

# FANTASTIC BODIES – THE BODY AS A TOOL OF SOCIAL CRITICISM IN TWO FANTASTIC SHORT STORIES BY TWO CENTRAL AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

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## ABSTRACT

One of the characteristics of the Fantastic is its subversive nature when dealing with contemporary social issues and taboo subjects, which is particularly noticeable in narratives written by women. This comparative analysis of short stories by two women writers from Central America —«Manual de hijo muerto» by Claudia Hernández (El Salvador) and «Para elegir la muerte» by María Eugenia Ramos (Honduras)— will discuss how women use narratives of violation of the body as a tool of social and cultural criticism against the authorities and the patriarchy. Framing the discussion within the field of body studies, particularly the works of Margo DeMello (2014), Bryan Turner et al. (2012), and Jean Franco (2013), this study examines how these writers deploy Fantastic narrative techniques to reflect upon the social and political turmoil in Central America during and after their internal conflicts of the 1980s.

KEYWORDS: Claudia Hernández; María Eugenia Ramos; Central American women's writing; fantastic literature; body theories.

## CUERPOS FANTÁSTICOS: EL CUERPO COMO HERRAMIENTA DE CRÍTICA SOCIAL EN DOS CUENTOS FANTÁSTICOS DE DOS ESCRITORAS CENTROAMERICANAS

## RESUMEN

Una de las características de lo fantástico es su carácter subversivo al abordar cuestiones sociales contemporáneas y temas tabúes, cosa que es especialmente perceptible en

las narraciones escritas por mujeres. Este análisis comparativo de dos cuentos de escritoras centroamericanas —«Manual de hijo muerto» de Claudia Hernández (El Salvador) y «Para elegir la muerte» de María Eugenia Ramos (Honduras)— se centrará en la forma en que las mujeres utilizan los relatos de la violación del cuerpo como herramienta de crítica social y cultural contra las autoridades y el patriarcado. Además de formular la discusión dentro del marco de los estudios corporales, particularmente los planteamientos de Margo DeMello (2014), Bryan Turner et al. (2012) y Jean Franco (2013), se examinará cómo estas escritoras utilizan las técnicas narrativas de lo fantástico para reflexionar sobre la convulsión sociopolítica de Centroamérica antes y después de los conflictos internos de los años 80 del siglo xx.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Claudia Hernández; María Eugenia Ramos; escritura de mujeres centroamericanas; literatura fantástica; teorías del cuerpo-



## INTRODUCTION



**ATTENTION!** Taking these precautionary measures can save you unnecessary exhaustion in case you have received the pieces of the wrong child. Make sure, also, not to sign for receipt before you are completely sure that the entire contents of the package belong to you.



**REMEMBER THAT RETURNS ARE NOT ACCEPTED.**

Figure 1: Claudia Hernández, *De Fronteras*, p. 107.

This warning box (Figure 1) appears on the first page of Claudia Hernández's «Manual de hijo muerto» (The Dead Child Manual). It warns the parents, who have just received the dismembered parts of their missing adult child, to ensure that the pieces are all there and that they belong to the child, as «returns are not accepted» (Hernández, 2007: 107). Likewise, the following content warning is included in this paper for references to the death of children, corpses, mutilation and dismemberment, violence, murder, torture, and body appearance. This paper analyses two Fantastic stories by women writers from Central America who are not well known in the literary canon, explo-

ring how the authors use the Fantastic, narratives of dehumanisation, annihilation, and the subsequent reconstruction of identity, to criticise the political regimes and the authorities in their countries.

The abovementioned «Manual de hijo muerto» (2002) by Claudia Hernández of El Salvador, is a satirical story, written as an instruction manual, directing the parents how to deal with the dismembered body of their adult child which has been sent clandestinely to them. Following the manual's instructions, the parents have to reconstruct the body to prepare it for the burial, but are ordered not to seek out those responsible. The other story is «Para elegir la muerte» (2000) (To Choose Death) by María Eugenia Ramos of Honduras, in which the protagonist enters a store with the purpose of choosing his own death, following the example of his friend who had died three weeks earlier. In these stories, the authors have constructed allegories of the conflicts and the political situations in the region from the early 1980s —notably, the civil war in El Salvador and the US intervention in Honduras— using satire, humour, and irony, but without referring explicitly to any specific event. The theories of the Fantastic of Ana María Barrenechea (1972), Rosalba Campra (1990), and Rosemary Jackson (1981) explain how the writers draw out their perspectives using the Fantastic. In addition, the theories of David Roas (2022) and Anna Bocutti (2020) on the female Fantastic will be explored in relation to the stories, as well as Carmen Alemany Bay's notion of the «unusual» (2019) specifically for narratives written by women. Furthermore, building on the body theories of Margo DeMello (2014), Bryan Turner et al. (2012), and Jean Franco (2013) on death, torture, dismemberment, and mourning, as well as on existing scholarship on the Fantastic written by Central American women, this study demonstrates how women writers use narratives centred on the body as a means of subversion and as a tool for social criticism.

