

“(Un)Natural Pairings: Fantastic, Uncanny, Monstrous, and Cyborgian Encounters in
Contemporary Central American and Hispanic Caribbean Literature”

By

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Abstract

Since the turn of the 20th century many writers, playwrights, and poets in Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean have published fantastic, gritty, and oftentimes unsettling stories of ghosts, anthropomorphic animals, zoomorphic humans, and uncanny spaces. These unexpected encounters and strange entities are an embodiment of muddled boundaries and a creation of unsettling and sometimes monstrous myths and fictions. Cultural theorists from Central America and Cuba have associated this kind of literature with a growing culture of disenchantment and cynicism that is rooted in the loss of utopian and egalitarian ideals associated with past revolutionary projects. Through the course of this dissertation, I look beyond cultural disenchantment as I show how many writers—especially women—from Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica) and the Hispanic Caribbean (Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic) have utilized strange, fantastic, and sometimes grotesque elements in their work in order to imagine alternative, utopic futures that challenge gendered hierarchies in society. Traditional dualistic categories that require all-or-nothing identities (of being all good, all bad, all feminine, all masculine, etc.) are broken down in the literature that I explore from both regions. By joining sacred domestic spaces in uncanny environments, mixing the dead with the living, blending animals with humans, and rendering passive women into abject, erotic monsters—these (un)natural pairings contest and contradict naturalized gender and sexual hierarchies by revealing the fluidity of supposedly inherent and fixed boundaries. At the same time, the (un)natural pairings that I explore provide an unlikely and creative space where traditional gender and sexual ideologies are especially foregrounded, which invites the reader to rethink conventional and hierarchal structures of power, especially as they relate to gender in Hispanic Caribbean and Central American societies.

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To Suyapa Dilworth

And to my friends in Honduras,
who continue to believe that change is possible.

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Introduction

Cultures of Disenchantment: Bridging Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean

Since the turn of the 20th century many writers, playwrights, and poets in Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean have published fantastic, gritty, and oftentimes unsettling stories of ghosts, anthropomorphic animals, zoomorphic humans, and uncanny spaces. In these narratives, writers explore taboo subjects regarding rape, menstruation, incest, and castration within unsavory settings like a garbage dump or a cemetery, but also within the familiar space of the traditional home. These unexpected encounters, strange entities, and troubling environments embody muddled boundaries as well as unsettling and sometimes monstrous myths and fictions. This dissertation, a literary and cultural study, examines Central American and Hispanic Caribbean works that were written during what Seymour Menton has called the “Post-Revolutionary Age,”¹ a time period not only marked by skepticism and cynicism, but also by a growing neoliberal environment dominated by transnational interest groups. In recent Central American and Caribbean literary and cultural scholarship, critics have observed expressions of deep-seated disappointment and political exhaustion in contemporary literary works from both regions: firstly, due to the loss of utopian ideals linked to revolutionary projects and, secondly, due to the modernizing neoliberal project that has yielded more social problems and economic disparity.

¹ Menton notes that this period began with the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union along with the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (1990) and the signing of the peace accords in El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1996).

As will be discussed in the chapters that follow, Central American and Hispanic Caribbean literatures display striking cultural commonalities that few scholars have examined. While cultural and literary critics like Beatriz Cortez or Esther Whitfield have observed separate cynical literary perspectives in Central American or Cuban literature, this dissertation contributes to Latin American Literary and Cultural Studies by uncovering a nexus of cultural disenchantment that connects Central America to the Hispanic Caribbean and that speaks to a shared bitter disappointment with the outcome of the recent revolutionary projects. By examining many of the complex social, political, and economic interconnections that exist between Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean, this investigation facilitates a better understanding of the ways in which emerging feelings of hope and disenchantment transcend regional and national boundaries. Also, by making connections across national or regional borders, I seek to chart the reach, magnitude, and urgency of social problems such as sexism and racism, both in Central America and in the Hispanic Caribbean.

By examining the historical connections that link the two regions, this dissertation participates in recent Central American and Hispanic Caribbean scholarship by investigating how many writers—especially women writers—from Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean (primarily Cuba) utilize strange and grotesque literary elements in order to explore alternative, utopic futures that challenge gendered hierarchies in society. Drawing from Raymond Williams's work, this dissertation proposes that intellectuals and artists from the two regions are currently forming similar *structures of feeling*, especially so among women for two principle reasons. First, despite the revolutionary period's promises of social equality, a gendered hierarchy has remained firmly intact in both regions (Shayne 159). Secondly, economic crisis and demands (socialist or neoliberal) in both regions have encouraged women to not only

maintain their femininity, but also to become diligent, sacrificial producers within society (Padilla 6; De la Torre Dwyer 62).

In the literature I analyze, traditional dualistic categories that require all-or-nothing identities (of being all good, all bad, all feminine, all masculine, etc.) are broken down. For example, by joining sacred domestic spaces in uncanny environments, mixing the dead with the living, blending animals with humans, and rendering passive women into abject monsters—these (un)natural pairings contest and contradict naturalized gender and sexual hierarchies by revealing the fluidity of supposedly inherent and fixed boundaries. By embracing the grotesque and the fantastic, female protagonists attempt to evade oppressive patriarchal systems of power. While escape into a fantastic utopia is impossible for real women, the Central American and Caribbean works I examine provide and explore an unlikely and creative space where traditional gender and sexual ideologies are especially foregrounded. Thus, amid a growing culture of disenchantment, the literature analyzed in this dissertation proposes alternate ways of viewing and critiquing the current social and political arrangements within each nation.

While critics have explored fantastic and cynical literary elements throughout Latin American literature, few scholars have focused on how these forms connect Central America to the Hispanic Caribbean (another (un)natural pairing), nor have they extensively analyzed how these literary morphisms and supernatural encounters express regional reactions to disenchantment. My study builds upon the work of theorists like Cortez and Whitfield, who have noted that much of the literature that has emerged from each region expresses a palpable feeling of disenchantment or cynicism. For Central America, the armed conflicts of the 1980s and 90s ended in political stalemates and, as a result, many revolutionaries felt a deep sense of defeatism with social and economic inequalities that had been exacerbated—not resolved—by the violent

conflicts.² Scholars like Misha Kokotovic, Alexandra Ortiz Wallner, and Maureen Shea assert that neoliberal policies in the region are a major reason for disenchantment among Central American writers. The 1990s also proved transformative for Cuban culture and literature as the nation struggled to survive a harsh economic crisis, known as the “Special Period in Time of Peace,” or the Special Period. During this time, the Cuban government employed stringent economic measures that Whitfield has likened to those typically used during times of war, such as cutting energy supplies and rationing certain foods and products (*Cuban Currency* 3). These implementations intensified with the eventual collapse of the Soviet Bloc in December of 1991 as Cuba struggled to survive both physically and ideologically in the worsening economic crisis that followed. As a parallel to the postwar aesthetic found in Central America, the iconic Havana ruins that repeatedly appear in contemporary Cuban literature fittingly correspond to the physical devastation left behind by civil war in countries like Guatemala and El Salvador. As Whitfield notes, various Cuban writers³ have associated Havana’s ruins with war and that there is an inherent attempt to reinstate continuity between the present and the future by evoking Havana as a postwar space in the 1990s: “the ‘post’ reiterates the concern with what comes next” (*Cuban Currency* 140).

² As William Robinson highlights in his book *Transnational Conflicts* (2003), the various revolutionary struggles in Central America actually paved the way for the “full implementation of the project of global capitalism in Central America” (70).

³ For example, Whitfield cites Tania Bruguera’s project *Memoria de la postguerra* (1993), Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s novels from his *Dirty Havana Trilogy* (2001), and Abilio Estévez’s novel *Los palacios distantes* (2002) (140).

Emerging from the advanced stages of globalization, neoliberal capital, growing social unrest, and a postwar mood, a common social experience of disillusionment has taken shape in the last few decades in Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean. I demonstrate how a shared experience of disenchantment has helped shape new structures of feeling among the two regions' artists and intellectuals. The stories analyzed in this study demonstrate how many writers have abandoned the hope that official, political actors will bring about meaningful social change. Nevertheless, this is not to say that the stories explored in this dissertation are expressions of resigned hopelessness. Rather, an implicit hope for change persists as writers construct otherworldly encounters in order to envision new, theoretical solutions that fully depart from traditional ways of thinking by defying strict dualistic notions of social identity and acceptability. In this departure from a normalized logic, readers are invited to imagine alternative ways of *being* in society.

Common Histories and Literary Aesthetics

The common experience of disenchantment shared by Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean is rooted in the intense focus and transnational intervention that both regions received during the Cold War—a focus that was galvanized by the Cuban Revolution's success in December of 1959, which promised to establish a society that would eliminate classes and institute equal rights for racial minorities and women. The Castro brothers' armed uprising against Fulgencio Batista's totalitarian regime not only brought about dramatic social and political transformation within Cuba, but it also inspired revolutionary projects throughout Latin America. In particular, it had a profound impact on its Central American and Caribbean neighbors. As the gap between the disenfranchised poor and the upper classes widened in Central America, the Cuban Revolution inspired revolutionary movements that sought to overthrow

oppressive authoritarian governments in Nicaragua (1961-1978), Guatemala (1960-1996), and El Salvador (1979-1992). Although not all Central American countries experienced civil or revolutionary war in the region (i.e. Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panama), the 1990s are generally considered the postwar years for all of Central America as the armed conflicts spilled over and affected every country in the region to varying degrees (Cortez 25, Perkowska 1-2).

For the Hispanic Caribbean islands, the Cuban Revolution's success in 1959 stimulated processes of decolonialization as nationalist and reformist parties formed in both Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic (Villarreal 83).⁴ As well, in both the Dominican Republic and in Puerto Rico, a growing neoliberal, transnational market economy has aggravated a widening gap between the rich and the poor, similar to the socio-economic reality found in Central America. Moreover, while Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic did not experience revolutionary wars in the latter half of the 20th century (like Honduras and Costa Rica), they have endured over a century of US political intervention and militarization that has profoundly impacted the nations' psyches and a sense of sovereign identity.

