatez* (Castellanos Moya 2005) and *El sueño del retorno* (Castellanos Moya 2013).

Like Zeledón, Aragón's behavior in daily life is determined by maladaptive defense mechanisms that are the result of his traumatic experiences. And like Zeledón, Aragón also falls into deep daydreaming that pulls him away from his current context into an intense memory: the same barista asks him something that he does not understand "por lo sumido que yacía en mis recuerdos" (p. 202), and, on another occasion, he dissociates while waiting for the bus and, when it finally arrives, "tuve que salir de mi ensueño, y me enteré de que había más de una docena de personas a mi alrededor también dispuestas a subir al bus" (p. 191). The extensive digressions force the reader to enter with Aragón into the "burbuja" (p. 183) of his dissociation, easily forgetting that the scene is a memory and not what is actually going on in the present of the story. Like Zeledón, Aragón abruptly returns to the present, completing a symbolic journey in time and space: "Regresé a la mesa" (189). Like Zeledón, his memories accompany him no matter how much distance he has put between the Salvadoran conflict and himself, and the reliving of the past without the ability to properly differentiate it from the present moment signals at they are both acting out trauma, unable to heal.

The "extreme paranoia" (Bezhanova 2020, p. 215) that both characters suffer constitutes a "leitmotiv" (Sáenz Leandro 2018, p. 347) in the novel. Magdalena Perkowska (2020) has pointed out, regarding this matter, that "*Moronga* es una inflexión del policial latinoamericano que dramatiza y evidencia el omnipresente sistema panóptico del capitalismo tardío, con las gestiones tecnocráticas y políticas de consenso que lo caracterizan y sostienen" (p. 16). From her perspective, scholar Luna Sellés (2020) links the novel with Ricardo Piglia's concept of paranoid fiction and states that Castellanos Moya is employing his characters' paranoid subjectivities in order to criticize "the logic of the panopticon, which takes the form of a State that aims to control everything" (p. 356). Indeed, everyone surveils and is surveilled under the panopticon of the neoliberal state (Luna Sellés 2020, p. 356): Zeledón feels monitored by hypothetical enemies and the state's security structures and, at the same time, has a part-time job monitoring Merlow College emails in order to detect illegal activities within the academic community. Another of his part-time jobs consists of monitoring public security cameras, and he is also hired on a couple of occasions to follow a random woman. Just as Aragón, he is, in a way, "monitoring" the CIA, while also being monitored by it.

In sum, both Aragón and Zeledón are every day obligated to bear the psychological, moral, and physical burnout of permanent terror, the continual suspicion of a threat that has not yet been revealed to them, and the possibility of being unmasked and destroyed. Despite the temporal and spatial distance separating them from the war, both characters live under the insufferable burden of the pain of the past conflict, and it is therefore impossible for them "to contain the effects of the trauma inherited from their experiences during the civil war and to prevent this trauma from sweeping into their lives as immigrants in the United States" (Bezhanova 2020, p. 213). According to Jeffrey Browitt (2019), "*Moronga* highlights the psychological and emotional impact of revolutionary violence stripped of its ideological romanticism, an unflinching portrayal of the worst of unreconstructed and violent masculinity" (p. 83). In his opinion, the novel is also about "the relationship between victims and perpetrators, and how guilt and traumatic memories can dominate one's life and action in the present" (p. 96). In particular, Zeledón lives with the guilt of having accidentally killed his mother during a guerrilla operation in which he was the gunman, as well as with the loss of his girlfriend when she stepped on an anti-personnel mine. Aragón suffers from how the memories of his youth have been truncated by a war that killed almost all of his friends and forced him into exile and rootlessness. Despite having opposite personalities and their trauma manifesting in different ways, both are, ultimately, "las dos caras de una misma moneda" (Sáenz Leandro 2018, p. 348), which Magdalena Perkowska (2020) has also noted: "[e]l mutismo tenso y controlado de Zeledón y la paranoia lenguaraz de Aragón son, a pesar de su aparente incommensurabilidad, dos caras de la misma moneda. Ambos son, entonces, damnificados de un proceso histórico que comenzó años atrás y en otro lugar" (p. 24). Each of them, however, survived the war

in a different way, which causes them to behave differently in the present. Therefore, the way in which each of them manages his past is totally opposite, as already pointed out by Olga Bezhanova (2020, p. 215) and Luna Sellés (2020, p. 355): Zeledón forces himself not to remember the painful past and to live in a present that, as he is poorly adapted to civilian life, lacks interest for him. Aragón, on the contrary, actively remembers the past, as exemplified in the research he is carrying out on the figure of Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton and his murder.

3. The Transnationalization of Organized Crime in the Era of the Global Market

In the era of globalization, the Salvadoran diaspora is not only burdened with war trauma, it is also forced to grapple with organized crime networks and a new logic of violence. The political violence of the 1980s has transformed into an equally pervasive criminal violence: the El Salvador of the early twenty-first century experiences severe problems of political corruption and organized crime. Rónald Sáenz Leandro (2018) has noted that *Moronga* brings to light how, in times of peace, “la violencia no se destruye, solo se transforma, y ahora reaparece a través del fenómeno de las migraciones, de las pandillas, del narcotráfico, del crimen organizado y de la trata de personas” (p. 346). This transformation of a form of violence into another is a pervasive theme in the postwar Central American novel, with the notable examples of *Que me maten si...* (Rey Rosa 1997) by Guatemalan Rodrigo Rey Rosa and Horacio Castellanos Moya’s *El arma en el hombre*, in which a Salvadoran soldier is unable to reintegrate into civilian life and, through his contacts in the army, goes on to work for organized crime. In the time of the neoliberal economy, crime networks circulate freely across transnational markets, and gangs devoted to the trafficking of arms, humans, and drugs have established action groups in diverse locations, regardless of geographical borders. At the end of the novel, both protagonists come into contact with these networks in the U.S.: Zeledón, as a perpetrator; and Aragón, as a victim.

