

## Diasporic Reparations: Repairing the Social Imaginaries of Central America in the Twenty-First Century

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Contemporary Central American diasporic writers like Horacio Castellanos Moya (Honduras, 1957-), Francisco Goldman (US, 1954-), Héctor Tobar (US, 1963-), and Marcos McPeck Villatoro (US, 1962-), among others, often write in response to various forms of violence.<sup>1</sup> In their works, they grapple with Central America as a site of unresolved historical crises that often extend into the lives of Central Americans outside of the isthmus. In their writing, recent wars and social strife lie at the core of transnational Central American cultural and social formations. This essay examines how violence, impunity, and a reckoning with the past hold cognitive relevancy for a number of Central American diasporic writers seeking to deal with residual trauma. Central American diasporic writers like the aforementioned contribute to relevant critical debates on Central American history, diaspora, and the construction of transnational *Centroamericanidades* in the twenty-first century. In particular, writers like Goldman in *The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop?* (hereafter *The Art*) and Castellanos Moya in *Insensatez* ‘Senselessness’ engage in symbolic acts of reparation that often manifest the (im)possibilities of repairing and rewriting or righting the past in societies where violence and impunity have been duly institutionalized, have left indelible marks, and are the root causes of diaspora. Following Charles S. Maier’s line of questioning in “Overcoming the Past?: Narrative and Negotiation, Remembering, and Reparation: Issues at the Interface of History and the Law,” it can be said that Central American transnational and diasporic writers often seek in their work to “repair and remember because

[they] cannot return. What community existed has been rent” (296), torn apart, and destroyed for them. That loss of homeland and everything associated with it gives shape to their condition of diaspora. Hence, impunity, violence, and immigration are at the core of the diasporic imaginary of US Central American writers whose works are considered in this larger analysis.

### The Central American Diaspora Writes Back

Part of a growing corpus of Central American diasporic literature that concerns itself with war and its aftermath in Central America, Castellanos Moya’s *Senselessness* and Goldman’s *The Art* focus on the act of investigating and writing about past war crimes and their consequences in the postwar period. In *Senselessness*, Castellanos Moya outlines the process of editing a truth commission-like report that during the course of the novel takes a life of its own, possessing the writer-editor who grows more and more paranoid as he reads the text until he is forced to abandon both the project and Guatemala. In *The Art*, Goldman details the court proceedings following the assassination of Bishop Juan José Gerardi Conedera, who, on April 26, 1998, was killed by unknown assailants just two days after the publication of the Archdiocese of Guatemala’s *REMHI* report (*Official Report of the Human Rights Office*, titled *Guatemala Never Again! Recovery of Historical Memory Project*). To this day, Bishop Gerardi’s killers have yet to be brought fully to justice, and Goldman in his text documents years of investigative work and court proceedings that, in the end, did not clarify the chain of command responsible for the killing of the bishop. In Guatemalan and Central American historiography, Bishop Gerardi’s assassination (like that of Archbishop Oscar A. Romero in El Salvador in 1980 and similarly the six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter, killed on the grounds of the Catholic University in San Salvador in 1989) serves as a symbol of impunity in the postwar period. Those who killed the bishop, as well the priests, nuns, and thousands of other people in Guatemala and El Salvador, remain to be brought to justice. Together, then, these diasporic texts return to unresolved crimes in Central America and the need to work through violence and trauma by rewriting or righting the past and revisiting the vast archive of written and ephemeral texts, including novels, oral

testimonies, truth commission reports, and other texts associated with the recent civil wars and social crises.

In their respective works, *Senselessness* and *The Art*, Castellanos Moya and Goldman incessantly return to the scene of the Guatemalan civil war and engage in acts of reparation through writing from their diasporic positions. While Castellanos Moya has long resided outside of El Salvador and his birthplace Honduras and writes primarily in Spanish, Goldman, who was born in the United States of Guatemalan and Jewish parentage, writes and publishes for the most part in English. Both authors' works have been translated extensively. For both, especially in their texts discussed here, the Guatemalan civil war and its aftermath serve as a point of departure for reflection on the larger issues of violence, impunity, and the limits of writing on these subjects within and outside of the Central American isthmus. Writing from different locations of the Central American diaspora, Castellanos Moya and Goldman are part of what Robin Cohen in *Global Diasporas* identifies as a "dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions" (17). War-torn and violence-afflicted Central America, whether it be Guatemala, El Salvador, or Honduras, is the greater homeland that both Castellanos Moya and Goldman address in many of their works, including *Senselessness* and *The Art*. As diasporic subjects writing outside of the Central American isthmus, they show that they, too, have something to say about the region, articulating a significant intervention from other locations. With them, the Central American diaspora writes back, remembers the past, and attempts to reconstruct a broken history that ultimately cannot be repaired.

