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# Rewriting the Militant Left: Untranslatability and Dissensus in Horacio Castellanos Moya

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Mitchell, Tamara. "Rewriting the Militant Left: Untranslatability and Dissensus in Horacio Castellanos Moya." Central American Literatures as World Literature, edited by Sophie Esch, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, pp. 155-71.

Published a decade and an ocean apart, Honduran-Salvadoran author Horacio Castellanos Moya's *El asco: Thomas Bernhard en San Salvador* (1997; *Revulsion: Thomas Bernhard in San Salvador*) is a literary restaging of Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard's *Auslöschung* (1986; *Extinction* [1995]).[1] In *Extinction*, narrator Franz-Josef Murau recalls anti-Austrian tirades delivered to his Italian student, Gambetti, railing against the most despised aspects of his homeland: Catholicism, art, music, literature, Fascism, the family, and class divisions, among others. *El asco* is markedly similar to Bernhard's text in terms of plot and tone. Both are jaded monologues by cynical ex-patriots forced home after nearly twenty years due to deaths in the family. Both novels hinge on the conflict that arises when the sole heirs of each work, Murau and Edgardo Vega, must decide how to dispose of the family home: the Wolfsegg Estate in *Extinction* and the Miramonte house in *El asco*. This proves a source of tension in each, as both men divest themselves of the estates against their siblings' wishes. There are also significant formal similarities, as the two works lack paragraph or chapter breaks, and their content is spewed in serpentine, run-on sentences laced with repeated phrases. Like Bernhard's Murau, Vega despises his homeland and obsessively criticizes its culture, government, and people. Both protagonists live abroad (Rome and Montreal, respectively) and avoid visiting "home" at all costs.

Yet *El asco* is not mere pastiche or acritical parody of Bernhard's infamous style, which "hammers away at the reader's nerves with endless repetition and elaboration of a few basic themes" (Kuehn 1997: 550–1). For one, while *Extinction* is told from Murau's first-person perspective, *El asco* is recounted by Vega's interlocutor, Moya, and thus related from a third-person perspective.[2] Likewise, the details and objects of critique—local cuisine (e.g., *pupusas*), Salvadoran rock bands, and national soccer—are culturally specific to El Salvador. Most importantly, while *Extinction* synecdochally thematizes the last gasps of Austrian aristocracy, Castellanos Moya critically resituates Bernhard's aesthetic devices in the Salvadoran context to problematize a different epochal turning point: El Salvador's shift from a military state entrenched in decades of civil conflict to a farcical neoliberal "democracy" nearly over night. In this milieu, in which "un sicópata criminal que mandó a asesinar a miles de personas en su cruzada anticomunista se haya convertido en el político más popular" ([1997] 2018: 30–1) (a psychopathic criminal who assassinated thousands in an anticommunist crusade transformed himself into the most popular politician) (2016: 16), there is no accountability for the violent excesses of the civil war, which continue into the neoliberal present. As Nanci Buiza (2018: 101) observes, the novel "is a literary slap in the face" that seeks to jolt traumatized readers into "perceiv[ing] their own degraded situation." To do so, Castellanos Moya's narrative dialogues with and reimagines the literary tradition that precedes it, adapting Bernhard's scathing, antinationalist prose as a means of critiquing notions of modern development and nationhood that structure postwar El Salvador.

I rehearse *El asco*'s intertextual conversation with and debt to Bernhard to tease out a trend in the Central American author's oeuvre, namely the persistent intertextual and metaliterary dialogue he maintains with an expansive world literary archive. Below, I discuss how he often invokes works of Central and Eastern European literary giants as a means of positioning Central America in relation to a broader (post-)Cold War context. This sets up a sort of hemispheric parity—the periphery of the Americas in dialogue with the European periphery—that challenges the accepted literary canon and indexes parallels among the small states of Europe and Latin America as minor nations affected by global struggles for political, economic, and cultural power. In its examination of this sustained intertextual dialogue, the present chapter has two principal objectives. First, I read the persistent exchange established in Castellanos Moya's prose—what, thinking with Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado (2018), we might call "strategic" intertextuality—as a means of positioning Central American politics and letters in relation to a global context.[3] Second, I undertake a close reading of Castellanos Moya's first novel, *La diáspora* (The Diaspora, 1989), to consider a specific example of this strategic intertextuality. My analysis bears on a sustained debate in world literature criticism regarding the relationship between

the cosmopolitan center and the provincial periphery, and I show how *La diáspora* at once establishes parallels to world literature while insisting on a linguistic and geopolitical specificity that resists reduction to the world literary canon.