⁴ With the fear that Dominican inspired by Castro would takeover their oppressive government, US policymakers overtly intervened and occupied the Dominican Republic during the 1960s (Rabe XXXVI). In US's commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the US covertly worked from 1948 to 1986 with the Puerto Rican government to systemically surveil and interfere with any independence movements that might also be inspired by the 1959 Revolution (Atilés-Osoria "Pro-State Violence"). Also, see Jorge G. Castañeda's chapter "The Cuban Crucible" in *Utopia Unarmed* (1994) and J.M. Atilés-Osoria's essay, "Pro-state Violence in Puerto Rico" (2013).

Therefore, while utopian dreams of egalitarian societies inspired revolutionary projects throughout Latin America in the latter half of the 20th century,⁵ by the 1990s, many felt defeated by persisting social and economic inequalities. Notwithstanding the fact that foreign neoliberal forces have influenced all of Latin America, I contend that the close proximity of Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean to the United States has produced a particular, more acute reaction to the Cold War and US interventionism.⁶ The Cuban Revolution's success panicked many US policymakers who feared that "Castro Communism" would spread from the Caribbean basin to the rest of Latin America (Rabe XXXVI). And, with the United State's considerable influence on global economics (both directly and indirectly), North American policymakers have successfully pressed Latin America to reshape itself into a "free market mold," which has served as a tactic to diminish the communist "threat" in the Western Hemisphere (Weyland 139, "Post Cold War Latin America"). Thus, with the rising influence of transnational capital in the 1990s, utopian dreams of egalitarianism have proven to be incompatible with the competing neoliberal

⁵ As Jorge G. Castañeda notes in *Utopia Unarmed* (1994), a long tradition of taking up arms was seen in the following nations, dating as far back as the 19th century: Villa and Zapata in Mexico, Martí, Mella, and Guiteras in Cuba, Sandino in Nicaragua, Farabundo Martí in El Salvador, peasant uprisings in Colombia, José Figueres in Costa Rica, and countless insurrections in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Haiti (69).

⁶ While Mexico's relationship with and proximity to the United States also reflects a similar, antagonistic dynamic, the Mexican nation's utopic project occurred much earlier in the 20th century, which in turn, has helped shape a very distinct experience, especially in terms of revolutionary ideals and disenchantment.

and transnational forces in Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean, which have taken the form of free trade agreements like DR-CAFTA and of foreign investors in supposedly autonomous NGOs. For Cuba during the 1990s, economic scarcity forced the Revolutionary government to join the global trade market and make “adjustments” to socialist ideologies,⁷ including commodifying its national image and resources for foreign consumption.

In general, the few comparative studies that link Central America to the Hispanic Caribbean tend to focus on either ecological concerns or national legacies of past revolutions.⁸ In terms of literary and cultural studies, the impetus of reading narratives across national borders (rather than regional borders) has been examined at length in various studies of either Central America or the Caribbean. For example, in *Dividing the Isthmus* (2009), Ana Patricia Rodríguez argues for a “transisthmian” approach to the study of Central American narratives by providing

⁷ In particular, the devaluation of the US dollar in 1993 (until 2004) augmented class stratification in its uneven distribution. Also, by encouraging foreign tourism, fewer Cubans enjoyed Cuban resources (i.e. beaches) and private foreign investors became interwoven with Cuban enterprises (Whitfield, *Cuban Currency* 3).

⁸ See Anders Danielson and A. Geske Dijkstra’s *Towards sustainable development in Central America and the Caribbean* (2001); Ingemar Hedström’s *Situación ambiental en Centroamérica y el Caribe* (1989); Don Rojas *One People, One Destiny: the Caribbean and Central America Today* (1988); Félix Ramos’s *Género y cooperativismo en el Caribe y Centroamérica* (1995); the Department of State and Department of Defense’s *The Soviet-Cuban connection in Central America and the Caribbean* (1985); and Francisco López Segrera’s *Cuba y Centroamérica* (1986).

spatial-cultural readings of narratives from nations across the region. By examining both local and global forces that have given shape to Central American narratives, the trope of the “transisthmus” provides an “imaginary and material space” in which to examine larger regional complexities (2). And, in *El arte de ficcionar* (2014), Alexandra Ortiz Wallner makes a similar case for examining the interconnections and dynamics found in Central American narratives published from 1986 to 2006 that reflect literary representations of life experiences within the war and postwar contexts of the region (10). As Ortiz argues, the recognition of the region’s complex interrelationality of social and cultural processes permits a wider and nuanced understanding of the region (17).

In *Hispanic Caribbean Studies*, Antonio Benítez Rojo highlights the importance of searching out the various rhythms, processes, and dynamics that emerge from Caribbean cultures in his foundational work, *La isla que se repite* (1989). As a postmodern critic, Benítez resists easy categories and definitions as he explores how historical, political, and cultural processes repeat chaotically over time in the region, which serves as an approach to examining the complex and heterogeneous space of the Caribbean basin. And, in *Out of Bounds* (2008), Dara E. Goldman approaches the Hispanic Antilles as a transnational entity by examining the repeating trope of *insularismo* in Caribbean cultural productions. Goldman argues that despite the influence of increasing globalization, an insular trope continues to reinforce regional and

national identities in the Caribbean by correlating the physical boundaries of the island with those of the nation.⁹

In terms of a trans-regional analysis, only a scant number of literary comparative studies exist that connect Central America to the Hispanic Caribbean,¹⁰ which includes the 2011 publication *Trans(it)Areas: Convivencias en Centroamérica y el Caribe*. In the volume's introduction, the editors Ottmar Ette, Werner Mackenbach, Gesine Müller, and Alexander Ortiz Wallner point to the critical importance of transareal studies—especially within today's context of expanding globalization. As they examine the connections between Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean, the editors assert that sociocultural spaces need not be understood solely based on traditional historical or territorial limits, but also on the relationships, connections, and movements that bind together spaces of life and social norms. The editors demarcate the two regions as “el *área* circuncaribe:” “una red fragmentada de mundos insulares, así como diversas unidades multilingües y transculturales ubicadas entre la insularidad y tierra firme” (9). As unique and paradoxical spaces of transition, communication, and crossing movements, the editors argue that, rather than simply examine nations or regions within their traditional borders,

⁹ Also, see *Vulnerable States: Bodies of Memory in Contemporary Caribbean Fiction* (2007) by Guillermina de Ferrari and Michael Dash's *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (1998).

¹⁰ See Ann González's *Resistance and Survival: Children's Narrative from Central America and the Caribbean* (2009); Barbara Lafford's *Central America & the Caribbean: Today & Tomorrow* (1987).

it is far more productive to examine the relationships and dynamics that exist between non-traditionally delineated spaces in order to better understand those spaces (10).

Building upon the notion of a “transareal” study proposed by Ette, Mackenbach, Müller, and Ortiz in *Trans(It)Areas*, I pay particular attention to the historical parallels that exist between the two regions of Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean in order to examine common cultural manifestations of disenchantment as well as explore the ways in which writers from both regions—especially women writers—take on taboo, macabre, fantastic, and abject themes in unique ways in order to contest naturalized social ideologies. While these taboo and fantastic elements are, in part, expressions of cynicism and disenchantment with failed revolutionary projects and current neoliberal realities, I argue that these discourses are not expressions of complete hopelessness, but rather, they are a means to alter, destabilize, and reconstruct the logical, naturalized reality in which they live. As a result, this destabilization of reality opens a space to rethink traditional gender and sexual ideologies.

Examining unsettling, fantastic, gritty, and abject stories, I build upon the work of cultural theorists like Beatriz Cortez who, in her book *La estética de cinismo* (2010), has identified a recurrent “aesthetic of cynicism” as one manifestation of disenchantment in Central American postwar literature. Cortez explores how, in a new environment of disenchantment with failed utopic projects, gritty and macabre fiction is emerging from Central America that tries to “poner en evidencia la inexactitud de las versiones oficiales de la realidad centroamericana” (27). Much of the disenchanted literature that develops from Central America focuses on the disconnection between the actual state of affairs as expressed by many writers and an official state version of certain topics like war, security, poverty, neoliberalism, gender identity, and cultural/national unity (to name a few).

I also draw from scholars of contemporary Cuban literature like Jorge Fornet and Esther Whitfield who have established a common tendency of disenchantment in literature produced after the Revolution. In *Los nuevos paradigmas* (2006), Fornet describes a “poética de desencanto” as a literary characteristic of the Cuban generation born before the Revolution in 1959. He states that this tendency “tiene un final más o menos previsible; todo desencanto presupone tanto la creencia como la extinción de la fe en una utopía” (90). Thus, for Fornet, disenchantment is a product of disillusionment with utopic projects that were never achieved by the Cuban Revolution. Examining writers born after 1959, Whitfield takes Cuban disenchantment a step further in her essay “A Literature of Exhaustion” (2011). Whitefield explains how Cuban literature from the Special Period gave way to a new cultural tendency that surpassed the “poetics of disenchantment” that Fornet describes and became more related to a general exhaustion of hope or political involvement.¹¹

While I examine the contributions of both men and women writers, I pay special attention to women writers’ disenchantment, as it is typically linked to oppression based on difference

¹¹ Whitfield appropriates the phrase “literature of exhaustion” from John Barth, highlighting that “[e]xhaustion marks both the mood and the dissemination of post-‘special period’ writing. Having abdicated from the frenzied interpersonal encounters and the conflicts between Revolutionary ideals and market forces that marked the 1990s, characters emerge today in a state of physical and ideological depletion” (“A Literature of Exhaustion: Cuban Writing and the Post-‘Special Period.’” 27). In John Barth’s article, “The Literature of Exhaustion” (published in *The Atlantic* in 1967), the author discusses the manner in which the modes of literary representation have been exhausted by their excessive use.

between genders and sexualities. Additionally, my dissertation examines primary texts that, in general, are typically understood as marginal or incidental works within US or Latin American academia. Some of these texts have not been widely read outside of Central America or Cuba due in part to gender (i.e. the challenge for women writers to be taken seriously by publishers or readers), but also because of the peripheral geographic regions from which they emerge. For Central America in particular, the lack of a robust publishing industry and limited means for authors to disseminate their work has also contributed to many authors' peripheral status. In my own approach, I engage with authors who have been embraced by critics and also examine the contributions of lesser known texts and authors in order to forge a rich comparative analysis. In particular, I engage with the Central American writers Francisco Ayala Silva, Claudia Hernández, Fernando Contreras Castro, Lucía Escobar, Patricia Belli, Laura Fuentes, Horacio Castellanos Moya, Jacinta Escudos, Rocío Tábora, Marta Susana Prieto, and Lety Elvir and the Cuban writers Ena Lucía Portela, Ana Lydia Vega Serova, and Daína Chaviano, all of whom engage with extraordinary and supernatural encounters that speak to a profound disillusionment with unmet promises of egalitarianism from the revolutionary period, which refers to the years following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 until approximately 1991 with the Sandinista's electoral defeat in Nicaragua.