Representing this irreparable breach with the past, the writer protagonist of *Senselessness* escapes Guatemala without completing his job—the copyediting of the one-thousand-one-hundred-page-single-spaced document that will become the Archdiocese of Guatemala's *REMHI* report. With the text incomplete and his mind impaired, the failed writer-editor suggests the futility of writing such a text when he reiterates throughout the novel that the report should have been titled, "we all know who are the assassins" (Castellanos Moya 139). According to the writer-editor living at the end of the novel in exile in Switzerland with his cousin Quique, that line is "the

most propitious, the right one to be the title of the report that really wanted to say precisely this, that *We all know who are the assassins*" (139). This phrase brings to light the impossibility of bringing to justice the assassins, especially the military high command and government officials who ordered the killings and massacres in the 1980s, because most traces of the chain of command responsibility have been erased and covered up in silence and fear.

In this context where words fail their mark, or where signifiers are cut off from once revered connotations like truth, justice, and freedom, the writer in Castellanos Moya's novel is left to collect in his notebook truncated meaningless words, phrases, and sentences extracted from his reading of victim testimonials as cited in the *REMHI* report. His notebook becomes the repository of bits and pieces of testimonies that have been discredited by political, juridical, and literary authorities. Castellanos Moya's novel thus represents the breakdown of the social order and the chain of signification in a world subject to what Idelber Avelar calls the "letter of violence"—rhetorical, literary, political and juridical discourses that are not only compromised but moreover complicit in the production of violence (23). Although everyone may know that those in power are the assassins who killed the bishop and others, the truth cannot be disclosed because those in power control the law, justice, and meaning of truth. Further, Castellanos Moya's text suggests that there is no higher juridical power to which to appeal for justice in countries such as Guatemala and El Salvador, where full political amnesty has been granted to and exonerated perpetrators of crimes against humanity. In this context of smoke screens, the Archdiocese of Guatemala's *REMHI* report defines impunity as "a pervasive reality in which government agents operated, and continue to operate, without fear of punishment. Impunity is presented as a cause of and a consequence of [state-generated] violence, as well as a central obstacle to justice and reconciliation" (xxxiii).

Toward the end of the novel, nearly driven mad by the looming past, the writer-editor of Castellanos Moya's novel flees to Switzerland, only to discover that there, too, he is pursued by the ghosts, echoes, and words of the *REMHI*. In particular, he is haunted by one particular line from the report, which captures the sense of postwar disillusionment that follows him into exile. The writer recalls

that, even in diaspora, those afflicted by the trauma of the wars in Central America “live the time of distress” (Castellanos Moya 142). In a drunken stupor, he returns home one evening to read an email from his friend Toto in Guatemala, announcing the assassination of the bishop “at the parish house ... his head [smashed] with a brick” (142). The editor’s growing paranoid fear of participating in the project of editing or repairing the report is exacerbated by the news of the assassination of the bishop who supervised the project. In the last lines of the novel, Toto reveals to the editor the facts of the murder and confirms his greatest fear, “Everybody’s fucked. Be grateful you left” (142), leaving the editor in a numbing state of *insensatez*, or rather “senselessness” and futility in dealing with the past, especially when perpetrators continue their work in postwar Central America. Indeed, he had been right to fear and flee from working on the human rights report, which could have cost him his life as it did the bishop’s. The writer-editor comes to the conclusion that any involvement in the production of the report had been, for him, a senseless endeavor that could never undo “the sorrow of an indigenous woman who had survived the massacre” (130), or the suffering of the survivors who were left to tell of the atrocities that they experienced and witnessed. His participation in the editing of the report could only leave him “either wounded or dead” (130), or what he calls a state of senselessness. Indeed, Castellanos Moya’s novel seems to suggest that the act of writing (about) or bringing to justice past crimes is but a fruitless endeavor in Central America.