## From *literatura centroamericana* to *Weltliteratur*

Castellanos Moya's narrative fiction has received ample scholarly attention for its candid portrayal of the Cold War—a misnomer in Central America given the civil and dirty wars of the era—and its violent aftermath in Central America. His relentless narrative treatment of inequality, greed, consumerism, and sociopolitical violence of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been described in scholarship as neoliberal noir (Kokotovic 2006), an aesthetics of cynicism and disenchantment (Cortez 2009), and "frictional" works that challenge the limits between fiction and nonfiction (Ortiz Wallner 2012). Moreover, Castellanos Moya's status as an author of global renown has been recognized broadly. Cristina Carrasco (2016: 47), for instance, situates the Central American novelist alongside Roberto Bolaño as authors that have been embraced and commodified on the global book market due to their portrayal of Latin America as a space of violence. This association with Bolaño goes deeper, as the Chilean author published a short piece praising Castellanos Moya's work in *Entre paréntesis* (2004; Between Parenthesis), which publishers have gone on to use in online reviews and as a book jacket blurb on the Central American writer's work ever since. Despite this success, critics have noted that the Central America of Castellanos Moya's novels is still perceived as part of "peripheral modernity" (López 2004: 96), the "[p]eriphery of the periphery" (Dove 2015: 188), and Carrasco (2016: 47) finds that, overwhelmingly, his texts propagate "los estereotipos exotizantes de siempre" (the same old exoticizing stereotypes).

It is generative to revisit this notion of the periphery in light of Castellanos Moya's persistent return to Central and Eastern European authors like Bernhard (Austrian), Elias Canetti (Bulgarian-British), Emil Cioran (Romanian-Franco), and Milan Kundera (Czech-Franco)—authors who, in the European context, pen (semi-)peripheral literatures but, at the same time, have been consecrated as part of the world literary canon. By establishing a sustained dialogue with such thinkers, Castellanos Moya situates Central American letters in relation to major works of world literature and recognizes the shared sociopolitical and ideological realities of the two regions, particularly regarding the Cold War and its aftermath. This dialogue and concomitant aesthetic and political parity emerge in various ways. First, Castellanos Moya's narrative fiction employs intertextuality, such as the above-mentioned stylistic affinities between *El asco* and

Bernhard's antipatriotic literature or, as will be discussed below, in relation to Kundera's prose. Second, Castellanos Moya often thinks with and against these authors, developing an understanding of politics, violence, and aesthetics alongside writers of peripheral European nations. In essays, interviews, and narrative works, the Honduran-Salvadoran author teases out the ways in which the reality of Central and Eastern Europe in the post-Second World War and Cold War eras coincides with the experience of the Central American isthmus in substantive ways.

Of note is that, like Castellanos Moya, each of these authors experiences a sort of exile—Canetti, Cioran, and Kundera live in linguistic and territorial exile, while Bernhard enacts an aesthetic exile—from which emerges a shared distance from and critique of nationalism in their disparate works.[4] This connection becomes salient when Castellanos Moya invokes these authors to question the notion of the homeland, such as in the essay "La metamorfosis del sabueso" (The Metamorphosis of the Sleuth/Hound), in which he draws on the legacy of Canetti to meditate on writing, language, and history: "La patria de un escritor es su lengua: afirmación propia de escritores desterrados, apátridas, de aquellos a quienes les ha tocado padecer extremismos nacionalistas o étnicos. Elias Canetti quizá sea el postrero de los narradores centroeuropeos de la primera mitad del siglo XX, testigos del desmoronamiento del Imperio austrohúngaro" (Language is the writer's homeland: affirmation of exiled, stateless writers, of those who have suffered from nationalist or ethnic extremism. Elias Canetti may be the last of the Central European storytellers of the first half of the twentieth century, witnesses to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) ([1996] 2011: 57). At the time the essay was first published, in 1996, Castellanos Moya was experiencing a similar collapse—that of the Salvadoran Leftist project, which, following the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords, had been institutionalized in the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) political party that was defeated by the right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA, Nationalist Republican Alliance) in postwar presidential elections. Although their political experiences diverge in meaningful ways—Castellanos Moya critiques an increasingly authoritarian Left that fought a repressive military regime, whereas his European interlocutors often critique those in power of a dogmatic Soviet Bloc entrenched in decades of authoritarian rule—Castellanos Moya's persistent turn to authors of marginal Central European nations may be understood as seeking refuge and understanding in works created from similar moments of decadence and political peril.