#### THEORIES OF THE FANTASTIC

In both stories, the reader does not question what he or she is reading, whether it is about the dismembered body of an adult child, or a person who enters a store wanting to choose a death. This is one of the characteristics of the genre of the Fantastic, which, according to Ana María Barrenechea, is an a-normal event which is outside what is accepted as normal or possible. It is the same in both the natural world and the supernatural world (1972: 392-393). However, Barrenechea states that this a-normal event does not need the

reader to doubt or hesitate, as Tzvetan Todorov suggested in his theory (1975: 33), as the reader has already accepted the unusual situation that is being narrated. Barrenechea also rejects Todorov's exclusion of allegories in Fantastic literature; she claims that it intersects and reinforces the level of the narrative, as «the allegorical content in contemporary literature is often the meaninglessness of the world, by nature problematic, chaotic and unreal» (1972: 395). Rosemary Jackson's theory of the Fantastic as a literature of subversion is also utilised in this paper. Building on Barrenechea's theory of the a-normal event, her theory posits that the reader becomes receptive to disorder and transgressions in the narrative, to those events that occur outside what is considered to be normal or real, noting that the Fantastic is «un-real» while the real is «so frustratingly finite» (Jackson, 1981: 4, 20). Barrenechea's and Jackson's theories of the un-real, the unreal, the chaotic, and the meaninglessness of the real world can be applied to the political allegories in both stories. In «Manual de hijo muerto», Hernández implies that the Salvadorans have lived with violence for so long that they have become accustomed to violence and funerals, including for young adults. An example of such violence is the massacre of nearly one thousand civilians in El Mozote and its surrounding villages in 1981, which Jean Franco describes as «beyond cold blooded execution» (2013: 165). In the story, Hernández parallels the violence to which her characters are subjected to these tortures and extreme violence in El Salvador. In a similar way, Ramos's story is an allegory of the assassinations of political and left-wing citizens in Central America, including Francisco Morazán, Túpac Amaru II and Ernesto «Che» Guevara, as well as an allegory of US consumerism with deaths for sale, as anything can be bought at a price.

Information has been deliberately left out of both stories. Rosalba Campora's theory of silences or empty spaces in Fantastic narratives is the deliberate intention to create an instability between what has been said and what has not been said, such as a lack of explanatory words, an illogical conclusion, abrupt or shortened endings, or lines of writing that are out of place. Campora contends that when it is impossible to find the cause of an event, the Fantastic tension appears, resulting in a void, some openings, or the silence in what is narrated (1990: 52, 56). In Hernández's story, there is no explanation of how the body arrived, who sent it, or why it was sent to the parents instead of being openly dispersed or hidden as many bodies are by the perpetrators. Perhaps the culprits were known to the parents or the child, and the offenders felt a sense of guilt or shame, which could explain why the body was returned in pieces to them. There is no description of how the body of the dead child is

returned to the parents, whether it is placed in a box or some other type of container, or formally returned by the state, by courier, posted, or left at the door with the Manual. There is also no description of the pieces, for example, entire arms, half arms, half legs, and so on. Furthermore, there is no information regarding who wrote the Manual —whether it is provided by the state, the law enforcement agencies, a drug gang, or a violent vigilante group—or why the parents need a Manual to reconstruct the body. Likewise, in Ramos's story, there is no explanation of the association between Samuel, the protagonist, and his friend, Dr Santana, who chose to die as a missing political figure. Is Dr Santana a friend, a professor, a family member, or Samuel's medical professional? There is also no explanation for why Dr Santana chose to die early as a delinquent when he was a conservative man in his lifetime, or why Samuel is so affected by Dr Santana's death, or why Samuel is choosing to die within the year and is getting his affairs in order to do so.

These puzzling parts of, or silences in, the stories are exactly what Campra describes as «a silence whose nature and function consist precisely in not being filled» (1990: 52). All these questions are left to the reader's imagination, and they must complete the missing information for themselves. Nevertheless, the readers may become puzzled or feel uneasy by the missing information, as they often expect completeness in a story. As Campra notes, the unsaid is exactly what is essential to the reconstruction of events (1990: 52). The readers have two options: firstly, they can fill in the missing information with a possible explanation for the silence. For example, a reader of «Para elegir la muerte» may assume that Dr Santana chose to die because he was threatened by a vigilante group, or was in debt, or always secretly dreamed of being a guerrilla hero. Alternatively, the readers can accept that no answers will be provided, and the story will be incomplete. The Fantastic has filled these voids and the readers will continue reading the story. On a similar note, Campra posits that in the absurd, the lack of finality and causality is an intrinsic condition of the real, while in the Fantastic, it comes from an unforeseen rupture in the laws of reality. In the absurd, there is no alternative but a grim certainty that includes every human being, including the protagonist (1990: 56). While Campra keeps the absurd and the Fantastic separated with a fine line, Hernández combines both the absurd and the Fantastic in «Manual de hijo muerto»: the absurd instructions to stitch the pieces of a dead body together to a semi-human form, and the reader's acceptance of the almost ordinary occurrence of doing this (the rupture of the real) driven by the narrative style of the Manual. Likewise, in

«Para elegir la muerte», a store offering death choices is an absurd concept, but not within the logic of the Fantastic.

