

# APPROACHING THE VIOLENT STRANGER LITERARY TECHNIQS IN THE NEW JOURNALISM OF THE SALVADORIAN NEWSPAPER *EL FARO*

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The so-called *Triángulo Norte*<sup>1</sup> (triangle of the north) in the region of central America has been in the last years one of the most dangerous places in the world. Although the countries of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador are known for a past of military dictatorships, civil wars and genocides, it is actuality where the death rates have reached its highest. El Salvador has been in a violence crisis since more than a decade. It reached its peak in the year 2016, when within the first 15 days of the year the homicidal rate was of one murder committed per hour,<sup>2</sup> decreasing afterwards but still maintaining a steady high.<sup>3</sup> In the United Nations' report of homicides for 2019, El Salvador is one of the only four countries with a death rate of more than 40 persons per 100 000 habitants:<sup>4</sup> an alarming quote when comparing it to the definition that the World Health Organization gives of an epidemic (10 deaths per 100 000 inhabitants). An off key but really spot on comparison made also by Óscar Martínez, a journalist of the digital paper *El Faro*, in his 2016 published book *Una Historia de Violencia* (A History of Violence).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Juan Mario Solís Delgadillo and Marcelo Morriconi Bezerra, *Atlas de la Violencia en América Latina* (San Luis Potosí: Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí, 2018), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Solís Delgadillo and Morriconi Bezerra, 218.

<sup>3</sup> Solís Delgadillo and Morriconi Bezerra, 219-220.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicide*. Vienna: UN, 2019. E-book

<sup>5</sup> Óscar Martínez, *Una Historia de Violencia* (Ciudad de México: Debate, 2016), 14.

This book, and its previous publication *Crónicas Negras* (Black Chronicles) entails a number of journalistic chronicles based on the theme of extreme violence happening in Central America. It is investigative journalistic work, trying to offer data to keep record of the happenings, but also making use of literary writing, and searching for an adequate narrative that reaches into the discursive content of the violent happenings, otherwise portrayed exclusively as marginal.

Latin America's long record on violence, from the conquest to the following long colonial period, from the several military dictatorships to their genocidal actions, the latter civil wars and their subsequent black market of weapons, has undeniably marked the cultural perception of violence of today. It is still disputable if this has been otherwise anywhere else, or if it is a characteristic of the once so-called developing countries, which are perceived up to a specific limit as still uncivilized, for example when being profiled as "a violence-prone region".<sup>6</sup> On terms of governability, it is certain that the modern state in its unaltered form dictates one possibility to deal with violence. Namely trying to keep it at the margins of society, excluding the exceptional role the state's monopoly plays on violence.

The question about the legitimization of violence, not in its pathological diagnosis but in a structural sense, brings a discussion about sovereignty and about the conception of life and death, as Achille Mbembe points out in his essay *Necropolitics* (2003) describing the appearance of violence as a dynamic of handling towards death (or in other words as handling away from life) on a matter of policies, the presumption being that normally the motivation of a state, or of a society for that matter, is the preservation of life. What has to happen in a society to change that striving goal? And what has to happen within the population to accept that? Achille Mbembe directs these questions to the modern form of governability carrying on with Foucault's thoughts on *biopower*.<sup>7</sup> The unanswered question in Foucault remains who the actual subject of biopower is. On that note, Mbembe will explore the different valid categories of abstraction that can play a role in the decision making process within politics, regarding the biopower in question. He considers the dichotomy between reason and unreason, as well as the sovereignty discussion on slavery, to account for a heterogeneity within the relation of biopower to

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<sup>6</sup> See here the profiling and the logical premises put on violence and its causes within Latin America in: Peter Imbusch; Michel Misse and Fernando Carrión. "Violence Research in Latin America and the Caribbean." *International Journal of Conflict on Violence* 5 (2011): 88.

<sup>7</sup> Achille Mbembe. "Necropolitics". In *Public Culture*, translated by Libby Meintjes, vol. 15 (1), Duke University Press, 2003. 12

the subject, in order to state the different value that life can have within the hierarchy human condition implicates.<sup>8</sup> It is clear that categorical abstraction on the level of race, class and gender still plays a decisive role and that the workings of power require a complex analysis, because of their fragmented application. It is through the colonial aspect, that Mbembe will portray the shift of biopower to necropolitics, observing the intrinsic element of design which governing policies most obviously show during the colonial period: "In this case, sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not."<sup>9</sup>