While the comprehensive *REMHI* report painstakingly attempts to reconstruct the larger narrative of the victims of the Guatemalan civil war, Castellanos Moya’s writer-editor deconstructs it, literally extracting disconnected verbal fragments from the firsthand testimonies of survivors recorded in the report. As the editor reads and corrects the report, he is mesmerized by what he identifies as the “poetic quality” of the victims’ words. Repeatedly, he refers to the verbal “beauts,” “powerful sentences,” and “splendid sentences” of great “sonority,” “musicality,” and “poetic quality” in the testimonies (Castellanos Moya 19, 32, 36, 110). Through the testimonies of his “so-called aboriginal compatriots” (20), the despair of massacres, tortures, mutilations, and deaths is magically transformed for the editor who converts words into “intense figurative language ...

that reminded [him] of poets like the Peruvian César Vallejo” (20) and into sentences that he could “with luck later use in some kind of literary collage, but which surprised [him] above all for their use of repetition and adverbs” (32). The fragments of testimony recovered and recorded in his notebook prefigure “the plot of a novel” he intends to write and fuel his desire “to write it, to turn tragedy on its head, to turn [himself] into the suffering ghost of the civil registrar in a town called Totonicapán...” (60). In reading and recording the pained words of others in his notebook, the editor is forced to imagine the violence recorded in the report and also to engage in the transference of trauma. Increasingly, he becomes a man possessed by fear, paranoia, and narratives of violence, torture, and death until he is overtaken by “secondary trauma” and is forced to abandon the copyediting project and the country. Pulled into the drama and trauma of the text, readers witness the writer’s unraveling as well as the coming undone of the hundreds of testimonies in the archive that comprise the *REMHI* report. What is under question in Castellanos Moya’s novel is the truth-value and credibility of the *testimonio* genre. Under Castellanos Moya’s scrutiny, the *testimonio* falls literally to pieces: the verbal beauts, powerful phrases, and splendid sentences that he copies into his notebook for no higher intention than to use them as quotes in a novel he plans to write in the future.

Picking up the pieces for a different purpose, Goldman dedicated over seven years of his life to writing the story of Bishop Gerardi’s killing in *The Art*. Although everyone might have known implicitly who killed the bishop in charge of collecting the testimonies of war survivors and writing the *REMHI* report, which Castellanos Moya’s fictional writer edited, no one can tell the whole story, identify the guilty parties, or say outright who killed the bishop in the country’s current state of impunity. The title of Goldman’s novel, *The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop?*, would seem to illustrate that break, gap, or caesura in getting to the truth of violence in Central America. To ask who the murderers are means to enter a space of silence, lies, and fictionalization of events, or rather the art of political murder, in which authorities are so well versed. Hence, both Castellanos Moya’s and Goldman’s texts seek to reconstitute a story that cannot be told because to tell it in the postwar context of

Central America would be to challenge those in power today.

In the end, both texts serve as meta-reflections that ponder the construction of narrative in the aftermath of genocide as well as the archiving of fragments of truths that more recently have been recalled in the long-overdue trials of generals and other guilty parties responsible for crimes against humanity. Though rarely studied together, *Senselessness* and *The Art* may be read as symbolic acts of reparation that challenge the prevailing narrative of impunity in Central American today. It is not a coincidence that both texts are written from the cloak of diaspora and exile. In both *Senselessness* and *The Art*, Guatemala City stands almost frozen in time, bound by the long civil war that began in 1954 with the United States sponsored *coup d'état* that toppled from power President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán and that only ended in 1996 with the signing of the Guatemalan Peace Accords. During the Guatemalan civil war (1954-96), over 200,000 people were killed, with almost 90% of these deaths, countless disappearances, and numerous acts of torture and violence attributed to the Guatemalan government (Jonas 2000; REMHI 1998; Carmack 1988).