The feminine Fantastic, as proposed by David Roas (2022) and Anna Boccuti (2020), has also been investigated for this paper. While Roas focuses more on the female-monster and its associated threat to and rebellion against the patriarchy, he notes that in Postmodern Fantastic fiction, the voices that were once marginal in narratives, authority, and representation, are now in the spotlight. Irony, created by Postmodernist scepticism towards the notion of a stable world, opened the doors for Fantastic fiction to combine with humour as new vehicles for subversion and challenges of the real (Roas, 2022: 107). According to Roas, women authors also use Fantastic fiction (and monsters) to denounce the cultural, social, and economic conditioning factors imposed on women (2022: 121). Boccuti also analyses the subversive function of irony in stories written by Spanish-speaking women writers, which, when combined with the twisting of the real by the Fantastic, creates a «powerful critique of patriarchal society» (2020: 151). Boccuti considers that irony can be considered as a characteristic of many narratives written by women, which results in «an effective strategy to rethink values, models and existing narratives» and creates a community of readers with new transgressive visions (2020: 172). The Fantastic, when allied with humour, including hyperbole, exaggeration, metaphors, and the absurd, reveals certain aspects of the real and forms new ways to condemn the patriarchy (Boccuti, 2020: 171). Like Roas, she also refers to the marginalisation of women by the patriarchy has allowed the subversive nature of the Fantastic to be a vehicle for women to tackle themes that previously would have been censured (Boccuti, 2020: 160). In «Manual de hijo muerto», the humour and irony commence with the story title, reflecting the number of young people killed in conflicts (Gentile, 2017: 144) and continue with the normalisation of violence. In «Para elegir la muerte», the humour and irony relate to the death choices of the tapestries, depicting people who did not choose their own deaths. Both authors are protesting the violence in Central America from the second half of the twentieth century.

Carmen Alemany Bay has proposed the notion of the «unusual» specifically for new textualities written by women. She states that the unusual, when combined with daily life, a little humour, and absurd situations, swings strangely between the rational and the irrational, even though they are within the broad scope of the real (2019: 310). Narratives of the unusual are a hybrid mix of traditional reality and an unusual reality, in which the unusual tries to harmonise the opposing poles (Alemany Bay, 2019: 311). This theory can be

applied to Hernández's story, with the oscillation between the body in pieces and the hyperbole and humour of the tip and warning boxes which include references to medical opinions. In Ramos's story, selecting your own death in a store that offers a range to choose from is both rational and irrational. The actual death choices, while real, are also irrational.

#### DEATH AND TORTURE

Death is at the core of these stories, both of which also deal with the reconstruction of the body and of a new identity, whether it be a body stitched together to make it look as human as possible, or choosing to die as another person, perhaps a heroic death or as a historical figure. For many societies, death is commonly shaped by economic factors, such as lack of access to medicines, vaccines, and hospitals, but it can also be intentional, such as through wars, genocide, homicides, and euthanasia. Margo DeMello states that while dead bodies provoke primeval reactions in humans, all cultures take care of their dead, either by burial, cremation, embalming them, mummification, and maintaining burial sites, and mourn the dead with a cultural event or ritual to bid farewell (2014: 79-88). While Nurit Stadler notes that most religious groups have strict rules regarding handling corpses (2012: 218), visible cadavers are objects for transmitting messages of fear or dominance to either the civilian population or to the enemy, as will be discussed later. These are important themes in these stories because death is the ultimate form of loss of identity and dehumanisation, particularly in cases of violent death.

Hernández's «Manual de hijo muerto» is written as a section of an instruction Manual in just seven paragraphs. It provides brief, impersonal descriptions on how to reassemble the incomplete body of an adult child who has been murdered and dismembered by a person or persons unknown. The body has been returned clandestinely to the parents, together with the Manual, to prepare the body for the funeral. Hernández has written the story in a polite instructive writing style with a third person narrator who has little emotion or empathy, except for satirically suggesting having a box of tissues within reach. The narrator's style, voice and tone are consistent throughout the story. The instructions use the imperative mood at times and impersonal instructions in the passive voice such as «se recomienda» («it is recommended») to carefully instruct the parents of the procedures to follow (Hernández, 2007: 107; Ortiz Wallner, 2013: 6). Thus, the narrator is distanced from the recipients

of the body, which is in complete contrast to the effect on the reader, who becomes a participant in the story through his or her disgust of imagining that he or she is assembling the body, especially when sewing it together (Rodríguez Corrales, 2013: 126).