The Mexican philosopher Sayak Valencia continues developing this theoretical approach by means of a specific Latin American reality: the city of Tijuana, at the Mexican border to the USA. This city is known for the continuous appearance of public displays of dismembered bodies and for a series of femicide, still happening in actuality. It is on the basis of the cinematographical term of *gore* that Valencia intends to sketch the quality of the extreme violence happening in Tijuana.<sup>10</sup> Valencia proposes the term *Capitalismo Gore* (gore capitalism) for further analysis of the term of necropolitics, achieving the reach, that the exceptional level of violence expressed in Tijuana demands. She also proposes a deeper differentiation to describe the structural dynamics by which the necropolitics in question are being applied with and or without the help of the state.<sup>11</sup>

*Gore* is a term used to describe the explicit and unjustifiable showing of bloodshed. Valencia applies it when trying to give dimensions to the high percentage of visceral organs and dismemberment often related to organized crime and the predatory use of bodies in Tijuana, which characterizes what she will call a *necroempoderamiento*<sup>12</sup> (necro-empowerment). This is the resulting dynamic of the participation of citizens when being tied to the hardest form of necropolitics. The term *gore* then appears as an epistemological implementation describing the learning of violence and death, as the leading elements of perception, and therefore as the determinants of a specific aesthetic. Aesthetics meaning here not necessarily what is beautiful, but what is worth

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<sup>8</sup> Achille Mbembe. "Necropolitics", 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. Italics in the original.

<sup>10</sup> Sayak Valencia, *Capitalismo Gore* (Barcelona: Melusina, 2010), 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

striving for and what can be considered as the ground to the “schooling of one’s perception”<sup>13</sup>.

The structural depth given by Valencia to the functioning of necropolitics becomes relevant when trying to understand how the violent subject (or the subject being empowered through violence) can still be relegated to the margins, as in opposed to being at the center of an already violent society. It is here that Mbembe’s argument about the dichotomy of reason and unreason toward the subject of biopolitics comes into play. The violent subject can be relegated as being unreasonable and therefore as being outside of civil society. This argumentation though, would evade all possibilities of approaching the discursive logic of this kind of marginal subject. Valencia takes then a step further and exemplifies a multidimensional structure of the mechanics of necropolitics:

The radicalization and overexposure of necropolitics consist mainly in the expulsion of all government application from all its spaces and its <<legitimate>> actors. The concept of necropolitics, as we understand it, stands out by the fact that it is applied by “endriago” subjects, who decide to break their dependence from the state. It is in this way that necropolitics show a multiple character, because it is exercised by the illegitimate and by the legitimate actors of biopolitics (the government, the state, the discourse) alike, and it finally legitimizes itself through both of them.<sup>14</sup> (Translation mine, CGM)

This consideration visualizes the fact that the sphere of violence is being isolated from state affairs and the operations of society and being decoupled from civil logics. Sayak Valencia explains this functioning through the mechanism of a double discourse, where the actual exclusion of the marginal spheres happens before the pathological diagnostic of violence as it appears. Valencia generates the concept of *Capitalismo Gore* to mark the economical exclusion as the catapulting element of the dynamics of violence. These specific dynamics derail from the established normal world and become able to build a

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<sup>13</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 6., 122.

<sup>14</sup> “La radicalización y sobreexposición de la necropolítica consiste, sobre todo, en que saca de sus espacios y de sus actores/ ejecutores <<legítimos>> a las tecnologías gubernamentales. La necropolítica, tal y como la entendemos en esta investigación, se diferencia sobre todo por el hecho de que es ejercida por sujetos endriagos que deciden romper su condición de sujetos sujetos al Estado. Así la necropolítica detenta un carácter múltiple, ya que es igualmente ejercida por los actores ilegítimos como por los actores legítimos de la biopolítica (el gobierno, el Estado, el discurso) y se legitima a través de estos.” Valencia, *Capitalismo Gore*, 145.

detached logic of its own: a logic of violence on the original grounds of a ruthless capitalistic logic.

Bodies conceived as interchangeable products that alter and break through the logics of the capital's process of production, because they subvert the capital terms to squeeze the phase of merchandise production and substitute it with a merchandise, that is literally in the flesh of the body and human life, through predatory technics of extreme violence as it is the case of abduction or hit men jobs.<sup>15</sup> (Translation mine, CGM)

The value of life and of the reproduction of life, that is so important for capitalistic features, disappears here. The economic importance of surplus value shifts from the value of human work force (contained in the life of the worker him/herself) to the surplus value of bodies and of death. An economy of violence is the result of this transaction. A broad spectrum of new business possibilities opens up for the once excluded subject: hit men, extorsions, human trafficking, prostitution and organ trafficking, to mention but a few, are the channels to monetary upward mobility, in a situation where the state does not give any guarantees. This is not by any means a revolution to acquire the means of production<sup>16</sup>, but rather the subtraction of the means of production, that leaves the resources of life literally incarnated in the flesh of the body, ready to be bounded directly to the extreme logic of capital.