Looking at historical parallels between the regions, this dissertation focuses specifically on literary works that speak to women's roles within this nexus of cultural disenchantment. In the armed conflicts that arose in Cuba, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador, many women shared in the experience of being actively recruited to fight and work alongside men. However, in the postwar years many women felt an intense sense of disenchantment with the gendered hierarchies that remained firmly intact in each country and with the economic crises and

demands that have encouraged them to become sacrificial workers within society (Shayne 159; Padilla 6; De la Torre Dwyer 62). So, while women were urged to change for the benefit of the nation, they saw little change in the gendered divisions of power that existed before in each revolution. As a result, this common experience of *desencanto* has helped shape new structures of feeling, which alludes to a developing feeling or sentiment that arises from shared social experience (such as women's participation in revolution and, later, their disenchantment with it). This in turn, gives way to "emergent expressions:" formations of alternative meanings and values that are produced outside of the dominant culture that foster the creation of new cultural forms (Williams 123). I identify one such structure of feeling among Cuban and Central American women who are coming to grips with the hierarchal gender roles that persist in a post-revolutionary society. In each of the following chapters, I explore how various women writers from both regions have published fantastic and bizarre literature that breaks ties with "reality" in order to critique the status quo and/or to creatively imagine alternative conceptual ways of framing gender identity within each society. The literary narratives that I explore therefore provide a critical exploration of traditional structures of patriarchal power that maintain and reinforce gender hierarchies and male-dominated politics in each country.

Unfinished Revolutions and (Re)productive Women in Neoliberal and Globalized Markets

Many Central American and Cuban women's initial desire to join the revolutionary causes had little to do with interests in gender equality, but rather with a desire to help generate fundamental socio-economic change and to overthrow oppressive authoritarian governments. Regardless of these initial impetuses, many women found their lives profoundly and inevitably transformed by the experience of revolution. In *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution* (2004), Karen Kampwirth asserts that Central American "[f]eminists were not born, they were created"

(8). In particular, she affirms that these feminists were produced from the armed and unarmed social struggles that took place in the region from the 1960s until the mid 1990s. Kampwirth notes three principal elements that helped to “create” feminists within post-revolutionary contexts. She explains that the ideological impact of the egalitarian principles of revolution inspired women; also, after participating in war, many women felt newly empowered to also do something about gender inequality within their society; and finally, women had access to networks that were already in place from which to mobilize (6).

Despite the ubiquitous presence of official rhetoric that extolled gender equality amongst all *compañeros*, most conventional gendered structures of power persisted in Central America and Cuba after the revolutions. Julie Shayne writes in *The Revolution Question* (2004): “Despite the fact that women played countless roles in the movement, their tasks were very much influenced by an identifiable, gendered division of labor” (126). As Ilja Luciak and Lorraine Bayard de Volo both affirm, traditional gender roles, binaries, and hierarchies securely stayed in place throughout the various revolutions that occurred in Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala for the vast majority of women who participated in the armed conflicts. As fighting intensified, women were recruited and encouraged to leave the domestic space of the home, but even as some women found themselves working alongside men as activists and armed militants, many gendered norms stayed in place. Bayard de Volo points out that war tends to reinforce gender inequality by emphasizing and prioritizing masculine qualities to familiar binary divisions, such as strength over weakness, toughness over tenderness, action over passivity, and, in general, the masculine over the feminine (415). By adjusting to a masculine norm, women were encouraged by male revolutionaries to set aside the supposedly weak qualities of femininity to participate as active, strong militants. Once the wars were over, however, women were

expected to return to their traditional roles of mothers and caretakers. Therefore, Central America's armed conflicts from the past century only temporarily disturbed culturally established gendered binaries that relegated women to a private, feminine space and men to a public, masculine space. Looking back at the past 50 years, Shayne asserts that there has been a "virtual failure of revolutions of the twentieth century to address women's issues in any substantial and effective way" (159). As a result, in the postwar years many Central American women felt an intense sense of disenchantment: despite the revolutions' promises of social equality, women began to see that these ideals did not necessarily include gender equality (Shayne 159).

For Cuba, the Revolution's unparalleled success in bringing about dramatic civil rights reform led many Cuban men and women to assume that gender equality had already been achieved and that feminism was a divisive and redundant movement. Shayne emphasizes that during the 1990s, feminism was perceived as "an unnecessary distraction since a classless society theoretically creates equality for all" (150). The idea that gender equality was a non-issue after the Cuban Revolution was also supported by the creation of certain laws by the Castro-government in the 1970s, through laws like the Family Code that stipulated that "family relations should be based on love, respect, and shared responsibilities" (Shayne 141). However, the enforcement of such laws remained unaddressed, as they were primarily symbolic. Luciak warns that policies like the Family Code have led to an exaggerated sense of "the country's achievements regarding substantive gender equality" (105: 2007). In effect, these kinds of exaggerations, along with a governmental intolerance for any challenges to authority, have in large part helped thwart a cohesive independent women's movement in Cuba (Luciak 104-05; 2007). As the former FMC president and founder Vilma Espín acknowledges: "without a real

revolution in the family, the socialist revolution cannot be completed or consolidated” (76).¹² As reflected in popular Cuban films produced after the Revolution like *Lucía* (1968) and *Retrato de Teresa* (1979),¹³ many Cuban women would find such radical changes within the family both problematic and elusive.

By and large, traditional hierarchies of power remain in place as women in Cuba and Central America continue to find themselves excluded from positions of power within the political parties that have “reformatted” the new governments. While what it means to be a feminist differs greatly from country to country, common concerns about improving women’s representational powers are universal in each country. In a 1994 interview, Sandinista and feminist Sofía Montenegro explains how feminism threatened the exceedingly *machista*

¹² Espín was the founder of the governmentally supported Federación de Mujeres Cubanas. She was the organization’s president from its inception in 1960 until her death in 2007.

¹³ In *Retrato de Teresa*, director Pastor Vega explores the “portrait” of a woman who not only manages and cares for her home, husband, and children, but also maintains a factory job and is an active revolutionary member. The double standards that exists between husband and wife finally lead Teresa to leave her unfaithful husband in the end, which reflects one expression of the desire for autonomy from a gendered system that does not serve women. Also significant to the role of gender in Cuban cinema, the popular film *Lucía* (1968) by director Humberto Solás depicts the “evolution” of gender relations in three different stories from different time periods (all with female protagonists named “Lucía”). The last story, which takes place after the Revolution’s victory, ambiguously ends without resolving the fate of the last Lucia, indicating the challenge or improbability of changing hard-ingrained beliefs about gender relations in Cuba.

revolutionary movement in Nicaragua and its claim to male privilege: “Even when the men are fighting against class privileges of every kind, in their heart of hearts they are not prepared to give up their [male] privileges, however revolutionary they might otherwise be” (174). Her assertion illustrates a common, transareal sentiment that highlights the incompatibility of gendered hierarchies with egalitarian ideals. As Yajaira Padilla notes in her essay “Setting *La diabla* Free” (2008), many women writers have responded by presenting common threads of particular discourses that challenge and subvert hegemonic ideals of female subjectivity, gender roles, and notions of power. Drawing from theorists like Padilla, Cortez, and Rodríguez who have specifically noted Central American women’s *desencanto* with the failure of revolutionary projects, I highlight how a common disenchantment has shaped new structures of feeling among women writers in both Central America and Cuba. As part of an outward manifestation of these new structures of feeling, I follow the ways in which various writers critique the social status quo and propose conceptual (and oftentimes bizarre) ways of envisioning a new social order that transcends hegemonic patriarchal ideologies regarding gender.

In many of the Central American and Cuban works examined in this dissertation, neoliberal and capitalist policies are depicted as one form of structural patriarchal power.¹⁴ In *Feminism without Borders* (2003), Third World feminist Chandra Mohanty explains how

¹⁴ Misha Kokotovic points out in “Neoliberal Noir,” that not even Cuba was immune to a globalizing market in the 1990s. He writes: “Even in Cuba... the Mario Conde series of novels by Leonardo Padura Fuentes criticize the corruption of Cuban society and the erosion of revolutionary values produced by the Cuban state’s engagement with transnational capitalism after the collapse of the Soviet Union” (15-16).

neoliberal policies stifle revolutionary ideals through the naturalization of liberal-market thinking, which places importance on a producer/consumer relationship binary that is dissociated from more humanitarian, democratic principles (143). Thus according to Mohanty, global capitalism helps to foster antidemocratic processes that deprive certain disadvantaged individuals (namely, women and minorities) of an equal-representative system. In Central America, William Robinson highlights in his book *Transnational Conflicts* (2003), that by the time a weary “stalemate” had been reached at the end of the 1980s and 1990s revolutions, the social and economic inequalities that delineated Central American societies prior to the conflicts had only been intensified, which is a trend that continues today (70). Rather than promote social equality, Robinson states that the various revolutionary struggles in Central America have actually paved the way for the “full implementation of the project of global capitalism in Central America” (70). Even in socialist Cuba, liberalized economic policies have gradually been implemented since the Special Period.¹⁵ According to Joseph de la Torre Dwyer, socialist Cuba has begun transitioning toward a more liberalized economy, especially since Raul Castro’s rise to leadership in 2008 (222-23).