The short, concise phrases written in an impersonal tone are like those used in some torture manuals. For example, a Central Intelligence Agency Training Manual contains these types of instructions: «Keep the questioning focussed on the requirements» and «Do not allow the subject to determine your exact area of interest» (The National Security Archive, 2004). The direct, simple, and specific instructions are also similar to a cooking recipe or for the assembly of a doll or a toy, making the appearance of a mutilated corpse of an adult child seem like it is an everyday or common occurrence (Jossa, 2014: 19; Rodríguez Corrales, 2013: 126). In the same way, people who live with long-term death and violence often become accustomed to it. According to Carla Rodríguez Corrales, for people living with long-term violence it becomes a way of life and they do not try to fight it, or find a solution, or seek to punish those responsible with the assistance from the authorities, which is exactly what the Hernández's Manual is instructing the parents to do (2013: 127). This normalisation of violence is the irony in Hernández's story; the reality of violence in El Salvador is so painful, that it is easier to take it to an absurd level (Ortiz Wallner, 2013: 6; Ramos, 2007; Rodríguez Corrales, 2013: 127). In this way, Hernández's story is like Cristina Peri Rossi's 1984 story «El Ángel Caído» (The Fallen Angel), in which the citizens of an unnamed city have become so accustomed to the oppression and violence occurring in the city that they do not notice the sudden appearance of an angel, something that would normally be considered a miracle. These citizens do not wish to draw attention to themselves to the oppressive authorities and instead clean up the debris after two satellites collided (while the angel fell) and obey the curfew sirens. There is no significant deviation from their everyday life caused by the fallen angel.

As there are implications of police involvement in Hernández's story, the victims of state violence or violent vigilante groups are treated as objects by the narrative, chosen with good reason by the author, as she has softened the otherwise horrific impact of the contents of the story by converting the absurdity of the extreme violence into an instruction manual. The black humour provides the contrast or the opposite to the terrible events of the story (pain and death), taking it to an almost bizarre level: absurdity/humour versus the disgust of the grotesque event of an adult child's body being returned in pieces to the parents; light versus the obscurity and darkness of evil people,

war, or other violent acts. In this way, the black humour offsets the fear of death and grief (Roas, 2011: 71). The title of the story is also an irony of the number of young adults who were killed in the conflicts in Central America, which forms part of Hernández's protest about the violence in El Salvador (Gentile, 2017: 144). In addition, there are elements of satire in the warning box which demands that parents ensure that the pieces belong to their child, implying that the parts may belong to another victim or victims. Even worse, it may imply that, in multiple murders, the perpetrators took no care (and did not care) in placing the body pieces together and it is up to the parents to rectify any «mistakes».

In Ramos's «Para elegir la muerte», the protagonist, Samuel, enters a store and announces: «Vengo a escoger una muerte» («I've come to choose a death») (2000: 23) after which the assistant shows him the types of death on offer, all for a reasonable price. Samuel wants to choose his mode of death, for an unspecified date within the next year, as his legal affairs will be in order by then. The female assistant presents tapestries of different types of death on offer to him, including crucifixion, atomic bomb, shark attack, guillotine, drifting in space, and murder-suicide. The death by crucifixion, while extremely brutal, is also glorified in Christianity through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Samuel pauses at the tapestry of death by atomic bomb, as, while the victims were vapourised, it would be an instant death with no suffering. After viewing all the tapestries, he notices an indistinct room in which he finds the tapestry of the death by firing squad of Francisco Morazán (1792-1842), the former President of the United Province of Central America, who was also the head of the State of Honduras. The assistant will not enter the room, remarking that Samuel is entering at his own risk and very few people enter it. Curious about whether Dr Santana chose a death from this room, Samuel notices from the doorway the tapestry of Inca revolutionary leader Túpac Amaru II (José Gabriel Condorcanqui, 1738-1781) as he is being torn apart by the horses. This gruesome torture did not succeed, and he was subsequently killed and dismembered by the Spaniards. Samuel steps inside the room towards the tapestry of the roof of the little school at La Higuera. The school is significant because it is where Ernesto «Che» Guevara (1928-1967) was captured by Bolivian forces on 8 October 1967. He was put with his fellow fighters in this two-room schoolhouse, interrogated and executed the next day. Ramos's story deals with death but is presented in a light-hearted way, albeit also with black humour. In so doing, Ramos subverts the social and religious norms that accept death as a natural process, but which deprecate suicide. While she breaks

these social norms, at the same time, everything seems perfectly normal, routine, and firmly situated in an [almost] real environment.