Apropos of the present volume, from Central Europe to Central America, a meta-discourse emerges regarding how great works of peripheral literature fit into that privileged classification of world literature. In what I venture to call an anxiety of recognition, authors of the periphery frequently turn to Goethe's concept of world literature to question the reception of their works

in the cosmopolitan center. Castellanos Moya is no exception. In "El lamento provinciano" (The Provincial Lament), the Honduran-Salvadoran writer examines the anxiety of recognition experienced by geographically marginal writers, noting: "Una peculiaridad del escritor que procede de un país pobre y periférico, cuya tradición nacional carece de resonancia en el concierto de la literatura mundial, es el lamento por sentirse marginado, la queja por no ser tomado en cuenta, el complejo por no ser reconocido allende las reducidas fronteras de su patria. Es lo que llamo 'el lamento provinciano'" (A peculiarity of the writer who comes from a poor and peripheral country, whose national tradition lacks resonance in the concert of world literature, is regret for feeling marginalized, resentment at not being noticed, the complex about not being recognized beyond the narrow borders of their homeland. It is what I call "the provincial lament") ([2005] 2011: 42). He concludes by invoking Kundera alongside the progenitor of world literature, Goethe, noting that a certain maturity arrives when marginal authors feel "a gusto en lo que Goethe y Kundera llaman la Weltliteratur" (at home in what Goethe and Kundera call world literature) ([2005] 2011: 45).

This frequent turn to the European tradition does not exist at the expense of Latin American literatures, as Castellanos Moya invokes these traditions alongside Central American thinkers. For instance, complementing his theorization of *el lamento provinciano* through Goethe and Kundera, he addresses how Central American literary greats like Rubén Darío, Augusto Monterroso, Miguel Ángel Asturias, and Roque Dalton overcame the anxiety of recognition. Moreover, Dalton is omnipresent in Castellanos Moya's work. This is evidenced in protagonists' engagement with Dalton's oeuvre, such as one character's decision to write a dissertation on the poet in *La diáspora*, a plot point that becomes quasi-autobiographical when Castellanos Moya publishes *Roque Dalton: correspondencia clandestina y otros ensayos* (2021), a nonfictional meditation on Dalton's life, writing, and death. It may even be argued that Castellanos Moya's very engagement with Central and Eastern European writers relates to Dalton's legacy, as the late poet served as a correspondent in Prague in the 1960s, where he penned *Taberna y otros lugares* (1969) and interviewed Miguel Mármol about the 1932 Salvadoran uprising. Finally, Castellanos Moya practices a Daltonian credo when he critiques aspects of Central America in his fiction. This gesture, as Yansi Pérez (2009: 11) has discussed, reflects the epigraph from *Pobrecito poeta que era yo* (Dalton 1982) citing Lawrence Durrell: "Es una obligación de todo patriota odiar a su país de una manera creadora" ("It is the duty of every patriot to hate his country creatively" [Durrell 1958: 112]). By liberally drawing on authors from both traditions, Castellanos Moya emphasizes how Central American letters are already on par with Europe's.

Castellanos Moya's oeuvre does not just dialogue with authors of world literary status; his works undeniably belong to the world literary canon.

Initially published by small presses in Central America, such as Universidad Centroamericana Editores and Editorial Arcoiris, at the turn of the twenty-first century, Castellanos Moya enters into an agreement with Tusquets that sees many of his past works reissued and future novels released by the elite Barcelona publishing house and its partners in Latin America. Beginning in 2008, his novels have been rendered into multiple languages, with one of the most sought-after translators—Katherine Silver—undertaking English editions for New Directions Publishing. Most recently, in 2018, Castellanos Moya's world literary status was cemented when *Moronga* debuted with megapublisher Penguin Random House. Penguin then began reissuing many of his novels in Spanish and released two collected volumes of his essays. Finally, there is a host of robust scholarship on Castellanos Moya's oeuvre, including two contributed volumes—*El diablo en el espejo* (2016), edited by María del Carmen Caña Jiménez and Vinodh Venkatesh, and *Tiranas ficciones* (2018), edited by Magdalena Perkowska and Oswaldo Zavala—featuring work by major Latin Americanist scholars.

Thus, in terms of availability and reception in both popular and scholarly spaces, Castellanos Moya's corpus has proved cosmopolitan not only in content but also in translation and dissemination. This brief look at the material circulation of Castellanos Moya's work is not merely to establish his bona fides as an author of world literature but also pertains to the below analysis. I now turn to a comparative reading of Castellanos Moya's first novel, *La diáspora*, originally published in 1989, with its reedition by Penguin in 2018, to three ends. First, I posit that alternative archives, both musical and literary, foment dissensus in *La diáspora*, which opens a space for a Left that exists outside of the militant revolutionary project that developed in civil war El Salvador. Second, I analyze how the intertextual archive that the novel deploys in its critique of Left decadence—most notably Kundera's *Žert* ([1967], *The Joke* 2001)—situates the narrative in relation to major works of world literature. Finally, I undertake a close reading of *La diáspora* alongside Emily Apter's (2013) notion of *untranslatability* to think within the framework of world literature but against the universalizing drive of its critical apparatus.