This shift on the discourse of violence can be observed in the chronicles of Óscar Martínez. It is precisely the estrangement of extreme violence that is being called upon here, since the public sphere has lost the ability to devise the violent subject as something conceivable within its same logic. The narrative work proposed in Martínez's chronicles can be interpreted primarily as being directed toward a collective capacity of the imagination that has been unable to imagine the extreme violence as result of the same community, society and/or state. In the anthology of chronicles *Crónicas Negras* (2013), two different perspectives on the violent subject at the margins appear. The first one is the depiction of a sociopath, which is portrayed in its psychological whole, with a clear traumatic and irreversible past, which cannot be contained by any form of

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<sup>15</sup> "Cuerpos concebidos como productos de intercambio que alteran y rompen las lógicas del proceso de producción del capital, ya que subvierten los términos de éste al sacar del juego la fase de producción de mercancía, sustituyéndola por una mercancía encarnada literariamente por el cuerpo y la vida humana, a través de técnicas predatorias de violencia extrema como el secuestro o el asesinato por encargo." Sayak Valencia, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Valencia considers the possibility of misunderstanding *necroempoderamiento* as an act of resistance. See Valencia, *Capitalismo Gore*, 145.

rehabilitation. Whilst acting violently, this subject left the dimension of reason and can therefore only be understood by means of madness and insanity. The element of congruence between motivation and action is not considered here and cannot be put in terms of a logical sequence. An example of this is the chronic *La Locura de El Malvado* (The Insanity of the Evil), where scenes of explicit violence are narrated, accompanied by symptoms of psychical illness from the protagonist. The conclusion is cited directly from the technical diagnose of a forensic psychiatrist:

– This dumb girl has to feel the pain of labor! – said one of the gang. Then they tied her neck to the cross. They took off her pants. Then the bra. <<we left her almost naked>>. One of them approached her and started to cut her breast off little by little with a knife. And the girl looked up to the sky from the pain and opened her mouth as wide as she could, trying to scream one last time. But she could not, because she had a piece of fabric making it impossible. El Malvado tells me this and agonizes in his chair. He squeezes his hands. Hits his legs. He does not enjoy it. Slowly, his eyes leave the initial fury of the story and become kind of shot down. They lose its shine (...) *Last interview with the forensic psychiatrist*.<sup>17</sup> (Translation mine, CGM)

The subject being portrayed here shows a struggle between reason and unreason that culminates with the shutting down of the light of his eyes, referring to the lost barrier of consciousness that would normally stop him from giving in to the practice of extreme violence. The structure of the narration continues with a chapter that will justify this specific pattern of behavior through psychiatric expertise listing the subject within the frames of psychiatric disorder. This conception of the violent subject clearly fits within

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<sup>17</sup> “-¡Esta mafe tiene que sentir lo que es parir! – dijo uno de los locos. Luego le amarraron también el cuello contra la cruz. Le quitaron el pantalón. Después el sostén. <<La dejamos casi desnuda>>. Entonces se acercó uno que comenzó a quitarle poco a poco un pecho con una navaja. Y la *jaina*, del dolor, miraba hacia arriba, y abría la boca lo más que podía, intentando gritar por última vez. Pero no podía, porque tenía un canuto de tela que se lo impedía. *El Malvado* me cuenta esto y se retuerce en su silla. Aprieta las manos. Golpea sus piernas. No lo disfruta. Sus ojos poco a poco dejan la furia con la que iniciaron el relato y luego como que se apagan. Pierden el brillo (...). *Última entrevista con el siquiatra forense.*” *Sala Negra de El Faro. Crónicas Negras*. Desde una región que no cuenta (Antiguo Cuscatlán: Aguilar, 2013), 188-189.

the marginalization of insanity which relegates the violent agency beyond and out of reach of logical functioning.