### Truth Commissions Revisited

In the twenty-first century, we have witnessed the undoing of some of the most significant tenets of the 1990s Truth Commissions and Peace Accords in Guatemala and El Salvador. Reports published by organizations in the United States such as the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) and the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) indicate that Central America is being remilitarized (Mills n.p.), this time under the guise of transnational security. On the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the Peace Accords in El Salvador, for example, President Mauricio Funes appointed retired General Francisco Ramón Salinas to serve as the new Chief of the National Civil Police (PNC), undermining one of the most crucial stipulations of the Salvadoran Peace Accords, which, in 1992, mandated the purging of the armed forces and guerrillas, the establishment of a Truth Commission, and the building of a new civil police force to be run by civilian authorities (*Peace Accords*, Ch. 2, 3.A.a.1, p. 3). The Salvadoran Peace Accords emphasized that “the leadership of the National Civil Police shall be civilian” and that “the

public security structure shall be entirely new” (3).

In Guatemala, too, there has been a reversal of Peace Accords principles with the resuming of military order and the taking of office, on January 14, 2012, of President Otto Pérez Molina, a former army general of the right wing Patriotic Party (Paverman n.p.). During the most critical moments of the Guatemalan civil war, Pérez Molina served as “junior officer in the military’s unremitting human rights campaign against the Quiche indigenous population” (Mills n.p.). In the last pages of Castellanos Moya’s *Senselessness*, the writer-editor imagines personally seeing General Octavio Pérez Mena, a thinly veiled allusion to the aforementioned Otto Pérez Molina (O’Driscoll n.p.). Castellanos Moya’s OPM—Octavio Pérez Mena / Otto Pérez Molina—was known to have been an “intelligence officer” and “torturer of the girl of the archdiocese and the slayer of Indians” and others (Castellanos Moya 116), as well as “the official in charge of the unit assigned to the massacre[s]” and the torturer who “exploded the heads of newborn babies against beams” (126). Possessed by “the same macabre fantasy” that he experienced while editing the report in Guatemala, the editor thinks he spots the general in a bar in Switzerland during winter carnival, “his impunity here nonexistent” (140). As he sees and flees from the general in a satiric carnivalesque bar scene, the editor imagines spitting and shouting in the face of the general, “We all know who are the assassins!” (140). In an act of poetic justice, the text identifies OPM as a war criminal.

In this reversal of fates, not without verbal irony, the violent order of the editor’s world becomes unhinged and unravels before him, as Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (1984) would have it. Figuratively taken back to Guatemala, the editor identifies his mental tormentor, the torturer of many, and repeats the lines aloud: “We all know who are the assassins!” and “Thereafter we live in the time of distress” (140), incriminating thus the general with the war crimes that he committed against humanity in Guatemala, but for which he has not been brought to justice. Thus, Castellanos Moya’s novel may be read as an indictment, full of ironic twists, innuendos, and cover ups, that permits torturers like the fictional and real OPM to become the president of Guatemala as well as the former dictator General Efraín Ríos Montt to hold public offices after the civil war in

Guatemala and to go publicly untried for crimes against humanity.<sup>2</sup> In *Senselessness* and *The Art*, the field of restorative (institutional) and retributive (individual) justice often extends transnationally. Produced outside of Guatemala, both texts document crimes committed against humanity in Central America, which often go unspoken, undocumented, and untried in the region, or tried in courts outside of the country in the international arena of human rights justice.

Henceforth Goldman's *The Art* is examined as an act of diasporic imaginary reparation. While there has been little accounting of the great toll that violence has taken in Guatemala, it is even more significant that a diasporic writer like Goldman turned to literature to examine the workings and effects of institutional violence in Central American society. In his own right, Goldman challenges the narrative of impunity about who is guilty of killing the bishop while calling attention to the public "conspiracy of silence" (Hayner 135), which produces a myriad of competing stories that can never get to one truth but many versions of it. In his text, Goldman arrives at the unspeakable truth of not being able to repair the traumatic past, which he spends more than seven years researching and pursuing in the archives, courts, and offices of the Catholic Archdiocese. A meta-reflection on the act of writing about the effects of state violence and the search for justice, Goldman's text documents his long process of investigating the assassination of Bishop Juan Gerardi and the killing, torture, and disappearances of over 260,000 Guatemalans during the Guatemalan civil war, eventually compiled in the *REMHI* report.