## Intertextuality and an Archive of Dissensus

Penned in the tumultuous 1980s and published in the closing years of the Salvadoran civil war, *La diáspora* revolves around a troubling historical failure of revolutionary politics and meditates on the aftermath of the 1983 murder-suicide of Comandantes (Commanders) Ana María and Marcial (pseudonyms of Mélida Anaya Montes and Salvador Cayetano Carpio, respectively), the leaders the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL, Popular

Liberation Forces). The novel reflects on the suspicious nature of these two deaths, which echo the 1975 murder of Roque Dalton by comrades in the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP, People's Revolutionary Army). These events cast a dark shadow on the movement and lead to a loss of faith in leadership and an exodus of sorts by insurgents. The novel draws on these historical events as multiple narrators question the integrity of the revolutionary project from their exile in Mexico City. The novel's critique has two principal targets: the atmosphere of suspicion cultivated inside the revolution and the guarded control that guerrilla leadership maintained over information, particularly in relation to intellectual and artistic material. *La diáspora* self-consciously rejects the stranglehold of the Left by creating a constellation of narrators in varying stages of turning their backs on the Salvadoran revolutionary project.

In terms of plot, not much happens in *La diáspora*. The narrative begins on the first day of 1984 with protagonist Juan Carlos's arrival to Mexico City after his break with the revolution. He must remain in Mexico as he waits for refugee status and a visa to travel to Canada (1989: 17). He stays with friends, Carmen and Antonio, a Mexican couple sympathetic to the Salvadoran insurgency. At one point, Juan Carlos is kidnapped, roughed up, and questioned about his responsibilities with the Communist Party in El Salvador. Part Two tells the story of Quique López, a blindly loyal guerrilla whose early participation in the war is more a matter of happenstance than ideological commitment. He must flee the country after a failed military assault, which lands him in Mexico City, working in *Presal*, the Party's propaganda office, as he anxiously awaits his return to the front lines (1989: 104). Part Three focuses more sharply on the deaths of Ana María, Marcial, and Dalton and introduces the figure of an Argentine journalist named Jorge Kraus. Perhaps an allusion to Montonero leader Mario Firmenich's staged participation in the Sandinista Revolution, Kraus is a coward and opportunist who times his travels to war-torn locations to overlap with the end of conflict, when the danger has passed. Finally, Part Four presents el Turco, the most embittered member of the eponymous diaspora. A musician that once performed around the world to gain international solidarity for the cultural arm of the Salvadoran Revolution (1989: 176), el Turco abandons the cause in 1981 due to the Party's zealous control of his band (1989: 180–1). The closing pages narrate one drunken night when el Turco quits his job as a pianist in a bar and then joins Juan Carlos at a party in the home of el Negro, the bourgeois Director of *Presal*.

Critics are in agreement about the thematization of political crisis and of a shifting sociopolitical system that permeates *La diáspora*. Sophie Esch (2020: 466) characterizes the text as a "dissident novel" that "highlight[s] the utter lack of moral and political convictions among guerrillas and militants." This dovetails with Héctor Miguel Leyva Carias's (1995: 387) analysis, which underscores how the novel criticizes guerrilla insurgency

from within, demystifying revolutionary exceptionalism and challenging the utopic vision of *testimonios*. Likewise, José Luis Escamilla (2012: 63) argues that *La diáspora* functions as a bridge between the ideological writing initiated in 1970s Central America and a future generation that seeks to distance itself from revolutionary writing. Teresa Basile (2015: 201) posits that, rather highlighting heroic deeds of the Left, *La diáspora* goes against the grain by focusing on "las memorias perturbadoras" (perturbing memories) associated with internal betrayals. Related to these betrayals, Alberto Moreiras (2014) reads *La diáspora* in a tragic key, rejecting redemptive or cynical interpretations of the novel and instead locating in it an attempt, through mourning, to think a political and aesthetic future by grappling with the wreckage of the past. Finally, Alexandra Ortiz Wallner (2013: 154) homes in on the diasporic nature of the narrative, emphasizing the geopolitical "dislocation" that once-committed militants seek out as they become disillusioned with the revolution.