Zeledón, like so many other demobilized guerrillas and soldiers, transitioned into organized crime after the signing of the Chapultepec Accords in 1992 and he worked at a “plantación de amapolas en el altiplano guatemalteco [...] una noche los gringos nos barrieron con fuego desde el aire y apenas sobrevivimos los tres; luego, en el descampado, cada quien se reinventó y siguió su ruta” (pp. 69–70). Although Zeledón does not offer any details about his life between that shooting in the Guatemalan highlands and his life in Merlow City, the reader can infer that his “route” involved migrating into the U.S. and working a series of precarious, alienating jobs thanks to his TPS migratory status.⁶ Although Zeledón misses military activity, he also despises narcos, so he prefers to avoid working for them: “esos hijos de puta no me gustan —le dije—. Ni narcos ni maras” (70). In Merlow City, he is apathetic and slightly depressed, especially during the harsh Midwest winter months. He is motivated, though, by the “posibilidad de un negocio” (p. 35) with the Old Man, a possibility that makes him feel “un entusiasmo que suponía perdido” (p. 83). Zeledón and the Old Man met in prison during the civil war: Zeledón was a political prisoner, and the Old Man was a common criminal. However, when the guerrillas managed to flee prison, Zeledón invited his new friend to join them. Decades later, the Old Man is a minor figure within transnational organized crime in the U.S. and contacts Zeledón to ask him to provide security during a few meetings in Chicago with another diasporic Central American low-level criminal nicknamed Moronga. However, Zeledón suspects the Old Man is hiding something (pp. 127–28) and, indeed, the latter confesses that the actual operation consists of executing Moronga on behalf of the narcos for whom the Old Man works, a revelation that upsets Zeledón, who refuses to carry on with the mission (pp. 131–32). The Old Man tries convincing him to adopt the limited role of just offering coverage without directly participating in the execution and tells him that he is going to “pudrir en este país de mierda. Y peor en ese pueblo [Merlow City] perdido en la nada” (p. 132). Zeledón replies: “Más podrido estaría con tus nuevos patrones. Ya sabés que no me gustan. Yo me formé para accionar sabiendo quién era el enemigo. Todo muy

claro. Había un sentido, una causa” (pp. 132–33), and adds: “No es mi rollo matar por dinero, Viejo. Menos por encargo de esa gente. No me hace clic” (p. 133)⁷. His words indicate that Zeledón misses a context in which violence had an ideological sense, and despises the new logic of the criminal, apolitical violence of the neoliberal postwar era. He then goes to the restroom, and this closes the first part of the novel, leaving the reader wondering whether Zeledón will remain loyal to his own principles and return to Merlow City or complete the hustle for the Old Man and conform to the new patterns of violence. The mystery is resolved in the last thirty pages of the novel, which consist of a police report that also clarifies what happened to Aragón when he returned to Merlow City from Washington: although in an extremely different manner, he has also been involved with Central American organized crime.

During his first night in Washington, Aragón has dinner with his Airbnb host, a white American named George who lives with his wife and two adoptive children: George Junior from Tanzania and Amanda from Guatemala. He reveals that Amanda is a disruptive and problematic child: she is violent, employs vulgar language, is aggressive both physically and verbally, and sexually harasses her adoptive brother. The relationship between Amanda and her adoptive parents, who are considering having the adoption annulled, highlights how the girl is objectified as a purchase that can be returned to the store if the customer is not completely satisfied, in what Olga Bezhanova (2020) has called a “neoliberal approach to parenting” (p. 222). In the same way, the indifference of her parents regarding her traumatic past in Guatemala “is shared by many Americans who are ignorant of the effects of the US involvement in Central American conflicts of the twentieth century and are unwilling to accept that the consequences of that involvement will have an impact on their lives” (Bezhanova 2020, p. 222). Indeed, Amanda is another Central American diasporic subject who has survived traumatic experiences and, in a context that is completely oblivious to her past, acts out that trauma to end up being labeled as problematic and violent, instead being treated as a victim or a survivor.

George and his wife had been told that Amanda was the seven-year-old daughter of an indigenous woman who had died of cancer, but Amanda reveals that this is false (p. 159) and tells Aragón the story of her life: she was living with her beloved brother, Calín, a member of infamous gang Mara Salvatrucha, and their mother, a sex worker in Puerto de San José. A local fisherman, nicknamed Moronga, had feelings for her mother and, since he was making more and more money from drug trafficking, retired her from sex work and gave her a beauty salon. However, Moronga also aspired to have sex with young Amanda and, since her eighteen-year-old brother was a protective figure, he forced him to migrate to the U.S., where Calín became an undocumented migrant. When Amanda was fourteen years old, Moronga’s enemies perpetrated a shooting in Amanda’s mother’s salon, and the girl was the only survivor. An aunt picked her up, changed her identity documents, and took her to an orphanage (pp. 265–71). On the last day of Aragón’s stay in Washington, Amanda disappears: she has been seen getting into a car with two Latino men who are, presumably, Calín and Moronga (p. 293), who, of course, is the same Moronga the Old Man aims to execute in Chicago a few days later.