The significance of the tapestry, instead of a more modern version catalogue, poster, or a website, can be linked to the famous European tapestries of wars, such as the eleventh-century Bayeaux Tapestry of the Norman Conquest of England. Woven tapestries were highly prized by the Inca, with the finest woven fabrics reserved for royal and religious functions and tributes, and even placed in coffins (Cartwright, 2015). The Maya are also well-known for the beauty and quality of their textiles, because of the simple tools used to create them, even to this day. Likewise, the *arpilleras* of Chile wove images into their textiles, first as a means of financial emancipation, but then as a visual protest against the Pinochet regime as a testimony of collective suffering (Beattie, Coop & Schouten, 2022: 2, 4). Similarly, in Hernández's story, the weaving or sewing is done by the parents when they reconstruct the body of the dead child.

Torture is also central to both stories and is linked to historical events in the authors' countries. Torture is not only about causing pain and suffering to the body, but also about erasing human dignity. Torturers strip the power and control from the victims to the torturer's own body, which becomes a tool of aggression, equal to a fist or a boot (Franco, 2013: 175). The goal of the torturer is to rupture the body in two ways: firstly, by making the body *present* by torturing it, and secondly, to make the victim's voice *absent* by destroying it (Scarry, 1985: 49; my emphasis). The victims are completely dependent on the torturers for food, drink, and basic needs. Torturers control every function of the victim, from sleep and movement to sight and speech, including whether they live or die (Kaminsky, 1993: 56). Dehumanising a victim by torture, rape or other means reduces the victim to a state of complete abjection and humiliation, where the «I» no longer exists (Franco, 2013: 278). The victim loses their sense of self, time, place, and existence, and must be degraded totally so that the torturer feels less guilt. The torturers want to maintain control over the people who may oppose them and torture has been used by governments, religious authorities, and criminal groups to obtain information or confessions, or convert, indoctrinate, or re-educate captives. It is used to both dehumanise the victims and to punish them. Methods include breaking bones, branding, flogging, cutting, amputation of limbs, rape, and psychological torture (DeMello, 2014: 51, 252; Franco, 2013: 1). The use of torture to control, silence, and/or dehumanise the victims is present in the chosen stories. The torture references in «Manual de hijo muerto» include injuries to the body

from ligature marks, cigarette burns, and the body's eventual dismemberment, as well as the silence from the parents. In «Para elegir la muerte» there are references to crucifixion, beheading, and implied torture in the Spanish Inquisition. These torture references will now be analysed in more detail.

In «Manual de hijo muerto», the parents are instructed to cover the body's injuries, which are implied to be ligature marks on the child's wrists and ankles, with gloves and socks, and to cover the facial injuries which are, without doubt, from beatings, with heavy makeup. There is also the subtle instruction to the parents to avoid smoking around the corpse as ash may fall on the body parts, which would be a direct reference to real victims who had cigarette burns on their bodies from the perpetrators as part of their torture. The torture for the parents continues as they are forced to suffer in silence: the Manual instructs them not to seek out those responsible for their child's death, which implies a threat of retaliation from the culprits. The footnote to this section of the Manual satirically advises the parents that if they cannot mentally or emotionally reconstruct the body of their child, they can use the schematics in Appendix B if they are in doubt. In addition, if their child's body has suffered lesions that have varied the body's structure, they will need to consult with their primary care physician (2017: 108). The satire and irony of this footnote is that Appendix B is not included in the story, and it may not have been included in the Manual. The writers of the Manual assume that the parents may not be able to recall the exact appearance of their child (presuming that the parts are all there), which is absurd, especially if the child were missing for only a few days as noted in the first paragraph of the Manual. The reference to the physician in this footnote relates to any deformation to the body's structure caused by the injuries and/or dismemberment, in order for the parents to seek advice to reconstruct the pieces more aesthetically as done in cosmetic or craniofacial surgery. Moreover, the instructions commence on page 23, suggesting that there are more parts to the Manual, but exactly what else would be needed is left to the reader's imagination.

There is also the unspoken or other side of torture in Hernández's story: the extreme anguish for the parents to have to reconstruct the body, but who are directed by the Manual not to make assumptions or to seek out those responsible for their child's death. According to Jean Franco, the executions in El Salvador's civil war in the 1980s were committed by soldiers trained in torture methods by the USA, as part of US policy to rid communism in the region. The country resembled a slaughterhouse, driven by torture and acts of cruelty (2013: 12-13, 167). By bringing to light this physical and psychological torture in her

work, Hernández is protesting about the brutal violence in her country, where violence and acts of cruelty are commonplace and not the exception.