My reading of *La diáspora* coincides with these evaluations in many ways. However, what I find most noteworthy in Castellanos Moya's text does not relate to national or political boundaries, but rather to artistic ones. *La diáspora* is a tale of escape. The first-order escape is geographical and political—Juan Carlos and the rest of the ex-revolutionaries put physical distance between themselves and El Salvador to make a life outside of the Party and civil war. However, there is also a second-order escape that proves even more revealing—an aesthetic escape—which is undertaken by nearly every character in the text. Here, I read *La diáspora* through its internal artistic archive, which, I contend, points to how the novel thinks outside of Left-Right dichotomies through archival dissensus. I contrast the consumed and produced archives of the truly diasporic characters of the novel—Juan Carlos, Gabriel, and el Turco—with those of the characters that are attempting to return to or enter El Salvador—Quique and Kraus. Contrasting these two archives reveals the ways in which the former seeks an opening, an inclusion of more voices and more modes of telling that challenge revolutionary dogma, whereas the latter seeks a closure in the form of a totalizing political and literary consensus.

Notably, the two characters with the most constrained archives are the most dedicated to the ideals of the revolution: Quique López and Jorge Kraus. Quique, who works as a *teletipista* for *Presal*, the Mexico City arm of the press agency in charge of disseminating the Party's ideological materials and spin on what is occurring in El Salvador, copies communiqués that he frequently does not understand, and he refuses to think too much about the internal conflicts of the revolution to avoid trouble (1989: 86–7). When he is ordered to return to El Salvador, his supervisor asks him to write out his responsibilities so that his replacement has a guide. In Quique's estimation, this is the worst task imaginable given that "no hay peor trabajo que ponerse a escribir algo propio, le cuesta un mundo" (there is nothing worse than

writing something of one's own, he finds it impossible) (1989: 87). Later, he must enlist the help of a colleague to pen a brief report on the military situation in El Salvador—a situation that he hopes not only to join, but in which he aspires to serve as a military leader—and he admits that "está cabrón que ni siquiera pueda exponer un análisis sobre eso" (it's messed up that he can't even put forth an analysis about it) (1989: 90).

Like Quique, Kraus is solely interested in pleasing revolutionary command. He is an opportunistic would-be novelist whose "pluma siempre estuvo dispuesta a colaborar en lo que el proceso revolucionario le exigía" (pen was always ready to collaborate in what the revolutionary process demanded of him) (1989: 119). Kraus understands that the "official story" surrounding the deaths of Comandantes Ana María and Marcial is suspect at best and likely an out-and-out lie, but he doesn't care (1989: 128). His endgame is to write the story that gets him access, which, he believes, will lead to fame and wealth. So he sets off to portray as fact whatever the Party asks of him: "él partiría de lo que [el Partido] consideraba 'la verdad' y su trabajo consistiría precisamente en demostrar que esta verdad era absoluta, hasta en los mínimos detalles" (he would begin with what the Party considered "the truth" and his job would consist precisely of demonstrating that that truth was absolute, down to the smallest details) (1989: 139). The opportunistic Kraus aims to cash in on his support of the party line.

Contrary to Quique and Kraus, ex-militant protagonists Gabriel, Juan Carlos, and el Turco aim to expand their intellectual and artistic archive, including texts and music that are deemed anti-communist, taboo, or Western. Gabriel is writing a dissertation on Dalton's death at the hands of his ERP comrades, a topic that casts the revolution in a negative light. Juan Carlos is portrayed as in the process of shedding the ideological confines of the insurgency, and he consumes novels and films out of line with Party ideals by artists like Ingmar Bergman, Marguerite Yourcenar, Heinrich Böll, and Milan Kundera. Eventually, after expanding his consumed narrative archive, Juan Carlos contemplates penning his own novel about the most forbidden of topics—the suspicious nature of Ana María's assassination and Marcial's suicide (1989: 41), which would constitute a direct challenge to the official narrative of the Party. El Turco proves the most rapaciously anti-revolutionary in terms of his artistic tastes, which is a result of the Party having censored his own artistic output when he labored on their behalf. His is principally a musical archive, and he rejects any genre associated with revolutionary communism. He derides leadership's preference for "la cancioncita antes del discurso" (1989: 36; the little ditty before the speech) and refuses to play "cancioncitas pendejas puestas de moda por los cubanos" (37; stupid little songs popularized by the Cubans). Instead, he wants to form a jazz band, which becomes meaningful in multiple ways.