The moronga is a blood sausage typical of Central America. In a vulgar register, it also designates the penis. Moronga’s character, who reveals himself as the junction point of the protagonists, receives this nickname because he is short, chubby, and dark-skinned, like a moronga. Moronga is, as we also know, the title of the novel, whose plot is articulated not only around this character, but also around the themes of violence and masculinity: the novel is, like the sausage, full of blood, and heteronormative, violent masculinity is symbolically represented in the phallic meaning of the moronga.

The novel concludes with a police report that centers on a shooting that took place on 15 June in a Chicago parking lot, where Zeledón and Aragón’s destinies have finally collided. Once back in Merlow City, Aragón is contacted and blackmailed by Calín and Amanda to pay them an exorbitant amount so that they will not falsely accuse him of sexually abusing her. The FBI decides to use Aragón to rescue Amanda, who is, in legal

terms, a kidnapped minor, and to apprehend Calín and Moronga. This operation takes place while Moronga and the Old Man are meeting in a restaurant next to the parking lot, so when Moronga, his bodyguards, and the Old Man leave, a confusing exchange of gunfire is initiated. The shots leave seven dead people: an FBI agent, Moronga, Calín, the Old Man, one of Moronga's bodyguards, and two women who are victims of the crossed fire. The report reviews the identity of each of the people involved in the shooting, describing an extremely complex web of links between diverse organized crime groups that include Salvadoran gangs, Mexican cartels, and the Zetas, while many of the criminals are undocumented migrants who used to be in the armies of their countries of origin and are now connected with private security companies and the illegal possession of firearms.

The report focuses on an enigma that is left unresolved: the identity of a hidden shooter who, from a Ford SUV that had been stolen that same early morning and using a high-precision rifle with telescopic sight and silencer, has shot Moronga and each one of his bodyguards. The shooter is without doubt a seasoned expert, since he has also effectively covered his face and left no fingerprints. The report concludes that the agents "no fueron objeto directo de una emboscada en términos estrictos, sino que cayeron en la emboscada tendida a los otros" (p. 323), so we must deduce that the hidden shooter is Zeledón, although the reader is not offered any certainty and will not know his whereabouts or why he changed his mind and decided to assist the Old Man in Moronga's execution. The novel is highly ambiguous in its resolution: the reader cannot know for certain if Zeledón is indeed, as all evidence indicates, the anonymous shooter and, if he is, we never learn what his motives were or what he is going to do afterwards. Since he was never identified, nothing would impede him from returning to his Merlow City apartment and carrying on with his regular life. Zeledón's destiny remains uncertain, since the author's last novel in the series, *El hombre amansado* (Castellanos Moya 2022), follows Aragón. What is certain is that, if Zeledón was indeed the shooter, he was never identified and thus remains unpunished and free to continue his life as he pleases.

What is clear, in any case, is that Zeledón gets to skillfully evade justice, while Aragón, despite the lack of evidence against him, is apprehended and charged for sexually abusing Amanda. As a consequence, he loses his job and sanity and is committed to a mental health institution, where he will remain until his trial (p. 334). In her accurate reading of the novel's dénouement, Magdalena Perkowska (2020) states that Aragón is the scapegoat of a failed judicial system⁸:

faltando la información que permitiría detener y castigar al tirador oculto, el sistema panóptico fija su mirada en Erasmo Aragón, acusado de abuso sexual de una menor, a pesar de que la evidencia niega esta imputación. Si registrar todo no equivale a saber, menos todavía equivale a ejercer justicia, sobre todo si el supuesto 'culpable' es un inmigrante latino que fácilmente puede satisfacer el espectáculo de un poder justo y responsable. (p. 27)

For Perkowska (2020), it is precisely their relationship with the modern panopticon that determines the success or failure of the protagonists, since

Zeledón lo racionaliza y vuelve inoperante cuando confronta la lógica y mecánica del panóptico con la lógica y práctica conspirativa, aprendida en la guerrilla. Aragón, en cambio, cede a la presión que el saberse observado y vigilado en cada lugar y cada instante de la vida ejerce sobre el sujeto. No sorprende entonces que el primero se le escape al sistema y el segundo, en cambio, sucumbe a sus leyes sin haber hecho nada que mereciera un castigo legal. (p. 24)

Their success or failure is directly linked, as Perkowska (2020) explains, to the degree of success with which they might have adapted to the hyper-surveilled world of the global panopticon. However, we must note that their masculinity plays a relevant role in this adaptation: it is not coincidental that, after all, the victorious one is the former macho guerrilla who is involved in organized crime, while the peaceful, emasculated man who has always followed the law ends up losing his job, his sanity, and his freedom. The novel

suggests, then, that only those who perpetuate the modes of violence prevalent during the war times and display a masculinity linked to that violence will succeed in postwar transnational Salvadoran society, whereas those who follow the law, attempt to carry out memory work, and move on with their lives away from violence will be defeated by a system dominated by transnational crime.