Susan A. Berger affirms that while global restructuring has helped open more democratic spaces for women’s groups, its neoliberal policies have also encouraged these groups to “become

¹⁵ Since the Special Period, some examples include the 1993 legalization of the US dollar, liberalization of agricultural trade, and the opening of the tourist trade within Cuba, which has indirectly encouraged the commodification of women’s bodies through prostitution. A more recent consequence of market-oriented liberalization is the decentralization of managerial authority, which allows men in power to discriminate more effectively (de la Torre Dwyer 217).

the helpmate of the state in imposing its neoliberal agenda” (2). For example, Berger points out that globalizing forces use women as convenient representatives for restructuring gender roles under new neoliberal policies. Therefore, many women serve in traditional roles as mothers, healthcare providers, teachers, social workers, and heads of households in order to help those suffering from neoliberal government cut-backs, thus inadvertently reinforcing globalization’s “gendered relations of domination” (5). In concordance with Berger, de la Torre Dwyer clarifies that it is not simply economic liberalization per se that is harmful to women, but “the pursuit and construction of an economy that corresponds to male life, work, leisure, and other patterns of male desire” (223).

Women and minorities are therefore oftentimes those who suffer the most from global capitalism due to the manner in which patriarchal and racist ideologies are inscribed within it, reinforcing traditional gender expectations. As Shea argues, new economic realities in Central America have effectively thwarted the revolutionary project by choking “los valores e ideales revolucionarios por los cuales tanto [las mujeres] sacrificaron” (“Narradoras combatientes en la literatura centroamericana”). In Cuba during the Special Period, the Revolutionary government endorsed a similar attitude toward the (re)productiveness of women (both in and outside of the home). As Johana I. Moya Fábregas notes, Cuba’s revolutionary government has worked to construct an image of womanhood that centers on traditional domestic characteristics (such as those attributed to the mother and the wife), while also making women useful “producers” within the Revolution (62). Helen Hernández Hormilla states in *Mujeres en crisis* (2011) how, especially during the Special Period, women were expected to become highly productive and creative caretakers in order for their families to survive the economic crisis: “La identidad femenina vuelve a ser sacrificada desde el rol de madre—esposa, por lo que la presencia de un

modelo de feminidad estático, en el cual la realización espiritual de la mujer no se corresponde con las exigencias culturales, clama por ser sustituido” (113, 149). As Padilla notes in her book *Changing Women, Changing Nations* (2012), neoliberalism makes a similar attempt at “molding” the ideal woman for economic needs: “[u]nder neoliberalism, the stressing of women’s domestic duties as wives and mothers has remained paramount and is a telling development given the rise in Salvadoran women’s participation as ‘reproducers’ in the national and global labor markets” (6). Thanks in large part to liberalized markets, globalization, and economic necessity many women have taken on the “double shift” of working in and outside of the traditional home space, making it that much more difficult for women to incorporate themselves into the policy-making positions of power that men have historically and currently dominate.

Fantasy and *Desencanto* in Central American and Cuban Narratives

As one expression of a shared experience of disillusionment, various Central American and Cuban writers utilize fantastic literary elements in order to explore and critique gender equality in each respective country. The Bulgarian-French philosopher Tzvetan Todorov proposes three distinctions of fantastic fiction, including the fantastic,¹⁶ the uncanny,¹⁷ and the

¹⁶ Todorov defines the fantastic as “that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25).

¹⁷ Todorov explains that the uncanny is produced when the laws of nature stay intact and permit an explanation of the phenomenon described (41).

marvelous.¹⁸ Todorov, who advanced such ideas at mid-century, is oftentimes credited with providing the theoretical foundation to future theorists of fantastic literature. Building upon Todorov's concepts, Víctor Bravo, Lucie Armitt, and Jesús Roderó belong to the more contemporary group of theorists who highlight the subversive and transgressive nature of the genre. In regional terms, Roderó notes the difficulty of categorizing the fantastic within a Latin American context where the genre has been further complicated by literary movements that created *el realismo mágico* and *lo real maravilloso*. In a general sense, Roderó asserts that—despite how the fantastic fuels a wide diversity of definitions and theories—most studies agree that the fantastic, at its core, is a genre that questions reality, its limits, and the empirical presumptions that govern our understanding of the world (86).¹⁹ Armitt similarly argues that the literary field of the fantastic has lost a lot of ground due to squabbling over definitions and labels, rather than investigating more profoundly its possibilities. Along these lines, this dissertation does not try to systemically categorize the fantastic in a structural way. Instead, I will approach the fantastic broadly, seeking to understand how it can, in diverse ways, question and subvert fixed notions of normative social ideals that, for example, regulate gendered performances or delineate normative gendered spaces.

¹⁸ According to Todorov, the marvelous occurs when a person decides that new laws of nature must be accounted for to understand the phenomenon (41).

¹⁹ Similarly, in *Unraveling the Real* (2010), Cynthia Duncan also describes fantastic fiction as “a subversive type of literature that calls attention to the indeterminacy of man’s relationship to a universe that he has so systematically attempted to order and bring under control” (200).

By disrupting traditional understandings of normalcy and perversion (or notions of natural and unnatural states), female protagonists are provided with a new conceptual space to explore and grapple with self-determination and empowerment. Furthermore, the joining of the grotesque with the fantastic (in the form of uncanny, ghostly, monstrous, or bizarre, figures or environments) can be used for destabilizing traditional understandings of reality. Additionally, this strategy of destabilization functions as a conceptual blueprint to imagine change within society. In *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic* (2003), Armitt affirms the possibilities of a grotesque utopia that can be constructed from a feminist perspective. By coupling utopianism with the grotesque, Armitt describes this “oxymoron” as an “anti-establishment carnival force, which, in its excess, forms the epitome of all that most threatens order” (16). The grotesque utopia therefore calls for the disruption of normative lifestyles in order to transform or manipulate traditional, patriarchal narratives (that define what is socially acceptable or not) into something new.

Women writers of the fantastic are particularly important to the goal of challenging normative lifestyles and national narratives that depend on such normativity because, according to Duncan, “what sets women’s writing apart from similar [fantastic] texts produced by men is an insistence on viewing the events narrated from a distinctly feminine point of view and on speaking (or writing) in a way that addresses women’s frustration with a system that has for so long worked to exclude them” (181). For example, in the introduction to *Writing Women in Central America* (2003), Laura Barbas-Rhoden describes how various Central American writers like Claribel Alegría, Gioconda Belli, Rosario Aguilar, and Tatiana Lobo end up supplementing, appending, and accounting for marginalized, peripheral perspectives as they rework official versions of national history (12). In Cuba, women writers like Daína Chaviano, Chely Lima, and

Elaine Vilar also employ strong female protagonists in stories that mix science fiction with magical elements and fantastic encounters in order to destabilize notions of fixed or naturalized realities.

Working from Fernet's "poética de desencanto," Whitfield's literature of exhaustion, and Cortez's "estética de cinismo," this dissertation thus engages with Central American and Cuban cultural productions that not only reveal a pervasive attitude of disenchantment, but that also challenge clear cut understandings of reality, producing a hybrid, critical space of uncertainty (and thus new conceptual possibilities) for readers through the fantastic. This uncertainty is produced via one central facet to the fantastic and uncanny literature that I explore; by blending "unnatural" pairs (or dualistic categories), the narratives examined become a subversive method of disturbing reality or the status quo.

Women Writing in Central America and Cuba

In the hierarchy of gender relations and literary canons, it is not surprising that women's works tend to be neglected in academic circles—this is even less surprising for women's literature that has been published within Central America and Cuba. In Central America, due to scant economic resources and local publishing houses, only a limited number of publications surface from the region each year and priority is usually given to male writers.²⁰ In Cuba, it was not until the Special Period in the '90s when magazines and anthologies led to an "explosion" of feminine writing, an occurrence that contrasted with the male-dominated literature of the 1970s and '80s in Cuba (Campuzano, "Introduction: Cuban Women Writing Now" 9). As a result,

²⁰ See Jaramillo and Chambers's introduction to *Contemporary Short Stories from Central America* (1994).

many women writers from Central America and Cuba have been emboldened by the recent times of economic crisis and patriarchal oppression. In her introduction to an anthology of short stories by Cuban women, *Open Your Eyes and Soar* (2003), Luisa Campuzano asserts that in the 1990s in Cuba, *los años duros* (or the “Special Period in Time of Peace”) actually promoted the appearance of more female writers (13). She suggests that during such severe times of economic crisis and instability for women, the patriarchal nature of society becomes exacerbated and thus, women have a greater need to find a voice and avoid silence. Campuzano’s logic is transferrable to the similar situation of economic and social instability in Central America. As one positive consequence of neoliberal policies, there has been an emergence of resistance by new women writers. Common experiences of adversity give women writers a similar goal: to make evident how gendered injustice, inequality, and violence are played out in each respective culture.

It is only until recently that literary canons from Central America and Cuba have opened to representations of diverse, emergent voices, including that of contemporary women writers. For example, Campuzano claims that during the 1970s and ’80s, Cuban literature did not enjoy the same abundance of women’s writings that had appeared in other Latin American national literatures. Nevertheless, the dramatic economic changes in Cuba in the early 1990s not only impacted the material production of literature,²¹ but it also had a democratizing effect on the

²¹ As Catherine Davies notes, due to the austerity measures of the Castro government in the 1990s, all publishing that was not absolutely necessary came to a halt in Cuba (223).

artistic community.²² Campuzano writes that in the mid 1990s “an explosion of feminine narrative writing occurred that now, as the 21st century begins, has become one of the outstanding features of contemporary Cuban literature” (“Introduction: Cuban Women Writing Now” 9). Olga Marta Pérez, in the introduction to the short story anthology *Espacios en la isla* (2008), affirms: “La eclosión de los noventa en la literatura escrita por mujeres constituyó un gran fenómeno que no solo marcó una solidez en nuestra literatura, sino también marcó un punto importante de permanencia, autenticidad, [y] laboriosidad...” (6) In the 1990s in Cuba, groups of academics, writers, and artists began to organize programs and action plans in order to stimulate the growth of gender awareness (Campuzano, “Introduction: Cuban Women Writing Now” 10). As a result of this impulse, innovative literary magazines and anthologies dedicated to women writers appeared, allowing for more diverse female voices to be heard in the island.²³

Similarly in Central America, revolution helped to incite an increase of cultural productions from the 1970s until the mid 1990s. As Barbas-Rhoden notes, the revolutionary

²² In *Literary Culture in Cuba* (2012), Parvathi Kumaraswami and Antonio Kapcia demonstrate how the disappearance of institutional presses and a move toward more-local publishing effectively relaxed expectations for authors: this partially freed authors from their obligations to the público lector, the nation, and the state, which in turn, opened up opportunities for a diversity of writers (135).