The torture in Ramos's story is not as explicit as in «Manual de hijo muerto», but is depicted in the tapestries which portray the types of death for buyers to choose, including those of historical figures, such as French revolutionary feminist Olympe de Gouges, who fought for women's rights to divorce and was executed by guillotine, an unnamed Muslim woman facing the Inquisition, Francisco Morazán, the former President of the United Province of Central America who was shot by firing squad, Inca rebel leader Túpac Amaru II, who was tortured and eventually killed and dismembered, and Che Guevara, who was shot by firing squad after capture and interrogation, but whose body was cleaned and washed by the military for public display to prove that he was dead (Johnson, 2004: 336). The store's treatment of the death process is handled with discretion and implied care which is in complete contrast to «Manual de hijo muerto», where the victims die brutally at the hands of others. Despite that, if one chooses a violent death as displayed in the tapestries, it would be just as brutal. The irony in Ramos's story is that all the tapestries depict people who did not choose their deaths. Therefore, the buyers select deaths on their own terms and avert unchosen deaths, generally by oppressive regimes or violent groups. The protagonist, Samuel, has entered the store because his friend or teacher Dr Santana, a respected and conservative man who had strong ties to the Catholic Church and its principles, which include deprecating suicide and abortion, chose to die as a missing delinquent three weeks earlier. Samuel is confused as to why he did it, but the assistant does not and will not provide the answer. Samuel clearly wants to follow Dr Santana's example and die a chosen death, perhaps not realising that there are a variety of deaths on offer until he enters the store.

The reference to rebellion by Dr Santana dying as a delinquent raises the ghosts of political oppression in Honduras and other Latin American countries where the disappearance of political and left-wing citizens is part of their historical struggles. Ramos is dissenting the US involvement in Honduras during the twentieth century, from a capitalistic and imperialistic point of view. In particular, she is protesting against the Reagan administration's massive increase in militarisation and military spending in Honduras in the 1980s. The USA used Honduras's strategic geographic location as a base and launch pad for its counter-revolutionary activities and political plans in the neighbouring countries of Nicaragua and El Salvador (Shepherd, 1984: 109-110). Furthermore, the failed return to civilian rule for Honduras from decades of

military regimes in the early 1980s, distorted by US intervention, led to an increase in human rights violations, and reductions in political freedom and the free press (Shepherd, 1984: 138).

#### DISMEMBERMENT

Dismemberment of bodies is another key theme in the stories. It is an act of extreme cruelty, a demonstration of power and excessive masculinity, such as the beheadings practised by the Maras, the deadly Salvadoran gangs (Franco, 2013: 225-226). Like torture, a dismembered body is a sign to the community, the authorities, or the intended recipients of the remains that the perpetrators are wanting and willing to defend their reputation for brutality and to use the image of the dismembered body to retain the control of their zones (Tuckman, 2012; Petreca et al., 2020: 889; Franco, 2013: 14). Dismemberment allows the crime scene to be cleared, traces to be covered up, evidence eliminated, and the body can be transported without raising suspicion. It also takes longer for the crime to be investigated (Dogan et al., 2010: 542-544). Dismemberment may be used to hide the identity of the victim, targeting areas such as the face, teeth, and fingers, and any other identifying marks (Petreca et al., 2020: 889). Sometimes people are too scared to go to an area of mutilated bodies to identify them, for fear of their own lives, and they may be denied justice as local laws may prohibit the collection of dead bodies (Guglielmucci, 2020: 559, 561). However, it is not only the living who are violated: the desecration of cadavers exists in revenge killings and other atrocities, which sends a visible message or warning to the community of who is in control (Franco, 2013: 14). This also transfers the legacy of conflict from the public to the private space, leaving family members to deal with the outcomes privately. The dismemberment of the adult child is the main focus in Hernández's story, while Ramos's story is less explicit but more subtly refers to the brutal dismemberment of the Inca leader Túpac Amaru II as one of the choices for death.

In «Manual de hijo muerto», the body of the adult child has been dehumanised through its dismemberment and the identity has been stripped completely, which is the intention of the assassins. Not only is it done this way to make identification of the victim more difficult, but it ends the involvement with the body for the perpetrators; they are now completely disassociated from the person who now does not resemble a complete human being. Children are considered to be innocent and pure, and while the bodies that are

being returned are of an older child of «24-25 years of age» (Hernández, 2007: 107), there is still an implied loss of innocence through this dehumanisation. It is interesting that Hernández uses the term «child» for this age group, even though most parents still call their offspring «my child» or «my children» when they are adults. While Hernández could be reducing the horror for the reader of a younger child's body being dismembered, it is even more horrifying for an adult victim, who would consciously be aware of the brutality they were about to face. In any event, the Manual instructs the parents to reconstruct the child's body and identity for the funeral service to make it appear as «normal» as possible. The «Tip» box directs the parents to lay the pieces out in their original position and to display the body to make it appear that the child is living (2017: 108). They are instructed to sew the pieces together, leaving a two centimetre overlap in case the pieces should come apart when transported or handled (2017: 108). In this way, the parents create a new identity, that of the body of a tortured person. However, it may be difficult for the parents to associate this reconstructed body as that of their child, and they may instead consider it to be another being.