4. The Macho Warrior and the Emasculated Coward: Violence and Masculinity

In the novel, paranoia encompasses all aspects of life, including the sexual-affective facet. Thus, the fear of being unjustly accused of sexual harassment is pervasive, to the point that Olga [Bezhanova \(2021\)](#) has interpreted female characters in the story as a “presencia malévola y destructiva” (p. 88). Aragón, for example, reads a news article about “un banquero y político francés a quien le habían montado una emboscada en un hotel de Washington D.C. a través de una empleada que lo acusó de violación” (p. 262) and he himself is blackmailed by a woman he meets in Washington D.C.: if he does not help her contact a certain Panamanian sex worker in Germany, she will accuse him of harassment. Meanwhile, the young Amanda also threatens to accuse him of rape if he tells her father she has broken into his room in the middle of the night (p. 255). Zeledón lives under the same fear that a sexual harassment claim will destroy his plans, as actually happens when he is fired as a school bus driver after being accused by a female teacher, Estella. Indeed, all the female characters in the novel, of whose inner conscience the reader knows nothing, employ sex as a transactional tool to get their way in the most manipulative ways. The women seem to have adapted their sex-affective manners of relating to men to the new neoliberal context in which sex is nothing but another commodity to be sold or exchanged for personal gain. In the Greater Central America of the novel, male subjectivities perceive a constant threat posed by female liberation, and both protagonists, whose masculinity fits the patterns of the normative man from decades ago, suffer uncomfortable discords in the American society of the post-#MeToo era. [Connell \(2020\)](#) has stated that hegemonic masculinity is mutable and will therefore vary and adapt to the dominant Zeitgeist in order to preserve male social domination (pp. 76–77, p. 258): “When conditions for the defense of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded. New groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony” (p. 77). In this light, we can note that both Aragón and Zeledón’s masculinities, which solidified in the eighties in El Salvador, no longer correspond to the hegemonic model, especially in the United States. [Venkatesh \(2015\)](#) has pointed out how “the neoliberal episteme has caused a crisis of sorts in traditional gender structures” (p. 5) and provoked a series of changes in hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, “recent globalization trends have ‘softened’ hegemonic masculinity in several ways” ([Connell 2020](#), p. 264) and “[m]en are now more often positioned as consumers” ([Connell 2020](#), p. 264). In the twenty-first century, hegemonic masculinity is no longer centered around violence and military institutions: “With the collapse of Stalinism and the end of the Cold War, the more flexible, calculative, egocentric masculinity of the new capitalist entrepreneur holds the world stage” ([Connell 2020](#), p. 263). The new neoliberal hegemonic masculinity is “working out a non-threatening accommodation with feminism” ([Connell 2020](#), p. 263) and, thus, rejects explicit patriarchal violence towards women. The novel points to the friction that the normative masculinities solidified during the civil war suffer when introduced in a milieu in which said masculinities are nothing but obsolete, resulting in conflict and alienation. Both Zeledón and Aragón became men in a context of prevalent misogyny and, as they are unable to discriminate between sexual-affective behaviors that are improper and violent and those that are not, the resulting paranoia is inevitable.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Salvadoran culture was imbued with patriarchal beliefs and practices that, naturally, also permeated the revolutionary process and guerrilla organizations. Thus, Dinora [Aguinada Deras \(2002\)](#) states that “[l]os programas de las organizaciones político militares no incluyeron las demandas de las mujeres y la presencia femenina en la vida política del FMLN fueron [sic] escasas” (p. 108). This is contrary to the

Sandinistas, who included, among their first measures, the prohibition of sex work and the sexual objectivization of women in media, “el FMLN no planteó abiertamente los derechos de las mujeres en sus primeros pronunciamientos y programas” (Navas 2007, p. 5).

About 30% of personnel in guerrilla base camps were women (Aguñada Deras 2002, p. 109; Navas 2007, p. 3) but most of them did not actively fight and instead fulfilled other duties such as cooking and providing health services (Aguñada Deras 2002, p. 109; Navas 2007, p. 4). Although it is true that women with the proper skills got to occupy leadership roles, this usually came at a great physical and emotional cost, for they had to insistently demonstrate their abilities and merits for roles that would have traditionally been assigned to a man (Aguñada Deras 2002, p. 109; Navas 2007, p. 4; Luciak 2001, p. 12). The FMLN favored the use of contraceptives and free sexual–affective relationships outside of marriage, but female guerrillas were commonly judged by a double standard (Luciak 2001, p. 15) and “las mujeres que tenían relaciones promiscuas fueron sancionadas” (Aguñada Deras 2002, p. 111). This was paradoxical since, as women were a minority in the camps, most of them were faced with insistent pressure to offer sexual favors to their male peers (Luciak 2001, p. 15). While sexual harassment was common, it was rarely reported and, even in that case, accusations tended to be dismissed by the leadership (Luciak 2001, p. 15). Contraceptives were also introduced in milieus that supported the FMLN, but, in a context in which sex was still understood as an activity with a primarily reproductive function, they were soon stigmatized and women who opted to use them often did so clandestinely (Aguñada Deras 2002, p. 114).