The second and different approach to the violent subject is shown in the chronicles written by Óscar Martínez: like within the anthology of *Crónicas Negras*, in his later independent work of *Una Historia de Violencia*, the narrative structure of the violent subject chosen by Martínez differs from a marginalization of violence by means of pathology or social exclusion. The violent subject may remain strange with respect to a sense of the unknown but not in terms of the exceptional. Trying to sketch a subjectivity conceived in terms of mere violence, Martínez undertakes an approach that will pose a fundamental question on the perception of life and death. The term of *Necropolitics* and the further analysis of Valencia's *Capitalismo Gore* comes here into play. By means of constructing a narrative that uncovers a possible logic behind the search for empowerment through violence, Martínez's writings address a subjectivity entailing a perception not schooled by the aspiration of the preservation of life, but on the contrary, by the aspiration of the destruction of life. In other words, it is the striving for death, similar to Valencia's concept of the dynamics of *necroempoderamiento*, that is decisive in understanding the marginal context of this specific subjectivity and its relation to the apprehension of the logic of violence. An example of this appears in the chronicle *La Espina del Barrio* (The Thorn of the neighborhood), which tells the story of a hitman in the delicate key witness position for further trails on organized crime:

- Don't send sheep to hunt the wolf, because the wolf has nails and teeth, you fuckers, and they are really sharp, to really fuck you up – said the hitmen to the prisoners that listen to him on the other side of the telephone. (...) To every threatening sentence they made, he would give a straight answer, promptly, as if he had been waiting forever for this call, a call announcing that other hitmen were onto him. – We already know what's up – the prisoners threatened again – and you will leave that place smelling like pine. – Sons of bitches, they don't make coffins out of pine here, they make them out of earpod or mango trees. You don't even know about coffins and you don't even know the smell of pine. You will leave this place smelling like smoke because I have here M-16 enough for every one of you, you sons of bitches – the hitman lied about a gun, he does not have. The place he refers to as <<here>> is the hut he inhabits. There, he has some radishes he cultivates, there is some dry earth, that the radishes' roots barely squeeze, there

are two little marihuana plants, that he hopes to harvest in winter (...) El Niño is a perfect product of this death factory that is our country. His life is a sum of circumstances that always gives the same result: something worse.

The Prelude of El Niño

– When you are within the gang, and have killed, it is as if you made a pact with the devil, you are part of the devil, you are a soul delivering souls, man. And suddenly you deliver your own, because that is life on the street. When your time is up, your time is up – says El Niño, whilst sitting in the shadow that the wall makes.]<sup>18</sup> (Translation mine, CGM)

The omnipresence of death, from the implicitness of a death threat on a telephone call to the aesthetic references of a coffin, causes an estrangement at the beginning of the story. This first estrangement develops in the detailed narration of a logic of violence, where violence is being portrayed as a strategy to reach some kind of social mobility. This logic appeals to the understanding of economic exclusion and it also refers directly to an analysis in terms of death related expressions: the country is nothing more than a death factory. The only valuable product in this scene is death itself. At the end of this paragraph the protagonist summarizes in his own words how little appreciation he has for life, even if it is his own. This happens in a form of closeness making a direct contribution to the narration, which contradicts the former estrangement.

Another moment of approximation is shown here:

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<sup>18</sup> “– No vayan a mandar ovejas a cazar al lobo, porque el lobo tiene uñas y dientes, culeros, y bien afilados, para acabar de joder – dijo el sicario a los presos que lo escuchaban del otro lado de la línea telefónica. (...) A cada frase amenazante de ellos, él respondía determinado, de inmediato, como quien ya hace mucho esperaba esa llamada, la llamada en la que le anunciarían que otros sicarios estaban tras él. – Ya sabemos qué pedo – amenazaron los presos –, y con olor a pino vas a salir de ahí. – Hijos de puta, si ni hacen de pino las cajas aquí, las hacen de conacaste y de mango. Ni sabés de cuál madera las hacen y ni conocés el olor a los pinos. De aquí van a salir con olor a humo, porque aquí M-16 tengo para todos ustedes, hijos de puta – mintió el sicario sobre el fusil que no tiene. El <<aquí>> al que el sicario se refería es el solar que aún habita. En el solar hay rábanos que él cultiva, hay tierra seca que las raíces de los rábanos exprimen, hay dos plantitas de marihuana también, que él espera le rindan en invierno (...) El Niño es un producto perfecto de esta fábrica de muerte que somos como país. Su vida es una suma de circunstancias que siempre dio el mismo resultado: uno peor. El preludio de El Niño

– Ya cuando te brincaste y mataste, entonces hiciste un pacto con el diablo, ya sos pieza del diablo, sos alma entregando alma, men. Y al menor rato, entregar la de uno también, porque en la calle así es también: cuando te toca, te toca – nos dice El Niño, sentado al cobijo de la sombra de un muro.” *Sala Negra de El Faro. Crónicas Negras. Desde una región que no cuenta*, 133-135.