Marked by improvisation and a polyphonic ensemble style, jazz allows an individual musician to stand out during intricate solos. The musician

then rejoins the ensemble, making space for a different instrument to take the lead. Likewise, jazz is characterized by polyrhythm, which is the simultaneous presence of two or more conflicting rhythms that are not obviously derived from one another. Finally, jazz is a diasporic music, arising in African American culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and during the Cold War, jazz was deemed countercultural to both Soviet and US ideological paradigms (Borge 2018; Kofsky 1998). This final characteristic is of particular import, as jazz constitutes a key thread between Castellanos Moya's novel and one of its central intertextual archives: Kundera's *The Joke* ([1967] 2001), which narrates the decadence of twentieth-century communism from the perspective of various current and former Party members in the declining Eastern Bloc of the 1950s and 1960s. In both novels, jazz becomes central to disrupting intellectual and aesthetic consensus.

In *The Joke*, militant young musician Ludvik Jahn praises jazz's melodic specificity and ability to innovate and affect hegemonic Western music from the periphery. However, this same narrator cautions that, unlike jazz soloists, socialist musicians should sacrifice individualism to the collective ([1967] 2001: 140). From this effort, Stalin's "new art" would emerge, which encompasses "socialist content in national form" (141). This new art, in *The Joke*, is traditional folk music updated with lyrics that reflect socialist values. However, after a decade of forced labor as a miner, this same narrator, disillusioned with the Stalinist tendencies of the Communist Party, describes folk music as nothing more than empty propaganda (155). The novel closes with a spirited performance by Ludvik's disillusioned bandmates, reunited after a long separation following an ideological fallout. During the performance, each bandmate, moved by the music, improvises a solo. The band thus performatively breaks with the Stalinist ideology that insists that "in the folk song, one does not stand out from others but joins with them" (140). Analogously, *La diáspora* closes with el Turco, reeling from a night of partying, imagining a reconciliation with his militant younger brother in El Salvador, who, after hearing the jazz band, would forgive and accept the decision that resulted in el Turco "tronando con el Partido" (Casellanos Moya 1989: 181; breaking with the Party).

The anti-dogmatic potential of music is just one of myriad connections between the two novels. In addition to the overt intertextual reference mentioned above, Kundera's novel serves as a formal and thematic inspiration for *La diáspora*. The later novel implements a similar formal structure to its Czechoslovakian forebearer, with shifts among different narrators—both jaded intellectuals and dogmatic working-class militants—across different parts. Both novels include fictionalized primary source archival material, and there are echoes across specific scenes, such as the closing passages of abjection that take place in an outhouse (in *The Joke*) and el Negro's bathroom (in *La diáspora*), dwelling on laxative-induced

defecation and alcohol-induced vomiting, respectively. Thematically, the unifying thread of each work is the way in which revolutionary dogmatism and Left decadence lead to the collapse of the viability of the socialist project. Likewise, machismo and the arbitrarily cruel treatment of women are important elements in both texts. In this way, *The Joke* proves the key intertextual touchstone in *La diáspora*.

The parallels that exist between *La diáspora* and *The Joke* serve a variety of ends. Castellanos Moya's debt to Kundera positions the Central American novelist in relation to an author whose discontent with nationalism, socialism, and revolutionary poetics rendered him (in)famous worldwide and domestically. In dialogue with Kundera, Castellanos Moya critiques dogmatic Left-Right dichotomies and decries Left authoritarianism at a time when it is dangerous to do so. Moreover, this intertextual gesture situates Central American literature of the Cold War period as part of a broader world literary exchange—a world to which, as *La diáspora* makes clear, the region already belonged in terms of geopolitics. Finally, by dialoguing with a national tradition that, as Kundera himself has lamented, forms part of the perceived "small nations" ([2005] 2013: 290) of "Central Europe" (295), a critique of the center-periphery binary emerges, which becomes especially ironic considering how central these peripheral nations were to ideological battles of the Cold War era. Beyond mere critique, through strategic intertextuality, Castellanos Moya effectively introduces dissensus into world literature as an author at the periphery of the periphery who claims a place in the canon. However, as gestured at above, parity with works of world literature is not the same as conflation. In the closing section, I undertake a close reading of *La diáspora* to show that, despite Castellanos Moya's insistent dialogue with the canon, attention to aesthetics—the deeply literary aspects of *La diáspora*—serves to index the geopolitical and linguistic specificity of Central American letters.