²³ Campuzano cites *Alguien tiene que llorar* (1995) and *Estatuas de sal* (1996) as two particular anthologies that opened up new topics relating to the feminine condition and that employed new narrative syntax. Also, she mentions two magazines, *Temas* (1996) and *Unión* (1997), which dedicated issues to Cuban women and women’s cultural production (10).

movements sparked a politically engaged “artistic exuberance,” which initiated a new cultural boom that brought about literary innovation (4).²⁴ Nevertheless, a movement of solidarity among female artists is somewhat less evident in the region, but even so, more and more women writers are not only appearing in anthologies for women writers and poets, but there has also been a dramatic increase in the publication of woman novelists.²⁵ Additionally, many writers are taking advantage of the Internet in order to post literary blogs that feature their work, including Lucía Escobar, one of the authors discussed in this dissertation.²⁶ In his introduction to *Huellas ignotas* (2003), an anthology of short stories for Central American women writers, Willy O. Muñoz asserts that there now exists a new “illustrious group” of female writers who are “revolutionizing the values and social hierarchies within fiction” (XVII). Muñoz calls for a “rigorous revision” of the Central American canon, stating that certain talented writers must be included, such as Jessica Masaya Portocarrero, Aída Toledo, Claudia Hernández, and Lety Elvir, among many

²⁴ Barbas-Rhoden defines this cultural boom as a political and artistic response by the Leftist movements that were vying for power in the late 1960s until the signing of the Peace Accords in Guatemala in the early 1990s; she includes primitivist painting, exteriorismo poetry, testimonial and documentary novels as expressions of the boom (4).

²⁵ See the two-volume set *Huellas ignotas de cuentistas centroamericanas* (1890-1990; 1991-2005). Also, see *Mujeres que cuentan* (2000) and *Antología de cuentistas hondureñas* (2003). Also, Barbas-Rhoden notes that Claribel Alegría, Gioconda Belli, Tatiana Lobo, and Rosario Aguilar are representative of the “general explosion of women’s writing” in Central America (8).

²⁶ Escobar maintains a literary and political blog called “Mujer bonita es la que lucha” at <http://lasotrasluchas.blogspot.com/>.

others who have been overlooked due to their gender (XVII). In this sense, the recent surge of female representation within literary circles and magazines in Cuba and Central America is largely indebted to a new activism or consciousness among writers that promotes investigations into how gender functions in culture and everyday realities.

In the chapters that follow, I focus on how writers question and unsettle distinct structures of power that have helped construct a traditional patriarchal system. By embracing the abject, the grotesque, the uncanny, and the fantastic, female protagonists work to exit a normative social order and distance themselves from oppressive patriarchal ideologies regarding gender. Each chapter offers a discussion on the intersections of gender with history, space, female Otherness, and essentialism. Ultimately, the questioning of these structures generates a larger social critique of Central American and Cuban society.

Many ideologies regarding essentialist notions about gender and race are reinforced by official, hegemonic versions of national histories. In the first chapter, “Ghostly Haunts of Endless Violence in Francisco Ayala Silva’s *Mujer de las aguas* and Daína Chaviano’s *El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre*,” I explore how enigmatic and fearsome spirits from Christian, African, and indigenous traditions tell alternate versions to official national histories through highly gendered and racialized perspectives. In the Salvadoran play *Mujer de las aguas* (1995) by Francisco Ayala Silva and in the Cuban novel *El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre* (1998) by Daína Chaviano, I explore how these works, through the fictionalization of history, reveal and critique the ways in which hegemonic national discourses frame as well as help perpetuate deep-seated gender and racial ideologies in contemporary times. Engaging with Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters* (2008), I examine how each works’ ghosts not only serve as evidence of the connectedness of time but they also help to make sense of how complex national histories inform

gendered or racial discrimination in the present by contributing to (and sometimes subverting) a nation's cultural memory. In these stories, ghosts are as much about the future as they are about the past: the nation's future depends on a nuanced understanding of the past.

In addition to history, space can also serve as another form of structural power that reinforces patriarchal ideologies. As women are traditionally relegated to passive, domestic spaces, and men to active, public spaces—these gender-delineated spheres ultimately help shape symbolic social orders and gender hierarchies. In the second chapter, “Uncanny Domestic Spaces in Contemporary Costa Rican and Cuban Literature,” I draw from Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject and Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny in order to examine two narratives that blend uncanny, unfamiliar elements within the traditional, familiar space of the home in order to question and critique patriarchal ideology that relegates women to a passive, static space. In the short story “Al fondo del cementerio” (1999) by Cuban Ena Lucía Portela, two abandoned and incestuous siblings defend their solitary lifestyle in a cemetery and, in the novel *Única mirando al mar* (1993) by Costa Rican Fernando Contreras Castro, a community of *buzos* (trash pickers), make a new life for themselves within the confines of a stinking, overflowing garbage dump. Through death, decay, and human waste, the grotesque domestic spaces in each story are not only manifestations of social and political disenchantment, but they also highlight how traditional “spheres of influence” have served as one patriarchal structure of power that has relegated many women to a secondary, passive role in society. Furthermore, by disrupting the normative domestic spaces with ruin and abjection, female protagonists are afforded the opportunity to not only see the social-constructedness of gendered roles and spaces but also to imagine new ways of being and inhabiting the domestic sphere.

Gender hierarchies are not only found in physical space, but also in essentialist notions regarding sexual behaviors that depict men as sexually active and women as sexually passive. In the third chapter, “Erotic, Abject Others: Expressions of Feminine Autonomy in Central American and Cuban Short Fiction,” I explore literary expressions of feminine autonomy that defy this active/passive binary in contemporary, post-war literature from Nicaragua and Guatemala and Special-Period literature from Cuba. In each of the three short stories, “La muchacha que no fuma los sábados” (1999) by Cuban Ana Lidia Vega Serova, “El hechizo” (2009) by Nicaraguan Patricia Belli, and “Mis noches de luna llena” (2000) by Guatemalan Lucía Escobar, the female protagonists resist conventional social expectations for women by reappropriating and exaggerating two traditionally ascribed female characteristics: eroticism and Otherness. As literary expressions of feminine autonomy, female protagonists make themselves into abject, monstrous beings in order to momentarily exit traditional and hegemonic narratives that are typically attributed to women. Moreover, this intentional Otherness serves as the basis of the authors’ critical commentary on gender relations as it also speaks to the evolving situation of autonomous women’s groups in each country. Drawing upon theory from Honduran theorist Blanca Guifarro and from Audre Lorde’s foundational text on the erotic, I explore how eroticism is adopted in each story as an empowering drive that advocates rebellion and a rejection of victimization, and works alongside uncanny and deviant representations of women, which directly relate to Kristeva’s theory of the abject. Within these parameters, I demonstrate how eroticism and abjection intertwine to advocate for a feminine autonomy that is established through intentional female Otherness: a defiant reaction to women’s continual exclusion from power, despite past egalitarian rhetoric that pledged to radically restructure society.

And finally, I also explore traditional, patriarchal notions that equate women with an essentialist affinity toward the “inferior” feminine categories of nature (instead of civilization) and emotion (in place of logic or intelligence). In this final chapter, “The Natural Cyborg: Visions of a Gynocentric Utopia in Salvadoran and Honduran Literature,” I demonstrate how animal/human morphisms (or, to use Donna Haraway’s term, *cyborgs*) are employed in Salvadoran and Honduran literature as either a social critique of society or as a radical, utopian solution. Disillusioned with repressive social gender hierarchies, I explore how various Central American women writers work to disclose how the endless cycles of violence and human rights abuses in the region are perpetrated in large part by male-dominated social politics. Through the lens of Haraway’s cyborg theory, this chapter examines the ways in which the Salvadoran writers Horacio Castellanos Moya and Jacinta Escudos and the Honduran writers Lety Elvir and Roció Tábora offer a social critique and/or a discursive, symbolic solution to the region’s cyclical violence by writing stories about female protagonists who exit a male-dominated order in search of a gynocentric, natural utopia. With this symbolic exit, the writers not only make an overarching critique of gender hierarchies and discrimination in Central American society, but they also point to the need to reimagine and restructure traditional gender dynamics. By employing “natural” cyborgs (animal-human entities), these writers draw attention to normative notions of gender difference while also inscribing new meanings of power into traditional concepts of femininity. As these writers appropriate and celebrate selective normative Western feminine characteristics, their work recasts women and women’s roles as uniquely productive, powerful, and crucial to the region’s future.

Each chapter of this dissertation shows how emergent structures of feeling have prompted women writers to create an abstract space to rethink traditional gender and sexual ideologies and

to conceptually reformat traditional structures of power in Central American and Hispanic Caribbean society. Writers from both regions typically utilize a grotesque and somber tone as they address a myriad of themes such as incest, abortion, suicide, murder, sexuality, and cyclical, historical violence in order to magnify, critique, and offer new, radical solutions of social reform in each region. This dissertation thus examines socially constructed beliefs about gender and sexuality through a literary and socio-cultural lens. In this manner, I argue that uncanny environments, supernatural encounters, natural cyborgs, and abject women all serve as manifestations of a pervasive culture of disenchantment with the unmet revolutionary goals of social equality and/or economic and political stability.

An examination of these trans-areal connections provides a more complete understanding of a common literary sensibility, while also calling attention to lesser-known, younger voices that are currently appearing in print in Central American and Cuban literature. My comparative project seeks to reveal how the privileging of dualistic thinking promotes injustices, especially between different genders and sexualities. By exploring the in-between spaces (amid reality and fantasy, human and animal, the “normal” and the uncanny), new possibilities for unforeseen coalitions can be established as new “couplings,” as Donna Haraway calls them, forge innovative methods that aren’t founded on a recycled violent past, but rather a hopeful and radical new future. In a sense, the (un)natural pairings serve as an unusual and inventive tool of resistance that promotes a new vision for a revolutionary departure from patriarchal and/or capitalist cycles that dominate and abuse traditionally “inferior” individuals, thus underlining the challenging, yet crucial need for reimagining our worlds. It is my hope that this work will contribute to a richer understanding and awareness of Cuban and Central American social movements, literature, and culture, especially as they relate to gender and sexuality.