### Writing Against Impunity

Published in 2007 and translated into Spanish that same year, Goldman's book revisits the impact made by the publication of the *REMHI* report. Goldman states that beyond documenting the atrocities of the war, "the authors of the *REMHI* report attempted to describe and illustrate the logic behind what they called 'the inexplicable'" (22), which could only be approximated through the collection of thousands of victim *testimonios* and names recorded in the four volume, 1400-page document. In addition to compiling statistics on human rights violations committed against Guatemalans,

the *REMHI* published *testimonios* of victims, perpetrators, and others who were interviewed after the cease-fire, all describing in graphic detail the form and extent of state-generated violence perpetrated against the Guatemalan people. The report told how, in addition to killing, vanishing, displacing, torturing, raping, and grievously injuring people, the Guatemalan military destroyed homes and property, and, in sum, “damaged basic means of survival and their symbols of life” (*REMHI* 41). In the case of the Maya, ethnocide was ensured with the killing of elders, who are the traditional bearers of memory, language, knowledge, aesthetic, cosmology, calendar counting, and other social practices in Maya communities (48). Each lost seed of corn like each human life lost represented massive and enduring losses for the Maya, the Guatemalan nation, and the world as a whole. Having worked in the Quiche region early in his priesthood and implemented bilingual education programs for his parishioners, Bishop Gerardi understood well the extent of the destruction of life, material goods, and cultural practices caused by the violence.

As the director of the *REMHI* project, Gerardi foresaw that the compiled information could be used in trials against guilty parties in the future. Thus, after the shock of making public past atrocities, Truth Commission reports like the *REMHI* in their postwar afterlife serve as an important source of data and documentation in reparative projects, as is shown in the use of film footage from the 1980s of Ríos Montt admitting command responsibility of his troops in the documentary *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator*. Some of these same film clips of Ríos Montt were presented by the prosecution along with witness testimonies as evidence against the general at his trial in 2013. Although Ríos Montt was found guilty of genocidal crimes on May 10, 2013, the Constitutional Court quickly overturned his conviction, leaving uncertain the future of his case and that of other guilty parties in the Guatemalan genocide.

According to Goldman’s informants, Bishop Gerardi’s next truth-gathering project would have been the production of a “new report on ‘the intellectual authors’ of the war’s atrocities” (Goldman 10). Although some army battalions, civil patrols, and individuals responsible for the killings were named in the *REMHI* report, those in the military high command remained unidentified. They

had much to fear if the bishop's second project came to fruition. Utterly different, the Salvadoran Truth Commission report named a number of military officials such as Coronel Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, Coronel Oscar Edgardo Casanova Vejar, Coronel Roberto Monterrosa, General José Guillermo García, Major Lizandro Zepeda Velasco, Sargent Dagoberto Martínez, Sub-Sargent Luis Antonio Colindres Alemán, among others, as responsible for giving, hiding, and/or following orders leading to the killing of the American nuns in 1980 and Salvadoran civilians en masse during the war (*De la locura*, 106-07). Some of these war criminals are now being called to trial in the International Human Rights abiding courts, as seen in the indictment of twenty military officials in Spain in 2011 and 2012.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of Guatemala, Bishop Gerardi was killed two days after the release of the *REMHI* by an unknown assailant—a mystery that captivated Goldman for more than seven years as he followed the investigation and court trials of Gerardi's alleged killers in a Guatemalan legal system that was skewed, as Goldman puts it, "to protect an entrenched elite" (15). Inasmuch as Goldman's book documents the aftermath of Gerardi's murder and offers a meta-reflection on the construction of narratives of violence, impunity, and truth finding and telling in Central America, *The Art* also figures as an indictment on the impossibility of juridical reparative acts in Guatemala. Early on in his book, Goldman comes to the conclusion that "here are some things that should be investigated, and others not," such as the thousands of unresolved killings like that of slain anthropologist Myrna Mack Chang, whose chief homicide detective José Mérida was murdered in 1990 (42-43). As Goldman and Castellanos Moya show, reparative work in the Central American countries gets people killed. To date, Goldman and Castellanos Moya have not been immune to retaliation and have survived several attacks on their literary and personal lives.