## Untranslatability, Incommensurability, and Semantic Excess

A revealing semantic tic arises in *La diáspora*, namely the marked prevalence of the verb *tronar* (to thunder) across the narrative. Unwieldy and polysemic, *tronar*, I contend, falls under what Apter (2013), following Barbara Cassin, has named the untranslatable. Thinking against what she calls world literature's "reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability" (2), Apter describes the untranslatable as "a linguistic form of creative failure with homeopathic uses" (20). Untranslatable terms, such as the Portuguese *saudade* or Greek *mimesis*, are often polysemic and culturally specific, and they are notoriously difficult to render outside of

their local language and context. According to Cassin, in an interview with Marc-Alexandre Reinhardt and André Habib, the untranslatable

> points less to that which we do not translate than that which we do not cease to (not) translate. Untranslatables are "symptoms" of linguistic difference, in other words, manifestations that can't be added up nor essentially identified. These symptoms we come across in those passionate and impassive translators' notes; that we encounter, that arrest and confront us … They are therefore signs of an open-ended, virtually infinite, ongoing work-in-progress.
>
> (Reinhardt, Habib, and Cassin 2015: 6–7)

Cassin and Apter identify the play of homonymy as a particularly tricky space for translation. Homonyms are, of course, words that are either spelled the same (homographs) or pronounced the same (homophones) but boast different meanings. And they are ripe for designation as untranslatables because this feature—identical spelling or pronunciation with multiple meanings—is most often lost when rendered in translation.

Due to its semantic slipperiness and the cultural specificity of its rich polysemy in Salvadoran parlance,[5] *tronar* is a homonym whose multiple connotations in *La diáspora* are difficult, if not impossible, to render in translation. *Tronar* in El Salvador and the region is at once and imperfectly: to thunder, to lose one's cool, to fight, to have sex with a woman, to rant, to fail, to storm off, to break with, to break up with, to fire, to kill, to gun down (*Diccionario de la lengua española* 2014). Incredibly, *tronar* is deployed in almost all of these connotations, either explicitly or in abstracted form, in *La diáspora*: el Turco constantly loses his temper; a comrade is killed by government snipers during a protest; Carmen and Antonio's relationship is falling apart; el Turco is fired from his job; Gabriel fights with his former boss; the male narrators relentlessly try to sleep with women. Without a doubt, though, the most persistent and overt use of *tronar* relates to the titular diaspora's falling out with the revolutionary Left. From the first page of the text, when Carmen greets Juan Carlos, declaring "Tronaste con el Partido" (You broke with the Party) (1989: 13), to the final section, when el Turco reminisces about the dissolution of the cultural arm of the revolution, musing "la mayoría de artistas acabó tronando con el Partido" (the majority of artists wound up breaking with the Party) (1989: 181), the verb appears nearly a dozen times in the characters' discussions about why individuals are leaving the Party (1989: 13, 15, 20, 21, 29, 31, 55, 181). The omnipresence of this verb becomes a semantic symptom of the period, a time when ideals were being sacrificed, supporters suppressed, and the revolutionary project of the Left was falling apart, failing, *tronando*.

By insisting on the untranslatable, Apter holds space for undecidability, mistranslation, and incommensurability in translation and world literature.

*Tronar*, as untranslatable, underscores how, even as a work of world literature situated within the context of the global Cold War, an obstinate geopolitical and linguistic specificity endures in *La diáspora*. Intriguingly, this obstinacy goes further, extending to an epochal specificity, which becomes evident in a comparative reading of the 1989 original alongside Penguin's 2018 reissue of the novel. An author's note precedes the 2018 reedition, stating "Me he atrevido a cepillar el lenguaje, pues el paso de los años dejaba al descubierto bordes romos, superficies con frases descascaradas" (I have ventured to polish the language, as the passing of the years exposed blunt edges and crude phrasing). Beyond these changes, Castellanos Moya asserts that he has not altered the plot, "ni ciertas imprecisiones históricas, ni los personajes" (nor certain historical inaccuracies or the characters).[6] A comparison of the two editions shows that, notably, one of the most persistent revisions is the almost systematic substitution of occurrences of *tronar*. In the original text, there are over a dozen instances of *tronar* and its variants (*truenes* [fights], *tronazón* [break up], etc.), while in the reedition, a third of these are substituted with synonyms and reworkings. For instance, "Carmen le había asegurado que *estaba a punto de tronar* con el Comité de Solidaridad y también con el Partido" (1988: 15, my emphasis) shifts to "Carmen le había asegurado que *estaba a punto de salirse* del Comité de Solidaridad y también del Partido" (2018: 16, my emphasis).[7] This revisionist gesture becomes uncannily suggestive of the untranslatable; *tronar* as spirit and sign of 1980s El Salvador is not only linguistically and geopolitically specific but also temporally specific, and untranslatable in a present-day reworking of the text by its own author.