While a dismembered body is an extremely gruesome death for any family to have to cope with and to suffer, it may be a better option than no body at all. According to Franco, a disappeared body is more cruel than public assassination, as the danger is placed in an imaginary world, and the prolonged doubt over time creates fear. Families are left in anguish, in an in-between world, being deprived of a body, a burial, and the mourning process, and they will never forget or forgive: «Ni olvido ni perdón» (Neither forgetting nor forgiveness). Hidden or disappeared bodies have been used by the Latin American military to rid themselves of their opposition without going through formal or legal means (Franco, 2013: 192-193). Disappeared bodies do not talk and cannot testify against their perpetrators, as they are not present and cannot return (Kaminsky, 1993: 25). Families want to bury their dead so that they have a plot to go to mourn their passing and a place to go to remember them. Parents of children who have disappeared, with no trace of their body, yearn to have a body returned to them so that they can bury and mourn the child. Even though the child's death would be considered the worst-case scenario by most people, never having a body or knowledge of their whereabouts is even worse, and the mourning and despair continue infinitely (Franco, 2013: 192-201). In Hernández's story, the adult child was missing for two or three days before the dismembered body was returned to the parents with the Manual. In contrast, in Ramos's story, Samuel's teacher, Dr

Santana, is an allegory of disappeared bodies, as he chose to die as a *disappeared* political dissident.

#### RECONSTRUCTION AND MOURNING

The reconstruction of identity in Hernández's story is an allegory of the proposed reconstruction of El Salvador after the twelve-year civil war ended in 1992. This civil war, backed by the US government, was brutal on many fronts; not only for the great loss of life and human rights violations, especially by death squads, but it also caused malnutrition and misery from failed land practices, which led many people to migrate to the USA (Meade, 2010: 293). The civil war ended with a Peace Agreement between the warring parties, but shortly afterwards, the Salvadorian government passed an amnesty law that gave war criminals immunity from prosecution. This amnesty aimed to reunite the country, but with no prosecution of those who committed war crimes (Moodie, 2010: 5; Keen & Haynes, 2013: 477; Kokotovic, 2014: 55; Sarmiento, 2017: 396). Hernández does not refer to the Salvadorian civil war in her stories *per se*, but instead to the enduring effects of the conflict in the troubled and violent post-war period, that for some was «worse» than the war (Moodie, 2010: 203), subtly and satirically calling attention to the authorities' silence on the subject. By alluding to the silence, evasion, and discounting of the (real) atrocities by the authorities in her home country, Hernández uses the Fantastic and satire to expose the unacknowledged costs of the war and subsequent peace process. By drawing the reader's attention to the return of a dismembered dead body to the parents' home (the private space), and then using the Fantastic, in the form of the absurd, to instruct the parents to «unknow», as Ellen Moodie calls it (2010: 173), how their child became dismembered, to mourn in private and then to forget who and how it was done, exposes the atrocities of the violence in El Salvador and questions the process of national reconciliation when war crimes go unpunished (Kokotovic, 2014: 54-55). But how are people supposed to forget, or forgive? This is, in part, one of the key points of Hernández's story: the clandestine arrival of a body in pieces, but at the same time, most visibly (in parts), with impersonal instructions to reassemble it for burial, then after the burial, to forget who was responsible and how it happened. They are expected to mourn in silence, while it is implied that those who committed the crime will not be caught or punished. The returned mutilated body represents disassociation by the murderers for their actions: there is no longer a person. This incomplete body

has become the Other and it can be wiped easily from the memories of the culprits. The parents must reconstruct the body of their child for burial, but it is a new body, that of a reconstructed being with no identity.

All cultures mourn the dead, and after death mourning is normally considered to be the total restitution of loss (DeMello, 2014: 88-89). Mourning is the mechanism which people use to confront the unbearable weight of their traumatic past, such as those who are left behind after a civil war. Yansi Pérez notes that the violence in Hernández's stories comes from this brutal conflict and aftermath, but that her approach and the memory of this war is unique, as she subverts the mourning through irony, sarcasm and the absurd «(...) as an ethics that attempts to anesthetize» [sic] as the parents try to reconstruct the body of their child using an instruction Manual (Pérez, 2014). In this way, the mourning process is interrupted, stripped of its sensitivity and humanity, and offered to the reader in a grotesque and unemotional way. Pérez adds that in the typical mourning process, there is a process of acceptance of the loss: the acceptance of absence and the recognition that the loss is irreplaceable and cannot be exchanged (Pérez, 2014). The inability for the full mourning process to occur is taken to the absurd level, which can be pivoted back to the Salvadorian history and the civil war and the subsequent period of peace. As the perpetrators of atrocities were not brought to justice, Hernández asks: how do Salvadorans remember and commemorate their dead in a country that has not accounted or held those accountable for the dead, and how to mourn in a country that does not have the mechanisms to confront the past? (Pérez, 2014). Ignacio Sarmiento states that in Salvadorian fiction, mourning may be understood as an unfinished process that challenges the official objectives of healing the wounds of the past and restoring the community. Hernández puts the dead to work and deploys unfinished mourning as a demand for justice for the crimes committed by the state (Sarmiento, 2017: 395, 399).