Sexist and patriarchal dynamics also determined motherhood, which entailed expulsion from the guerrilla, and women were the only ones responsible for preventing pregnancies. When these were carried to term, babies were often raised by other women outside the camps who acted as substitute mothers. Once the war ended, the reunion of biological mothers with their sons and daughters was complicated by the affects developed between the children and their caretakers, and many women, on both sides of the experience, underwent these transitions with great pain. Men, for their part, quickly dismissed any paternal responsibilities (Aguñada Deras 2002, p. 113; Navas 2007, p. 7; Luciak 2001, pp. 12–13).

During peace negotiations, “(n)o se escuchó la voluntad de los diferentes sectores sociales y mucho menos de las mujeres, cuyas demandas fueron excluidas de dichos acuerdos” (Aguñada Deras 2002, p. 108). As María Candelaria Navas (2007) has also noted: “los temas relativos a las mujeres recibieron atención nula o escasa durante las negociaciones de paz” (p. 8). Ilya Luciak (2001) agrees: “Women’s issues received scant to no attention in the peace negotiations in El Salvador” (p. 39). In sum,

[l]a población femenina que colaboró con el FMLN no tuvo acceso a la tierra repartida, pues incluyeron únicamente a los ‘jefes’ de familia. Las mujeres que participaron en la guerrilla urbana al no lograr desmovilizarse, no calificaron para obtener los beneficios de la desmovilización, perdiendo así la posibilidad de acceso a beneficios como becas y créditos. (Aguñada Deras 2002, p. 108)

Furthermore, during the Salvadoran postwar era, women’s rights experienced a setback similar to the one that took place in the United States after the Second World War:

se aceptó y permitió que las mujeres desempeñaran un papel no tradicional, siempre que fue necesario durante el conflicto, pero una vez terminada la guerra, cuando sus nuevas identidades representaban una amenaza para las relaciones tradicionales de género, se intentó relegarla a la esfera privada y despojarla de autoridad. (Navas 2007, pp. 9–10)

In its transition from guerrilla organization to political party, the FMLN included in its program the goal of “conseguir la igualdad de derechos para las mujeres” ((Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN) 1993, p. 19)). It is precisely then, in the early 1990s, that the Salvadoran feminist movement emerged, and several organizations of leftist women were created (Navas 2007, pp. 11–12). Many former guerrilla women

have stated that, although in that moment they lacked the theoretical tools to classify those aggressions as a matter of sexism, they have come to understand, years later, that they were constantly discriminated against within the revolutionary organizations for their gender (Kampwirth 2002, pp. 77–78; Luciak 2001, p. 12).

Given their age and life experiences, both protagonists became men during the war and, consequently, were strongly influenced by this patriarchal climate, in which women were systematically relegated to minor duties and caretaking tasks and severely judged when they went beyond those roles and into positions of leadership; were often victims of sexual harassment, which was not perceived as a violent act or a problem; and were the sole responsible ones when it came to preventing pregnancies or taking care of children. Thus, Aragón and Zeledón, as men, find themselves alienated in the context of a small college town in 2010, a moment and time in which gender relationships have been radically transformed, and their performed masculinities no longer fit the hegemonic model, which creates friction and conflicts.

The prose of both characters is, as we have seen, completely opposite, as are their ways of relating to women and performing their masculinity. Both are men in their fifties with a strong sexual appetite, and they frequently make comments on the physical appearance of female characters. For instance, Zeledón says that Estella, the teacher he drives in the schoolbus with her class, has a “frondoso culo mulato” (24), and later states in similar terms that she “[v]estía unos pantalones verdes muy tallados que ceñían su hermoso culo mulato” (48). Similarly, he describes his friend Denis’s wife as “rusa, rubia, despampanante, como sacada de un video porno” (26). Aragón often finds himself transfixed by the body of a woman as well: “en vez de seguir lo que Mina me contaba me quedé pegado en la apertura de sus piernas” (196). Another time, he is working at the CIA archives “cuando llamó la atención de mis pupilas el trasero de una de las empleadas” (214), and on his flight back to Merlow City he sits next to a “guapa chica enfundada en unos shorts de escándalo” (291). For Olga Bezhanova (2020), “the machista attitudes of the former guerrilla fighters and sympathizers point to the failure of the Leftist movements to preserve the feminist gains of the war years” (p. 221), so the novel “points to the deeply flawed nature of the Central American revolutionary discourse that failed to incorporate the aspirations of women, in spite of the many ways in which women contributed to the popular resistance movements” (Bezhanova 2020, p. 221). For Luna Sellés (2020), “although both characters are good examples of hegemonic masculinity, the crumbling of this façade illustrates the crisis of masculinity that they are going through, which extends to the rest of society” (p. 358). Moreover, the misogyny exhibited by the protagonists can sometimes be understood as another symptom of diasporic alienation: coming from a context that is extremely traditional regarding gender and sexuality, both men are uncomfortable facing young American women and the new modes of affective relationships that they encounter. Thus, Zeledón witnesses an instance of abuse at a party: a Honduran acquaintance, Lui, degrades his wife, a white American, in front of other guests, and Zeledón is surprised to see that “[e]n vez de darle una trompada que le hubiera desencajado la jeta, ella empezó a lagrimear” (p. 40). Jeffrey Browitt (2019) has accurately pointed out that Castellanos Moya “consciously write[s] these as the typical thoughts of his fallen male characters” (p. 92), although this critic finds impossible and absolutely implausible the subplot of the romance between Zeledón and his young, lesbian neighbor, Nikki (p. 85), as he also finds Amanda’s character problematic, for being a highly sexualized young girl (pp. 88–89, 93–94).⁹ I will delve into these two subplots in the following pages.