Interpreted as an untranslatable, the erasure of *tronar* in the twenty-first-century reedition becomes symptomatic of a shift in political discourse. Indeed, Castellanos Moya revisits and edits *La diáspora* after the Left is no longer the opposition party to ARENA's rule, as the FMLN is institutionalized with the election of Mauricio Funes to the presidency in 2009. The FMLN that selects former CNN journalist Funes as its presidential candidate—the first non-guerrillero nominee for the party—is far removed from the dogmatic ideologues that Juan Carlos and the other "deserters" criticize in the pages of *La diáspora*. These revisions aesthetically silence an element of the earlier version, and the resounding absence of *tronar* in the reedition indexes a shift away from the dominant zeitgeist of the original context.

Across the years, Castellanos Moya, while celebrated and internationally successful, has also stirred controversy and been criticized for penning antipatriotic novels (Castany Prado 2012: 18) that denigrate Central American letters and communities (Cortez 2014),[8] as preferring to "mirar hacia afuera e incorporar recursos de otras tradiciones en sus textos, aunque hable de Centroamérica" (Carrasco 2016: 60; look abroad and incorporate resources from other traditions in his texts, even if he addresses Central America). While these assessments have merit, it is also true that Castellanos

Moya's turn to authors of semi-peripheral or peripheral European nations establishes a parallel between Central European and Central American experiences during the Cold War and productively situates Salvadoran literature as part of a broader world literary exchange. Akin to the enduring engagement with Dalton across Castellanos Moya's oeuvre discussed above, *La diáspora*'s generative untranslatability, as evidenced in the homonym *tronar*, shows how his literary corpus does not merely turn to world literature to comprehend and amplify Central America's role in the Cold War but also insists on a singularity that refuses conflation with the European tradition with which his novels often thematically and formally engage. Against world literature and, generatively, against the twenty-first-century reedition of *La diáspora*, the *tronar* of the original novel generates a semantic and aesthetic excess that can only be (*un*)*translated* with attention to the geopolitical and historical specificity of 1980s El Salvador.

## Notes

**1** See Quirós (2016) and Thornton (2014) on affinities between *El asco* and Bernhard's oeuvre. See Ribeiro (2016) and Werner (2020) for more on intertextuality between *El asco* and *Extinction*.

**2** Correspondingly, Castellanos Moya renders a famous formal device from *Extinction*, the oft-repeated phrase "habe ich zu Gambetti gesagt" (I said to Gambetti), in the third person: "me dijo Vega" (Gambetti told me). This stylistic change may be interpreted in relation to the genre of *testimonio*. See Thornton (2014).

**3** Indeed, Castellanos Moya could be read as an heir to Sergio Pitol's "heterodox cosmopolitanism" (Sánchez Prado 2018: 25), as both authors turn to "an archive of heterodoxies" (2018: 32) from the Eastern European tradition.

**4** By "aesthetic exile" I allude to Bernhard's infamous "posthumous literary emigration" in which he prohibited the publication of his works in Austria (Honegger 2001: 306).

**5** In the entry for "tronar" in the *Diccionario de la lengua española* (2014), El Salvador appears as the most frequent geographical location for the multiple meanings of the verb and as the only country with its own regionally specific locutions: "Dicho de un hombre: tener relaciones sexuales con una mujer" and "inmediatamente" (for "tronando y lloviendo").

**6** Curiously, and perhaps tellingly, no such author's note accompanies the reedition of *El asco*.

**7** Two additional examples include (my emphasis in each): "Le preguntaron cuáles eran las causas de *su truene* …" (1989: 21) is changed to "Le preguntaron cuáles eran las causas de *su ruptura* …" (2018: 22; They asked him the reasons behind his departure). And "la mayoría de artistas *acabó tronando* con el Partido" (1989: 181) becomes "la mayoría de artistas *acabó saliéndose* del Partido" (2018: 153; the majority of the artists wound up breaking with the Party).

8 The critique I reference comes from an editorial titled "¡Adiós, Horacio!" in which Beatriz Cortez (2014) affirms "después de ver repetido el mismo retrato una y otra vez, de leer una y otra vez a una voz demasiado similar regodearse de la misoginia, burlarse de la pobreza, celebrar el racismo y el imperialismo cultural, retratar repetidamente a nuestro país desde una perspectiva colonialista, y renegar de todos los escritores nacionales, le perdí interés poco a poco" (after seeing the same depiction repeated over and over again, after reading time and again an all too familiar voice delighting in misogyny, poking fun at poverty, celebrating racism and cultural imperialism, repeatedly portraying our country from a colonialist perspective, and repudiating all national writers, I lost interest little by little).

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