Chapter One: Ghostly Haunts of Endless Violence in Francisco Ayala Silva's *Mujer de las aguas* and Dáina Chaviano's *El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre*

In *Ghostly Matters* (2008), Avery Gordon states: “Haunting always harbors the violence, the witchcraft and denial that made it, and the exile of our longing, the Utopian” (208). If ghosts are born out of violence or denial, perhaps it is no wonder that the supernatural is typically associated with evil, terror, and revenge. But, as Gordon assures us, ghosts also harbor “the Utopian,” meaning ghosts may help us recognize and thus avoid the mistakes of the past in order to generate a better future. As Gordon writes: “[the ghostly haunt] gives notice that something is missing—that what appears to be invisible or in the shadows is announcing itself...” (15). In death, marginalized figures in history are given a voice and a second chance to tell their own stories. These peripheral or missing stories are oftentimes the key to identifying social injustices and to making amends to promote a more inclusive, just society. Ghostly haunts serve as active forms of remembering in that a ghost’s presence has the ability to challenge hegemonic “cultural memory” (the lived or generally accepted national and institutionalized memory of the past) that has marginalized or excluded them. The telling of these peripheral stories often forces a reevaluation of national discourses and of deeper socio-cultural ideologies. Paradoxically, these ghostly entities from the past inspire new ways of looking at the future.

Latin America, a region that has suffered from violence and discrimination since its conquest in the 15th century, has its fair share of ghost stories. In the introduction to *Societies of Fear* (1999), Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt characterize social and political violence in Latin America as “an endemic and permanent feature of the pattern of nation-building” found in the region; they also point out how Latin America’s long tradition of social exclusion has sustained this legacy of violence (3). Marginalized spirits—oftentimes the victims of violence and

discrimination—haunt many Latin American cultural productions from the 20th century.¹ This chapter, in particular, explores how ghosts are utilized by writers to critique and identify unmet promises of the revolutionary projects that took place in the latter half of the 20th century in Central America and in Cuba. By examining the play *Mujer de las aguas* (1995) by the Salvadoran dramaturge and journalist Francisco Ayala Silva and the novel *El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre* (1998) by the Cuban writer Dáina Chaviano, I explore how these ghostly tales call attention to each country's "unfinished business," pointing out how a drastic, social mobilization is still needed in order to stop the endless cycles of violence that are depicted as timeless in each work for Cuba and El Salvador.

Both works were written in the 1990s, an incongruous and tense period of time for Cuba and El Salvador when official state rhetoric oftentimes contradicted actual lived experiences. Although 12 years of civil war officially had ended in El Salvador in 1992, violence and unstable socio-economic class relations persisted (if not worsened) in the postwar years of "peace" that followed.² Also, with the Soviet Bloc's dissolution in the 1990s, Cuba's economic crisis and increasing repressive governmental control left many Cubans starving and questioning the ideals

¹ Cynthia Duncan notes that strange legends, ghosts stories, and tales of the supernatural originated in the United States and northern Europe and eventually appeared in Latin American literature in the 19th century. Duncan notes that writers such as Rubén Darío, Horacio Quiroga, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, and Carlos Fuentes have all been credited with cultivating fantastic literature in Latin America (1-2).

² See Magdalena Perkowska's essay, "La infamia de las historietas y la ética de la estructura en la novela centroamericana contemporánea" (2012).

and efficacy of the Revolution. Within these two national contexts, the 1990s—despite governmental official rhetoric—proved to be a time of significant social unrest and disillusionment as Cubans and Salvadorans grappled with the failed or truncated revolutionary projects that had once inspired hope.

As an embodiment of each nation's "unfinished business," Ayala's and Chaviano's ghosts reenact the endless cycles of violence and discrimination that continue to be perpetuated throughout each country's history. These enigmatic and fearsome spirits from Christian, African, and indigenous traditions tell alternate versions to official national histories through highly gendered and racialized perspectives. These perspectives could be considered what Michel Foucault calls "countermemories," or peripheral perspectives that contest hegemonic cultural memory (i.e. the way in which a memory is remembered by a culture or society). The ghosts in both works retell the past as they undermine national narratives that have traditionally framed women and minorities as naturally subordinate to each country's dominant authority. As theorists like Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith have asserted, countermemories contradict the assertion that social hierarchies are the result of natural laws: as peripheral subjects tell their own version of the past, their stories challenge long-held essentialist ideologies that are likewise perpetuated in contemporary times. For example, the women and indigenous people in both works disclose alternate histories that contradict their supposed intrinsic submissive character, thereby destabilizing traditional hierarchies of power. As the larger national narratives oftentimes reinforce social hierarchies (by emphasizing the inherent strength and cunning of one group above another), a revision of these histories allows marginalized groups to reexamine and rewrite their own identities. As Virginia Q. Tilley notes in her book *Seeing Indians* (2005), the subversive process of self-definition or truth-making oftentimes elicits violence from the powers

that be. In terms of indigenous peoples, Tilley writes: “For changing the regime of truth about Indians always threatens to alter, erode, or overturn established power hierarchies, with unpredictable consequences” (19-20).

The retelling of the past through peripheral perspectives performs two functions in both Ayala’s and Chaviano’s works. First, by breaking with the traditional stereotypes that have been internalized (not only by society as a whole, but by the subjects being labeled), identity-formation becomes an empowering process for each works’ protagonists. And, secondly, the obstinate recurrent presence of ghosts points out that the errors of the past cannot simply be ignored or erased with official national narratives. Rather, in Chaviano’s and Ayala’s works, the ghosts’ insistent haunting suggests that—regardless of the institutional structures of power that may change over time (i.e. the overthrow of the Batista regime or the Salvadoran oligarchy)—pervasive cultural ideologies (related to race and gender) must be addressed for a society to effectively alter the endless, historical violence and to engender egalitarian social change.

Thus, in this chapter, I explore how both Chaviano’s and Ayala’s texts endeavor to remember or re-define gendered and racial subjects that have been maligned or marginalized within their respective historical contexts. I contend that an intersectional analysis of race and gender is essential to this project of addressing and altering deep-rooted cultural ideologies of the nation. In *Mujer de las aguas* and in *El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre*, the female protagonists are haunted by ghostly ethnicities, all of whom are representative of or fundamental to each country’s history and demographic roots. The racial and gender identities found in each work are imperative to understanding exactly what the ghosts are “announcing.” As María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Preen note in their essay “Spectral Subjectivities” (2013), ghosts are not “interchangeable” and it matters greatly in *what form* they appear and *to whom* (Kindle

Locations 6840-6841). When marginalized ghostly entities in both works communicate with the female protagonists (who, as women, have also historically shared in social and political marginalization), they are attempting to awaken a new consciousness in the protagonists, showing them how the past and current power structures have depended upon racial and gendered hierarchies (or, the subordination of minorities and women). Furthermore, the ghosts' intersectional identities (of race and gender) compel the reader and protagonists (who are haunted by the ghosts) to consider how different social dimensions or identities (like race, class, etc.) contribute to an individual's beliefs about and experience with gender. As Stephanie Shields notes, intersectional perspectives are useful in that they resist a simplistic cataloging of differences, which, as a result, allows for "a more nuanced understanding of when and how gender operates as a system of oppression or as an aspect of identity" (304). The ghosts' hauntings speak to this need for a more nuanced understanding of how social identities inform oppressive norms. Harboring the "Utopian," this understanding (via the ghostly haunts) is key to breaking with the cycles of violence that plague each nation's reality.

Francisco Ayala Silva's play *Mujer de las aguas* was written in postwar El Salvador but is set on the cusp of civil war in San Salvador in the late 1920s. A young reporter named Carmen takes it upon herself to investigate the mysterious death of a famous poet, who, according to local rumors, bled to death from castration.³ New to the small town, Carmen encounters resistance from the townspeople to uncover information until she faces the feared and beautiful

³ In a personal conversation with the author, Ayala explains that his play was inspired, in part, by the life of Alfredo Espino, who is considered one of El Salvador's classic poets from the early 20th century, and also by the Welsh writer Arthur Machen's 1890 novel *The Great God Pan*.

woman who mysteriously never seems to age: Camila Teodora Malinalli. As a violent, racialized, and sexualized figure, Malinalli physically incarnates the nation as well as the abuse that indigenous women have historically endured in El Salvador. In response to this violence, she vengefully seduces and kills men in retribution—an act that ultimately perpetuates the same destructive culture of violence that she is avenging. At the same time, however, Malinalli's haunt is “utopic” in its endeavor to enact social change by revealing “what is missing:” a nuanced understanding of how gendered and racial discrimination have contributed and continue to contribute to the cyclical violence perpetuated in El Salvador.

Dáina Chaviano's novel *El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre* is written and set during Cuba's Special Period and explores the profound disillusionment of a woman, Claudia, who is haunted by three conflictive spirits and is troubled by mystic visions that arbitrarily transport her into different moments of Cuba's history. Representative of Cuba's racially-charged past, Onolorio is a Chinese mulato spirit whose evil and misogynist presence pushes Claudia into exploiting herself as a prostitute; el *Indio* is an indigenous mute spirit that warns her of impending dangers; and Muba is a black slave woman whom Claudia considers her *madrina espiritual*. The different spirits contribute to Claudia's personal and spiritual awakening, which runs parallel to a growing consciousness and understanding of Cuba's complex and paradoxical past that has informed her identity as a Cuban and a woman. Claudia's mystic time-travel also gives her an unadulterated look at the violence and exploitation upon which Cuba was founded and that continues to perpetuate itself throughout Cuba's history. While Alaya's play frames Malinalli (who haunts others) as an allegorical figure of the nation, Chaviano's novel posits Claudia (who is haunted), as representative of the Cuban nation. In particular, Chaviano's story establishes parallels between the exploitation of Cuba and the exploitation of Cuban women,

which is acutely notable during Cuba's Special Period. In the novel, understanding Cuba's multicultural and racially-mixed origins is equated with understanding oneself and is thus the key to finding self-empowerment and freedom from self-exploitation—on both a national and individual level. And, just as Ayala's protagonists ultimately question whether or not the past is doomed to simply repeat itself, Claudia also struggles with the question with which many other Cubans have grappled: should she leave Cuba or stay and face the challenge of altering such overwhelming and bleak traditions.