Although both of them sexualize women, Zeledón applies the same discipline and self-control to his sexual desire as he does over his verbal expression and daily activities, and, thus, is measured, calculating, and cold. On the contrary, Aragón’s sex life is governed by the same frenetic chaos and impulses that reign over his life and linguistic expression. Throughout the novel, Zeledón has an affair with Nikki, a young queer neighbor who lives with her girlfriend, Stacey. The affair is purely physical and devoid of any emotional bonds because Zeledón either rejects such connections or is simply unable to establish them. Their

first encounter borders on an assault, which implies that Zeledón can only relate from a position of violence and domination:

Me volví. Con un movimiento súbito, la tomé por la mandíbula con la mano izquierda y metí mi mano derecha entre sus piernas. Forcejeó un instante, pero luego se quedó quieta, sin quitarme la mirada desafiante de encima. Le desabotoné el short y deslicé mi cordial¹⁰ dentro de su vulva. Comenzó a jadear. (p. 37)

Their second encounter makes the physical nature of their relationship clear, since they do not even talk before sex:

No saludó ni dijo nada: tampoco yo. Caminé a mi encuentro [...] La encaramé sobre la secadora. Tenía los huesos largos y el tatuaje de un escorpión en el pubis. Me bajé los pantalones hasta las rodillas; la fusca se mantuvo firme en mi tobillera. Su boca permaneció pegada como lap a la mía. Fue rápido, animal, silencioso. (p. 58)

In this quotation, we must note the stereotypical identification of the gun with the erect penis, which suggests a link between sexuality and violence, as [Luna Sellés \(2020\)](#) has also observed (p. 358). However, it later becomes clear that Nikki expects to establish a closer emotional connection with Zeledón and complains that he “nunca respondía a sus mensajes si no era para tener sexo” (p. 95). His reaction is blunt: he stops answering her messages altogether and, eventually, Nikki leaves Stacey and moves away.

One of Zeledón’s jobs is as a school bus driver. The teacher on his route, Estella, accuses him of sexual misconduct, and he eventually loses the job. When he complains to his supervisor that “[t]odo es inventado” (p. 51), he replies that Estella already had another driver fired and that “esa puta [...] está loca” (p. 51) and “desquiciada” (p. 101). Later, Zeledón is fired as a result of Estella’s accusation that he “[se] propasaba cuando hablaba con ella” (p. 101) and followed her, when, in fact, Zeledón just ran into her a couple of times. However, the reader can only know facts from the protagonist’s perspective, and, taking into account his fixation with her buttocks, one may wonder if Estella has actually perceived Zeledón as a threat, just as Olga [Bezhanova \(2020\)](#) has suggested. For her, “Zeledón’s indignation over the firing makes it clear that he has little awareness that his insistent stalking of the female colleague was, indeed, threatening to her” (p. 220).

Although Zeledón continuously objectifies women, he also exerts great control over his own impulses and does not yield to these at any moment. As in every other realm of his life, he is cold and calculating. His attitude is aptly illustrated by a remark he makes regarding a past job, in which he also drove a school bus, only that time the students were teenagers and “algunas adolescentes, con las hormonas insolentes, buscaban provocarme” (p. 24). Zeledón is thus portrayed as a hypermasculine lover, sexually vigorous but emotionally distant and in complete control of his impulses at all moments, someone for whom sex and violence are closely connected: as a man, he is, in sum, the archetype of the traditional macho. This masculinity revolves around his military-style discipline and the violent dynamics learned during the war. This way, he is portrayed as a warrior and linked to the ideas associated with this figure: since he fought in combat, he is determined and courageous, he is a real man, in the traditional sense of the word. The warrior’s bravery is directly linked to the notion of masculinity in patriarchal culture ([Connell 2020](#), p. 213). For instance, the forms Spanish men had to fill in when enrolling in mandatory military service during the twentieth century had a section for “valor” under which it was customary to always write “se le supone”, implying that the mere fact of being a man meant that the individual was also brave and apt for combat. Ultimately, Zeledón’s masculinity fits into what [Venkatesh \(2015\)](#) has called the trope of revolutionary masculinity, characterized by its physical agility, its attractiveness to the female gaze, and linguistic ineptitude (p. 150). Revolutionary masculinity deviates from the hegemonic one in that it does not support the sociopolitical status quo ([Venkatesh 2015](#), p. 153). Like in Zeledón’s case, “[t]heir attention to detail stresses their military nature as a characteristic of their masculinity” ([Venkatesh 2015](#), p. 153). This scholar cautions us to keep in mind that these men are revolutionary

only in a strictly political sense, and that, regarding gender politics, they, like Zeledón, “succeed in perpetuating the evils of homophobia and sexism” (p. 150).