He has a euphemism for everything. If he killed someone and thrown the body into a well, he says he <<sent him to drink water>>; if he buried them alive or dead, he <<made them count the stars>>. Simple death for us is for him something that has many forms. (And when in his story El Niño is shooting, he makes a couple of loud sounds with his lips. Poh-keh, poh-keh.) (...) Five kilometers from here, there is a place called Turin. In this place, there are abandoned rail tracks surrounded by bushes. Following the tracks and the bushes you get to a narrow path. Taking a left, on the narrow path you come by some corn rows. After the corn you get to a wide piece of land. Crowning that piece of land there is a drought well made of cement. The hole of the well has a circumference of about one meter. The hole goes to a depth of 55 meters. Through that hole many corpses have been disposed by El Niño, by other members of his gang, and also by other three gangs from the MS13.<sup>19</sup> (Translation mine, CGM)

The listing of euphemisms used to describe homicides points again to an aesthetic dynamic of expressions of violence. It follows a meta-reference to the narration within the narration, making obvious that the happenings within the gang do have a narrative importance for its members. This means, that the violent happenings can be well understood within a discursive logic and are not exclusively to be understood in terms of unreason or pathological exception. The violent subject can be understood within a specific logic, even if this is a logic of death. The functioning of this argument leads to think about the working of perception on an aesthetic level: the key moment of being able to imagine the aesthetic portrayed in the text is responsible for generating an approach to the violent subject, which was conceived at first as a stranger. Establishing of this shift is grounded on the reader's ability of considering the described situation as possible, even if it is within a very specific narrative context. There is no plead of reflecting on reality here, but rather an injunction to understand and to imagine the

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<sup>19</sup> "Tiene eufemismos para todo. Si mató a alguien y lo lanzó a un pozo, es que <<lo mandó a tomar agua>>; si los enterró vivos o muertos, en algún potrero, es que <<los puso a contar estrellas>>. Lo que para nosotros es simplemente la muerte, para alguien como él tiene varias formas. (Además cuando en sus historias El Niño dispara, hace un par de sonidos huecos y fuertes con sus labios. Poke, poke.) (...) A unos cinco kilómetros de este solar hay un municipio llamado Turín. En ese municipio hay unas vías de tren en desuso, rodeadas de breña. Siguiendo las vías y la breña se llega a una callecita de tierra. Cruzando a la izquierda en esa callecita de tierra se pasa por unos maizales. Pasando los maizales se llega a una explanada de tierra. Esa explanada de tierra está coronada por un pozo seco, de cemento. El pozo seco tiene un agujero de un metro de diámetro. El agujero es la boca de una caída de 55 metros de profundidad. Por ese agujero tiraban cadáveres El Niño, los miembros de su clica y de al menos otras tres clicas de la MS13." *Sala Negra de El Faro. Crónicas Negras. Desde una región que no cuenta*, 143.

logics of something that seems impossible and illogical. The last sequence is an example of a narrative technique that appeals direct to the reader's imagination to follow the very detailed description, step by step, to visualize the real possibility of a mass grave on the countryside. The insertion of this logic of death and violence within the frame of the possible is the actual approach to the violent stranger, being purposed by the text.

These are distinctive elements that are present throughout the writing of Óscar Martínez. A very similar writing concretizes likewise in his last publication *Una Historia de Violencia*, accompanied by a personal preface on his motives on writing on violence, leaving a scope to a strategy of supporting the discursive approach of the violent stranger to reflect on the actual perception of violence. Furthermore, the work on the grasping of death and violence, within the context of the Central American society, has remarkable value. It allows a deep analysis of the aesthetic means applied for the cognitive shift that approaching a sphere of the unknown and the marginal requires.

In conclusion, the theoretical premises briefly outlined at the beginning of this paper can help us understand how the working of violence is intrinsic to conceptions of life and death and plays therefore a huge role in our institutional and social life. The reality of the so called *Triángulo Norte* in Central America has a very specific history of violence upon which science tries to reflect. The literary dimension can visualize the possible functioning and discursive structure of the subjects being attached to this specific violent context, as the chronicles analyzed in this paper show. Portrays of subjects within violence that offer an alternative genesis of violence, rooted not in pathology but in the intertwined economical and power relations, can become productive for the field of literary studies, when reflecting on the perception of the strange and marginal and the aesthetic dynamics this process entails.

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