Cultural theorists like José Roderó, Laura Barbas-Rhoden, and Cynthia Duncan have noted that the subversive tendency of the fantastic genre is particularly significant for Latin America in that it can question dominant cultural values that have perpetuated gender or racial stereotypes. In particular, Duncan articulates in *Unraveling the Real* (2010) that the genre of the fantastic can serve as a powerful tool for feminist discourses that challenge hegemonic narratives. Duncan writes that the fantastic and feminism are “both systems [that] challenge the normalizing powers of society's ‘regime of truth,’ or the mechanisms through which truth and knowledge are produced and disseminated” (180). The feminist, fantastic discourses within Ayala's and Chaviano's stories challenge the hegemonic truths or respective national narratives that insist that democracy, egalitarianism, and/or peace have either been achieved or are making significant progress in each country. In addition to pointing out essentialist or naturalized ideologies, Chaviano's and Ayala's ethnically diverse fantastic subjects go beyond the act of simply challenging these narratives. They also represent and identify the intersectional identities that are necessary for active coalition building to generate comprehensive social change.

The ghosts found in Ayala's and Chaviano's works speak, in part, to a hope for social reform. They signal optimism in a continuing fight for gender and racial equality as they point to

a collective need to address and put an end to national legacies of discrimination that have been perpetuated throughout each history. At the same time, they share in a common culture of disenchantment in that there remains the huge, daunting project of reforming deeply engrained cultural ideologies in order to create a truly egalitarian society. Furthermore, the distinct ethnic identities of the ghosts and their intimate interaction with the female protagonists point to the need to identify parallels between structures of gender and racial domination. By suggesting the need for a collective response of coalition-building between intersectional discriminations, the success of the protagonists who are haunted depends on the ability of each to recognize that gender and race are cultural constructs and that the authorities have naturalized and employed those categories to keep them from attaining political or social power. In addition to specifically addressing minorities and women, the literary works also speak to a wider, national audience as they reveal how institutionalized, learned histories are not only subjectively constructed (and therefore fallible), but they are also foundational to many contemporary beliefs that essentialize or disparage women and minorities.

Francisco Ayala Silva's *Mujer de las aguas*

Largely unknown as a dramaturge, Francisco Ayala Silva is a Salvadoran editor and journalist who began living and working in the United States in 2000. His first and only literary publication, *Mujer de las aguas*, was produced in San Salvador in the 1990s and later won the country's National Drama Award in 1996. The following year, the play was subsequently published in a collection of Salvadoran plays titled *Nuevo teatro salvadoreño* (1997). Within a rich framework that entwines history and myth together, the play explores gendered and racial discriminations from the nation's past in order to help explain the causes for social unrest and economic inequality found in El Salvador in the postwar years of the 1990s. The ghosts and

spirits in Ayala's play are born out of Pre-Colombian as well as traditional Salvadoran myths and legends. Particularly marked by accounts of gendered and racial violence, these legends highlight a cyclical pattern of violence traced from the Spanish Conquest to contemporary El Salvador.

Ayala's story begins in the 1920s with a young reporter named Carmen who is determined to investigate how a famous poet bled to death after he was mysteriously castrated. By inserting herself into the literary and artistic community of San Salvador, Carmen meets her love interest (who is symbolically named "Salvador") and she comes to learn about a mysterious woman named Camila Teodora Malinalli who appears to be involved in the poet's death. Ignoring the locals' fears and warnings against searching for the truth, Carmen soon encounters Malinalli. Another name for "la Malinche," Malinalli is a legendary indigenous figure who is known as the "mother of *mestizos*"⁴ and who is also credited with betraying her people during the Spanish Conquest. Upon meeting Carmen, Malinalli proceeds to tell the story of her violent past, which begins in the time of the Conquest and runs parallel to El Salvador's history. Once Malinalli is introduced in the play, the storyline's focus thereafter centers on the ghostly woman and an explanation of her violent and vengeful persona. After Carmen's brief encounter with Malinalli, Salvador speaks with the town elder, Don Chico, who further describes the woman's mythical and historical origins. In the final scene, decades have passed and the play concludes with the end of Carmen and Salvador's lives, which is also the beginning of El Salvador's civil war. With Salvador at Carmen's deathbed, Malinalli watches the couple from the shadows, pondering over the nation's fate.

⁴ La Malinche has been named the mother of mestizos by having one of the first Spanish-indigenous (*mestizo*) children with the conqueror Hernán Cortés.

Malinalli's actions and personal history propel the play's storyline. Her persona is a synthesis of myths and legends that embodies various, unflattering traditional stereotypes that endure for indigenous women in Salvadoran culture and society. In particular, her gender and ethnicity are linked as two historical categories of discrimination that are relevant to the current structures of power that exist in contemporary Salvadoran society. As an allegorical figure of the nation, Malinalli's story highlights how the contemporary nation was conceived out of a cyclical, self-perpetuating violence. After Malinalli is raped by a Spanish soldier (evoking la Malinche's story), the indigenous woman appropriates the sexual violence perpetrated against her by the newly-arrived Spaniards in order to later dominate powerful, historically iconic men from El Salvador's history. Malinalli's violent power rests in a vindication that is rooted in the abuse that she suffered with the start of the Spanish conquest and her appropriation of and participation with violence is indicative of a larger historical legacy and culture of violence that is portrayed as endlessly cycling through history. El Salvador's heritage and continuum of violence connects the violent birth of the Salvadoran nation to the contemporary civil war and destruction seen throughout the country from the 1920s up until the 1990s. Through the symbolic historical figure of la Malinche/Malinalli, Ayala's play also connects El Salvador to an even larger hemispheric origin story: as the mother of *mestizos*, her story is also the history of all of Latin America (one claimed by Mexico, in particular). This Pan-American legacy of violence and discrimination points, in part, to the profundity and pervasiveness of an internalized ideology toward traditionally marginalized subjects, like the indigenous and women.

What is more, Malinalli's allegorical representation of the Salvadoran nation and its past, specifically, forecasts a highly pessimistic future for the Central American country. As a vengeful indigenous woman, it would seem that Malinalli's eternal presence is a bleak indication

that violence cannot be stopped from repeating itself. Nevertheless, Malinalli's many monologues serve as "countermemories" that work to contest the hegemonic cultural memory that has contributed to many of the essentialist stereotypes for both indigenous peoples and women throughout Salvadoran history. Malinalli's ghostly presence "announces" to Carmen (and therefore, the play's audience) that the nation's success is dependent on recognizing the deeply engrained ideologies that perpetuate discrimination against women and different ethnicities. In other words, Malinalli's presence is part of a "utopian" longing in contemporary Salvadoran society for creating a more just, equitable society: her haunting and active presence suggests change and the betterment of society is still possible, but only by addressing these deeply engrained discriminations in contemporary Salvadoran society.

The play suggests that present-day events and social progress depend on a nation's understanding and memory of history and national roots. Malinalli's allegorical figure is shrouded in a mystery that is decipherable through Salvadoran myths and legends. In the face of growing globalization and neoliberalism in El Salvador in the 1990s, Malinalli is threatening in large part because the Salvadoran nation does not recognize the national myths that have created her. The power to diminish her threat lies in understanding her. The play therefore draws attention to and highlights the need for understanding and appreciating Salvadoran history and its cultural patrimony. This is true because, as the Salvadoran novelist Manlio Argueta notes, myths play a powerful role in national or social identity: "De ahí la importancia de la leyenda, mitos y creencias con lo cual la sabiduría popular otorga partida de nacimiento a elementos espirituales y subjetivos de la identidad" (7). However, as Benjamín Palomo points out, knowing one's self or one's national identity has become challenging, because in recent years (due to globalization and international processes) knowledge of myths and legends has declined in Salvadoran culture.

Palomo argues that modernity and positivist rationality have turned Salvadorans into “entes materialistas escépticos” that are no longer able to value myths that could lead to self-valorization and a better understanding of the current, chaotic present (22). Palomo asserts: “El capitalismo nos exporta mitos de plástico, metal, computarizados... con historias sorprendentes y maravillosas para volvernos entes de consumo y convertirnos en autómatas sin identidad. Cuando hemos tomado este camino, difícilmente, podremos creer en nuestra propia leyenda” (22). Palomo’s suggestion—that one must first lose sight of one’s identity in order to finally go looking for it—resonates in Ayala’s play: Malinalli’s threatening presence prompts both Carmen and Salvador (and therefore the audience) to look for answers that can only be found in the past. In other words, Malinalli and her embodiment of national identity are shrouded in mystery and sometimes fear due to their unfamiliarity. For example, applying Western Christian standards or definitions (such as of what constitutes an evil spirit) to an indigenous belief system will certainly produce misperceptions and inaccuracies in understanding. As well, Ayala’s play demonstrates that just because history, legends, or myths might have been forgotten or “erased” from public memory, this does not mean that the social issues associated with those stories likewise disappear. Just the opposite, past injuries from racial and/or gendered domination and discrimination linger on in ghostly and material forms in the present.

This lingering presence is theatrically communicated through stagecraft techniques that conjure the mysteriousness and haunted atmosphere in the play. In particular, Ayala effectively evokes an eerie sensation in the play through a very conscious use of darkness and solitary spotlights. Light is used to project images and create shadows on a white screen that is placed to one side of the stage. Behind this white screen, a system of lights is set up to help create distinct illusions and images (Ayala 146). At one moment, the screen shows a wide range of images that

closely relate to Salvadoran culture, history, or identity, such as the iconic Salvadoran volcano Chichontepec or photograph of a group of Salvadoran peasant children. These allusions to iconic symbols of Salvadoran culture and history beckon the audience to try to piece together meaning within the play—meaning that specifically fits within a Salvadoran context and tradition. Images such as these are “ghost-like” through their solitary placement on the screen during key moments within the performance of the actors, such as in the case of Bustamante’s ghostly image that materializes behind the actors as they talk of his death. With his image looming behind the actors, his ghostly existence and mysterious death are effectively announced, allowing for his presence to dominate the space on the stage, despite the fact that he is dead.