On the contrary, Aragón has a weak will and easily yields to his sexual desire, which often leads him into problematic situations. When he starts working at Merlow College, he has to complete a test on sexual harassment (p. 180) that he passes by following the tip offered by a colleague in selecting the opposite of what he would actually answer to each question (pp. 180–81). This comical anecdote reveals that he is unable to discriminate between consensual and predatory sexual practices, as emphasized as well in a scene on his flight back to Merlow, when he is sitting next to an attractive young woman and tries talking to her, but her headphones operate as a barrier to this, creating “una burbuja en la que por fortuna es muy difícil ser importunado por un vecino de asiento verborreico, pero que de igual manera me imposibilitó abordar a la guapa chica enfundada en unos shorts de escándalo” (p. 291).

Contrary to Zeledón, Aragón is often dominated by his sexual drive, even in situations in which common sense would advise otherwise, which leads to a series of comical subplots. Thus, during his first night in Washington D. C., he meets a woman, Mina, who is going through a marital crisis with her long-distance husband, who works in finance in Frankfurt, Germany. They chat and Aragón shares some stories about the time he spent living in that same city, where he had a Panamanian friend, Yesenia, who was a luxury sex worker. She specialized in prostatic massages for executives, and Mina decides to contact her to find out whether her husband has been seeing sex workers, which would benefit her in the divorce. Aragón, motivated by the possibility of getting to sleep with Mina, yields and gives her Yesenia’s private number, who, upset by this, will end up breaking off her friendship with him.

The sexual scenes featuring Aragón are grotesque, repulsive, and ridiculous, so that he is portrayed as the caricature of an emasculated man. Thus, one of his past lovers did not care that he “fuera latino, chaparro y enclenque, ni que cuando la penetrara le sobrara espacio” (p. 175). In another meeting with Mina, he masturbates her at a bar by using his toes (p. 197), and in a past sexual encounter with a lover named Heather, she is so talkative that she is only quiet when performing fellatio (p. 211), which is followed by Aragón having a panic attack in the midst of the sexual act (p. 212). Furthermore, the character comically insists throughout the novel on his fixation on anal sex, and he once wakes up remembering from his dreams only “la imagen de mi moronga metida en un culo” (p. 263). In Washington, the anxiety he suffers causes him to have diarrhea¹¹, so, before meeting again with Mina that night, he takes a shower, explaining that “mi cuerpo pegajoso de sudor y mi culo hediondo no hubiesen sido apetitosos” (p. 242). Vindoh Venkatesh (2015) aptly interprets a scene from Pedro Lemebel’s *Tengo miedo torero* (Lemebel 2021) in which the dictator accidentally soils himself, seeing the bowel movement as a symbolic castration (p. 51), a reading that we could also apply here to Aragón’s incontinence, which seems to be emasculating him. As a lover, not only is Aragón portrayed as ridiculous, grotesque, and less than a man from a traditional point of view, but his interest in anal sex and his recurrent references to his chaotic and irregular bowel movements symbolically portray him as a homosexual or an effeminate man. Being symbolically penetrated renders Aragón as subordinate and effeminate, a lesser man, since “[h]egemonic masculinity forbids the receptive pleasures of the anus and opposes assimilation” (Connell 2020, p. 219).

It is important to note that these characters’ opposed masculinities reflect their different relationships with the war: while Zeledón was an active guerrilla, Aragón exiled himself in Mexico, where he carried out supporting duties that never involved the use of violence. His persona as a mediocre, pathetic, and almost emasculated lover seems to be signaling the fact that he did not fight. Ultimately, the novel is implying that war masculinities, performed either by soldiers and founded on the hypermasculinity of the warrior or by those in exile and founded on emasculatory cowardice, are doomed to never fit in the transnational context of diasporic communities in the twenty-first century. However,

violent hypermasculinity will thrive in this context, whereas non-violent masculinity will be penalized.

In sum, although both characters experience a strong sexual drive, Zeledón is defined by his self-control and coldness, while Aragón easily yields to his impulses, even when these will get him into trouble. In the same way, sex for Zeledón is inextricably linked to violence, while Aragón is portrayed as a grotesque and ridiculous lover. Simply put, Zeledón represents the traditional hypermasculinity that is characterized by dominance, emotional distance, and violence and is typically associated with the figure of the warrior, whereas Aragón comes across as a sub-man or as not macho enough, in a portrayal that implies that his having eluded armed conflict has also prevented him from becoming macho in the way Zeledón has. In any case, both masculinities, the result of a coming of age during the Salvadoran civil war, no longer fit the new, neoliberal model that is dominant in the United States of the twenty-first century, rendering both characters alienated.

5. Conclusions

Moronga underscores how, in the era of the globalized economy, trauma and crime are also global, and that the painful memories of the Salvadoran war haunt its survivors beyond borders and decades. The novel sheds a critical light on how the transition to peace did not actually put an end to violence, but rather transformed it from politically motivated into criminal, and facilitated the integration of El Salvador into the transnational neoliberal markets that have just exacerbated the social inequalities that caused the war in the first place, forcing so many Salvadorans into exile and migration. Complex networks of transnational organized crime that operate throughout Central America, as well as Greater Central America, have emerged with the rise of extensive Central American diasporic networks, a direct product of the war.

The enormous burden of the trauma with which the novel's protagonists live each day suggests that Salvadoran society has yet to undertake memory labor in order to heal the psychological wounds of the conflict, but the postwar conflict benefits precisely the politics of historical amnesia, advantaging those who, like Zeledón, are trapped in the unhealthy dynamics of acting out and focus on forgetting, while perpetuating the violent dynamics of the past; and harming those who, like Aragón, are trying to carry out that memory labor and work through the traumatic experiences.