As Goldman claims, "it was widely assumed, of course, that the bishop was killed in retaliation for the *REMHI* report" (61). It was equally expected

that the murderers would [never] be brought to justice... Guatemalans had only to look at the region's recent history of "unimaginable" homicides to feel discouraged... The more

shocking the crime, it seemed, the more powerful or powerfully connected the criminals, and in Latin America powerful people almost never end up in prison. (61)

Goldman's text goes on to show how the investigation was compromised from the start as the crime scene was contaminated by the telos of impunity. The police prematurely cleaned up the crime scene even before all the evidence was gathered, unauthorized information was disclosed to the public, and the case of the dead bishop was covered up in a tangled web of lies.

For over three hundred pages covering seven years of court proceedings, Goldman's text replays the multiple theories that were presented in the public arena and subsequently in the juridical courts to explain the bishop's murder: by an unidentified shirtless young man seen fleeing the crime scene; by a homosexual lover caught in a fit of passion; by homeless drunks and drug addicts who slept outside the bishop's garage door at his home at the Church of San Sebastián; by his live-in assistant, Father Mario Orantes Nájera, and his German shepherd Baloo; by Ana Lucía Escobar, the illegitimate daughter of Monseñor Efraín Hernández, the Curia Chancellor who was third-in-command after Gerardi, and her boyfriend; and, by two unknown assailants who took the time to drink orange juice from a pitcher in the refrigerator on the night of the murder. From the start, "Father Mario had become the focus of much speculation and suspicion, public and private" (57), for he should have been awoken by the noise of Gerardi's struggle in the garage, and he managed to make calls to people in the bishop's circle before calling the firemen and police. More incriminatingly after the murder, he "emerge[d] from the parish house, expressionless, immaculately dressed and groomed, to walk his German shepherd, Baloo, in the park" (57). And yet, the purloin signs indicating that the bishop's death was caused by higher forces in the military remained hidden, unspoken, and misidentified.

Laying out the scene of what would become "Guatemala's 'crime of the century'—the most important, and certainly the most bizarrely spectacular, passionately contested and convoluted legal case in the country's history" (52)—Goldman's *The Art* plots multiple theories, players, and scenarios of impunity in postwar Guatemala. In the subtitle of the book, Goldman asks rhetorically, *Who Killed*

*the Bishop?*, alluding throughout the text to how murder is officially sanctioned and covered up in Guatemala and how it escapes the rule of law. As an experienced journalist, master storyteller, and author of novels such as *The Long Night of White Chickens*, *The Ordinary Seaman*, and *The Divine Husband*—all set in Central America—for Goldman, the drama of Gerardi's killing and court proceedings lent itself to storytelling. As the repairer of "unspeakable truths," to borrow from the title of Pricilla B. Hayner's classic book on reparation discourse (2001), Goldman spins theories, unravels subplots, shuffles characters, and toys with the impossibility of narrating truth in times of impunity, a conclusion also made by Castellanos Moya, albeit through different means. Goldman's book seems to show that the murder even of a bishop can be the basis of true crime narratives drawing from the most unreliable of sources and authorities. Finally, Goldman's text seems to posit that it makes no difference who killed the bishop, for "in Latin America powerful people almost never end up in prison" (Goldman 61). Although *The Art* exhaustively engages in the search for truth and justice through research, writing, and reporting, impunity wins out in the end as it does in Castellanos Moya's *Senselessness*.

The Guatemalan civil war, like the other wars in Central America, ended in a smoke screen of amnesty for the guilty with little to no reparation, redress, or societal healing for the victims and survivors of those wars. For the most part, the Guatemalan and Salvadoran governments have not accepted responsibility for human rights violations against their citizenry, nor have they extended formal apologies, or made formal, material reparations to the victims and survivors of state violence. In the case of El Salvador, the Truth Commission Report, *De la locura a la esperanza*, made recommendations for "material and moral reparations" (Segovia n.p.). The recommendations included (1) the creation of a special fund to function as an autonomous entity that would draw contributions from the international community and not the Salvadoran government; (2) the creation of a national monument with the names of all the identified victims; (3) the establishment of a national holiday in remembrance of the victims of the conflict and as expression of national reconciliation; and (4) the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Forum to include representative

sectors of the country. Of the four recommendations, only the Wall of Names, dedicated to those who died in the war and located in *Parque Cuscatlán* in downtown San Salvador, was built by a private organization (Segovia n.p.). In his essay “The Reparations Program Proposed by the Truth Commission,” published in *The Handbook of Reparations*, Alexander Segovia cites the “lack of political will” on the part of the Salvadoran state as the biggest obstacle to bringing war criminals to justice, enacting reparations, and initiating societal healing. Similarly, the Guatemalan state has offered no reparations to the victims and survivors of its long, devastating civil war.