The presence of cadavers and remains that would normally be buried disrupts the traditional mourning practices and questions their conditions of existence. While death and dismemberment are the complete loss of identity, families choose to keep the identity alive through burials, gravestones, and memorial sites. People mourn when they accept that, through the loss of the deceased, they will also undergo a change and be transformed by the death. Judith Butler posits that there is a transformative effect of the loss of the deceased, and the effects on oneself cannot be planned, no matter how much pre-planning the person may do (2004: 21). Hernández uses irony and sarcasm in her story to completely subvert the mourning process, with the body

returning clandestinely in pieces. The Manual's cold, formulaic instructions to the parents have, according to Yansi Pérez, «stripped the pathos» from the mourning process, while the parents can do «something productive with their loss» (2014) as they reconstruct the body.

In contrast, mourning is not a large part of Ramos's story, although the protagonist appears to be mourning the death of his teacher Dr Santana, in part as he cannot understand why such a conservative man died as a missing rebel or delinquent. Ramos is again subverting cultural norms because when buyers purchase their death of choice, they lose their identity on death as they are dying as someone else. While the story could also be further linked to the «Right to Die» movement, that is, euthanasia or suicide, which is against conservative and religious ideologies, choosing one's own death may be a better option than a possible brutal death by an oppressive regime or a violent vigilante group. With the construction of a new identity, the buyers may wish to make peace with themselves for past wrongs, or to appease a God, or it may be the last act of sensory pleasure to die as a popular figure in history.

#### HUMOUR AND THE FANTASTIC

By using the Fantastic and taking the «real» to the absurd level, Hernández and Ramos mix horror and humour to highlight the suffering of the citizens in their countries. Why then is the reader not appalled by the horror in the two stories? Noël Carroll explains that horror is connected to the violation, problematisation and transgression of society's norms, categories, and concepts. At the same time, incongruous humour is also linked to the problematisation, transgression, and violation of society's norms, as it provides the juxtaposition of contrasting objects or events or merely inappropriate transgressions of these norms (1999: 152-154). While horror and humour are opposites, they both deal with the unexpected, the outrageous, and the grotesque, but in such a way that they provoke different human reactions. Robert Bloch considered that when the reader willingly suspends disbelief, fantasy is discounted as the mix of horror and humour is designed to promote laughter rather than fear or tension (Winter, 1985: 22). This is exactly what both authors have done in their stories. On the one hand, Hernández employs the macabre to inspire sombre reflection while combining humour and horror to make us laugh, and on the other hand, Ramos utilises a light-hearted tone to offset the horrific choices. The double effect of humour and horror makes us laugh at the absurd instruc-

tions of the Manual in Hernández's story, but also reflect sombrely with our conscience about the people who may have lived through such horrors (Hernández Pérez and Morroquín Rivera, 2012: 59-60). The macabre nature of the story, softened by the distanced tone of the narrator, mirrors the distancing of the perpetrators from the outcomes of their violence in El Salvador.

For her part, Ramos has created an imaginary store which offers various deaths for sale. The death choice option of the atomic bomb has two sides: the reader laughs at this unexpected choice of death and that Samuel considers this option, but then the reader contemplates the horror of the actual event, or those like it. While Ramos raises the various atrocities committed by humans against their fellow humans in times of revolution, war, or as crimes of passion, the horror of the death choices is offset by the light-hearted way that Ramos has written the story, especially the non-ceasing politeness of the store assistant, making the selection of a horrific death humorous to the reader. Mary Rothbart argues that exposure to incongruity can create a series of different behavioural responses, including problem-solving, fear and laughter. These stimuli can create either a reaction of fear or laughter, depending on whether there is a perceived threat (Rothbart, 1976: 38-42). In both stories, there is no threat. Hernández's unemotional narrator does not instil fear into the reader, despite narrating about a dismembered body. Likewise, Ramos's death choices are lightened by the willingness of the assistant to display the tapestries and aid the protagonist.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Fantastic, being a «literature of subversion» as Rosemary Jackson calls it (1981: 79), enjoys breaking the real, especially human limits and taboos, and has been used by both authors to an absurd level, to temper but also highlight the gruesome themes of their stories, using humour, satire, and irony. Both authors use narrated stories of torture, dismemberment, and annihilation to denounce the authorities in their countries that permitted crimes such as kidnappings, torture, disappearances, and murder, to largely go unpunished. The stories are political allegories of the horrendous events in their countries during conflict times in the latter half of the twentieth century. These years are the realities in which both Hernández and Ramos grew up, a daily life of violence and fear, either from an oppressive regime, guerrillas, paramilitaries, or foreign armies. While Ramos's story is a non-threatening protest against

the assassinations of revolutionary and political figures in Latin America, as well as colonialism and US imperialism, Hernández has sought to neutralise the effect of her confronting story by converting it into a satirical instruction Manual, parodying and also highlighting the violence in El Salvador.

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