In the novel, this violence is exerted by Zeledón, who stereotypically represents the features of traditional hypermasculinity: he has a strong sexual drive but is highly controlled and cold, he is a vigorous lover whose sexual encounters border on assault, yet his lovers obsess over him, even though outside of the bedroom he is emotionally distant and cold. Zeledón performs a masculinity that has traditionally been associated with the figure of the warrior and, thus, he is as apt in his criminal hustles as he is in the bedroom and is able to elude the FBI. On the contrary, anxious Aragón also has a strong sexual drive but is often controlled by it, which gets him into problematic situations. Despite this sexual drive, his erotic encounters portray him as an emasculated man and a ridiculous lover: he is performing a sort of sub-masculinity that the novel links to his exile during the war and the fact that he has never actively participated in violence. Rather, he has always followed the law and has attempted to carry out the memory labor much needed by Salvadoran society in order to heal its war wounds. However, this postwar society is ruled by the violence articulated from the patriarchal violence of those who fought on one side or another during the war, and peaceful individuals like Aragón will be unable, Castellanos Moya warns us, to defeat the organized crime imperium.

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Notes

- ¹ This saga is, so far, comprised of a total of seven novels that narrate the history of a Salvadoran family through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These novels are *Donde no estén ustedes* (Castellanos Moya 2003), *Desmoronamiento* (Castellanos Moya 2006), *Tirana memoria* (Castellanos Moya 2008), *La sirvienta y el luchador* (Castellanos Moya 2011), *El sueño del retorno* (Castellanos Moya 2013), *Moronga* (Castellanos Moya 2018) and *El hombre amansado* (Castellanos Moya 2022). Olga Bezhanova (2021) has analyzed how Moronga is connected with the rest of the series, with particular emphasis on *La sirvienta y el luchador* (Castellanos Moya 2011).
- ² Readers familiarized with Castellanos Moya's work will recognize protagonists, as well as a few secondary characters, from other novels of the author. José Zeledón appears as Joselito in *La sirvienta y el luchador* (Castellanos Moya 2011), and anonymously in *El arma en el hombre* (Castellanos Moya 2001). Robocop, the main character in *El arma en el hombre*, briefly turns up here, too. El Ingeniero or The Engineer from *El arma en el hombre* is, in this novel, the Old Man or Urrutia. Aragón is the main character of *El sueño del retorno* (Castellanos Moya 2013), set in Mexico City in approximately 1990. Thanks to the Aragón series, we also know that Zeledón and Aragón are relatives, since Zeledón's grandmother worked as a maid for the Aragón family and had a daughter with Clemente, one of the Aragón boys. This daughter, Belka, is Zeledón's mother, which makes Erasmo Zeledón's uncle (Bezhanova 2020, p. 215).
- ³ Erasmo Aragón is Castellanos Moya's alter ego. Like the character, the author also exiled himself in 1981 to flee violence and spent several years working as a journalist in Mexico City. He then returned to San Salvador, like Aragón does, after the Peace Accords and worked for a new political magazine. Castellanos Moya has described himself as paranoid, one of the most notable traits of his fictional character, and also works as a college professor in the Midwest (Castellanos Moya 2004).
- ⁴ This was, according to novel *La casa de Moravia* by Salvadoran Miguel Huezo Mixco (2017), a motto commonly repeated among guerrilla members. It refers to the compartmentalization required to preserve one's safety and that of the organization: with other guerrillas, one might share only the necessary information about oneself. With anybody else, one should not share anything at all.
- ⁵ The story about his grandmother, María Elena, and the former boxer and policeman nicknamed Viking constitutes the plot of *La sirvienta y el luchador* (Castellanos Moya 2011).
- ⁶ Temporary Protection Status (TPS) is a temporary permit granted by the U.S. government to citizens of several countries, including El Salvador, that allows them to work and live in the U.S. and needs to be renewed periodically.
- ⁷ For Magdalena Perkowska (2020), this is merely just a seemingly ethical justification (p. 18) that Zeledón employs when his actual reason not to participate is the risk involved (p. 18).
- ⁸ For Olga Bezhanova (2020), the final shooting constitutes a "symbolic reenactment, on US soil, of the Civil War in El Salvador. Aragón represents the Salvadoran intellectual elites that welcomed US involvement in El Salvador's politics and relied on their economic and cultural capital to evade the harshest consequences of the Civil War. [...] Zeledón and Juan Domingo Urrutia [...] represent the degraded nature of the liberation movements of the second half of the twentieth century that have abandoned their ideological commitments and embraced a life of criminality" (p. 216).
- ⁹ Emanuela Jossa (2022) sees the sexualization of Amanda as a very intentional feature that aims to make the reader feel uncomfortable (as has indeed been the case with Browitt) (p. 141).
- ¹⁰ The word *cordial* is a comical reference to the middle finger, since this one is raised in a not cordial at all gesture, to offend someone.
- ¹¹ Venkatesh (2015) includes Castellanos Moya within a growing corpus of postwar Central American authors, such as Fernando Contreras Castro, Maurice Echeverría, and Franz Galich, that recurrently employ themes and imagery related to waste and scatology, thus calling "attention the detritus and stagnation that corrupts and rules Central America in the wake of neoliberal reforms" (p. 52).

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