To date, there has been no institutional base to enforce and monitor reparation measures in Central America, and people have been forced into silence, denial, flight, and/or the numbing postwar social condition of *senselessness*. In *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity*, Hayner explains that, in the absence of institutional reparations, which might include “restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantee of non-repetition” (171), societies affected by political violence are left with one important outlet—remembering and “telling one’s story” through different means (135). It is no wonder, then, that much of the postwar literature of Central America and its diasporic communities continues to fill the void of institutional reparations by remembering, recording, and perhaps symbolically repairing the social imaginaries of Central America. In the twenty-first century, Goldman’s and Castellanos Moya’s texts also hold vital pieces of information about crimes committed by the state that continue to be effaced by official juridical structures.

In 2013, as Ríos Montt’s guilty conviction for genocidal crimes was overturned in Guatemala and as the 1993 Amnesty Law absolving military personnel in El Salvador was to be challenged in the Salvadoran Supreme Court, a new war has been declared on the archives holding the records of the victims of human rights abuses. Between September and November 2013 alone, the Office of Human Rights of the Archdiocese of San Salvador (Tutela Legal) was closed, its staff fired, and its archives left unprotected, while unknown assailants entered the Office of Pro-Búsqueda, a non-governmental organization dedicated to searching for children abducted and adopted during the Salvadoran civil war. The assailants set fire

to records of cases and clients and stole computers with valuable information. Representing the long-lasting impact of institutional violence in postwar societies, the archives and records of human rights violations assume an even more important role in fighting impunity in the twenty-first century. Literary texts like Castellanos Moya's *Senselessness* and Goldman's *The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop?* also fill a significant discursive and historical void by remembering lives, recording stories, and representing the broken social imaginaries of Central America in the twenty-first century.

### Conclusion

Although the civil wars in Central America may seem long past, the struggle against impunity and for remembrance, justice, and reparation continues among its diasporic communities. Collective efforts to repair the past and make right the future, as a belated reparations movement in Central America might loosely be understood, have only been transmuted into other symbolic and discursive fields such as literature, or, as called here: the reparations imaginary. Following the work of Alicia Schmidt Camacho who speaks of "migrant imaginaries" to "trace the historical forms of migrant expressions and cultural politics in the transnational labor circuit linking Mexico and the United States" (4), Central American migrants participate in analogous transnational migrant imaginaries linking them to the particular histories of the isthmus. Herein, the discussion has dealt with a corpus of US Central American reparations literature, which, more often than not, continues to grapple with the long reach of the unresolved past that shapes the lives and memories of Central American diasporic subjects.

### Notes

1 Likewise, Central American writers such as Franz Galich, Claudia Hernández, Rafael Menjívar Ochoa, Waldina Mejía, and Rodrigo Rey Rosa, among others, have written about the condition of violence, impunity, and postwar crises in their respective countries.

2 In 1982 and 1983 at the height of the genocide in Guatemala, Ríos Montt (1926-) authorized the massacre of 70,000 people and implemented a "scorched-

earth counterinsurgency campaign” against rural, mostly Maya communities, that would eventually destroy over 600 villages and displace over one million refugees within and beyond the borders of Guatemala (Goldman 20). Despite irrefutable war crimes attributed to him, Ríos Montt gained amnesty at the end of the war, served as the President of the Guatemalan National Congress, and sought presidential reelection in Guatemala in 2003. Although he was brought to trial in 2013, his conviction was ultimately overturned.

3 In the spring of 2011, twenty Salvadoran military officials, including the former Defense Minister during the war, were indicted in Spain for the massacre of six Jesuit priests on the grounds of the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas in San Salvador on November 16, 1989. These cases were tried in the Spanish court system and not in El Salvador because in 1993 an Amnesty Law was passed in El Salvador granting immunity to military personnel. Passed by the Salvadoran ARENA government just five days after the Truth Commission Report was made public, the Amnesty Law pardoned all Salvadoran military personnel involved in the killings and massacres committed during the civil war.

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