Ghosts and Normative Expectations

Gordon states that a ghost “is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). The storyline focuses on Malinalli’s past and the myths that are connected to each of her names (Camila, Teodora, and Malinalli), all of which are associated with different aspects of feminine impropriety (i.e. her failure to fulfill gendered expectations). The myths found in the play—despite being from a distant past—resonate with contemporary times in that traditional expectations still persist by relegating women to a domesticated, passive space and categorizing indigenous people as savage or barbaric. The ghostly haunt of these persistent identities and expectations (invisible, but still present) are announcing themselves on the stage, waiting to be recognized.

Through Malinalli’s character, Ayala pushes his audience to consider how various traditional legends or myths associated with indigeneity and femininity inform current gendered and racial ideologies. Ayala’s ghostly haunts give notice of what is lacking or disappearing from

society: a strong cultural memory of myths and legends that have informed many contemporary ideologies. The active, transgressive “Salvadoran woman” is established through the convergence of four myths found in the character of Camila Teodora Malinalli: the female vampire, la Malinche from the Conquest, and both *la mujer coyota* and La Siguanaba from Salvadoran myths. By mixing the different myths in one woman, the play shows how certain beliefs are not born “naturally” into consciousness, but rather that they are internalized and handed down throughout the generations. In addition to bringing attention to ingrained essentialist ideologies regarding women, these myths also point out how the indigenous woman has been negatively framed as a deviant figure within a Western, Christian context, likewise embedded in contemporary ideologies.

To clarify Malinalli’s many identities, Don Chico (a scholarly *criollo*) describes each myth to Salvador. To begin, he explains that “Teodora,” comes from a Nahuatl myth that describes the story of a woman who can transform herself into a coyote. In this myth, feminine impropriety is the result of the woman’s inability to fulfill her domestic duties as a woman. A marked ideological conflict exists in the myth between Christian and Nahuatl traditions, especially in terms of expectations for women’s gendered roles. Palomo explains how, in the story of the *mujer coyota*, a poor man discovers that his wife is turning into a coyote at night in order to hunt the neighbor’s chickens to feed her family. When the worried husband consults his priest, he is told to sprinkle holy water on the clothes she leaves behind while hunting. That night, when the *mujer coyota* returns from her hunt, she says magic words to turn back into a woman, but she is unable to do so because holy water covers her clothing. Howling in sadness, the *mujer coyota* runs away to live forever in the wilderness.

The *mujer coyota* myth illustrates the conflict between two religious traditions or ways of rationalizing the world. Animals hold a sacred space in indigenous folklore, especially in nahualism, which Palomo describes: “es una práctica religiosa en completa empatía con la naturaleza” (25). From an indigenous perspective, *la mujer coyota*’s intimacy with an animal and spiritual world reflects a sacred connection. Nonetheless, her husband’s actions speak to a more Western Christian perspective in that he seeks council from a priest with the fear that her actions deviate from Christian morality. The Catholic tradition of using holy water to eliminate unholy elements is ultimately what separates the woman from existing in both the natural and civilized worlds and, interestingly, it also keeps her from enacting the masculine role of exiting the home space in order to provide for her family. Once converted forever into a coyote, the *mujer coyota* is barred from her duties of caring for her husband and children and, as such, Palomo describes her agony: “Lo que más le dolía era cuando oía llorar a su hijo y no le podía dar de mamar” (60). The story highlights the incompatibility of indigenous spirituality with Christian beliefs: the holy water cleanses the woman by forcing her to one polarity, destroying her “deviant” and holistic actions. This unholy “purging” frames indigenous traditions as blasphemous and aberrant. In other words, the indigenous woman is twice demonized because of her unholy association with indigenous “magic” and because she is unable to feed her children.

Don Chico also connects the character’s first name “Camila” not with a Salvadoran myth, but with another conception of a “deviant” woman in the Irish novella *Carmilla* (1872) by Joseph Sheridan Le Franu. Without many details, Don Chico simply remarks that Sheridan’s female character fed on blood: “se alimentaba de sangre” (195). Predating Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) by over fifteen years, the story involves a lesbian vampire who seduces and kills her victims. Vampires have traditionally been associated with notions of insatiable sexual desire,

violent sadism, and queer otherness (due to its sexual ambiguity). According to Eric Kwan-Wai Yu, this voracious “other” “threatens through subverting proper gender definitions and behavioral expectations” (148). The vampiric figure that Don Chico associates with Malinalli highlights a similarly insatiable and unstable kind of sexuality, which I develop further below. Just as the vampire is oftentimes framed as queer or as an exotic Other, the vampire legend also accentuates Malinalli’s indigenous difference by portraying her as a threatening and mysterious figure.

The last two myths that Don Chico describes involve two legendary women who are associated with Mesoamerican myths: la Malinche and la Siguanaba. To begin, Don Chico explains that the name “Malinalli” means “hierba retorcida” (twisted weed or grass) in Nahuatl, a name that is associated with la Malinche (195). As an infamous and “warped” figure, the Nahuatl meaning of La Malinche’s name speaks to the way in which she embodies the betrayal of an indigenous woman to her people (by serving as the mistress and guide to the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés) as well as the condition of being “*chingada*” (i.e. being ripped apart, raped, or “fucked”). In his essay “Los hijos de la Malinche” (1950), Octavio Paz describes the sexual verb “chingar” as a penetrating violence against another, stating: “[e]s un verbo masculino, activo, cruel: pica, hiera, desgarrar, manchar” (70). “Chingar” can also be understood as the act of “screwing over” or duping another person: it is an action that undercuts the power of the person being “screwed.” In terms of popular, patriarchal understandings of la Malinche, any agency she might have had is destabilized by the fact that she is traditionally seen as being used by the Spanish. However, Ana María Carbonell points out that, due to the fact that la Malinche was used as a sexual object, she has come to be “misguidedly” labeled as a whore and is associated with the epithet of “*la Chingada*,” thus representing “complete openness and

voluntary submission” (55). Paradoxically, the emphasis that is placed on la Malinche’s compliant victimization obscures and complicates her agency and culpability in her supposed betrayal of her people. As Amy Kaminsky notes, however, over two decades after Paz “invoked” la Malinche’s rape, various feminist writers like Victoria Ocampo, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Rosario Castellanos have contested this notion of betrayal as they point out la Malinche’s courage and strength in surviving enslavement in two oppressive cultures (17). Carbonell asserts that vilifying la Malinche as an *active* whore has helped perpetuate traditional binaries that persist in present-day Mexico. She states: “This pervasive denigration of female agency in Mexican culture has created the well-known virgin-versus-whore paradigm, a dualistic structure that attempts to police female behavior by extolling the Virgin’s passivity and selflessness while denigrating figures who take action, such as [la] Malinche and La Llorona, as selfish, treacherous and destructive” (55). Perhaps what is most disturbing about this myth is that it firmly places woman outside any rational or real space from whence she may have agency or control of her own self.

And finally, Don Chico vaguely describes the popular Salvadoran legend of la Siguanaba: a woman who flies through the air, causing “daños” at the crossroads on highways (195). Not surprisingly, this legend takes on various forms. In *Mitología de Cuscatlán* (1996), Miguel Ángel Espino tells another version that describes a woman named “Sihuélut.” “Era casada y tenía un hijo. Trabajaba mucho y era buena. Pero se hizo coqueta. Lasciva y amiga de la chismografía, abandonó el hogar, despreció al hijo y al marido, a quien terminó por hechizar” (36). As punishment for her promiscuity and for abandoning her husband and child, the woman was forced to wander the shores of the river, forever lamenting her actions. Interestingly, much like the myth about *la mujer coyota*, the woman is once again forced out of her domestic space as punishment for neglecting her womanly duties, prohibiting her from straddling both sides of

an active/passive traditional binary for women. Working with another version of the legend, Palomo describes this famous myth within Salvadoran traditions by explaining that the name “Siguanaba” originates from two words in Nahuatl: “Cigua,” which means woman, and “Nahual,” which means spirit (31). Palomo explains that since Siguanaba is a nahual (a spirit), she lives forever, traveling through centuries and generations. He clarifies: “Por otra parte, es evidente que se trata de una figura degenerada que anda en las calles en busca de amor a todas horas de la noche; como se ha deformado, o adulterando con hombres casados como se cuenta” (31-32). But Paloma points out that la Siguanaba is not necessarily considered an evil spirit within indigenous traditions (32).⁵ Palomo hints at how a lack of understanding of Nahual culture has perpetuated incorrect ideas about indigenous beliefs and links this misunderstanding with how the Spanish labeled the indigenous as “hijos del demonio” (32). By literally demonizing the searching, roaming figure of la Siguanaba, one can see how Western Christian influences can further polarize the image of this active mythical woman.

The merging of so many references to indigenous and regional myths within the play emphasizes the necessity of being well-versed in Salvadoran cultural memory: this knowledge is essential to understanding *why* the characters act the way they do. As popular legends that have

⁵ Palomo explains that the myth of the Siguanaba is intimately connected with Pre-Hispanic nahualism. He explains that la Siguanaba is not evil, but simply in constant search for her other half. When she discovers that the man she is pursuing is not a nahual, she simply scares him away so that she can continue on her search. Paloma states: “[la leyenda] va más allá de nuestra religión antepasada truncada por la cultura conquistadora que nos quemó todo por considerarnos hijos del demonio” (33).

been passed down from generation to generation, Christian and indigenous tradition and myth have shaped and indelibly marked the actions of these fabled figures. But perhaps most notably, patterns of gendered and racial repression surface through the re-telling of these myths. Within the morals of all these myths that center on deviant Indians and rebellious women, we see cautionary tales that show what may happen to women or indigenous people who step outside of their prescribed strict roles within a Western patriarchal society.

A National History of El Salvador

Malinalli's conversations with Carmen reveal how the stories regarding la Malinche and la Siguanaba are incorporated into her personal story, also highlighting how both stories contribute or relate to her personal desire for revenge. As an embodiment of the nation, her wrath is symbolically perpetuated through the violence that is witnessed in Central America throughout the 20th century. As a consequence of that violence, Malinalli embraces a problematic, newfound agency (inspired by revenge) and a sexual awakening that allows her to reject the traditional standards and expectations that are meant to control her and render her passive as both a woman and indigenous person.

Malinalli describes to Carmen the hypocrisy and paradox that ultimately frames her story by highlighting the incongruous link between the moral, patriarchal rhetoric that was used to colonize the indigenous via the Catholic Church and the actions of the Spanish soldiers. With an

encounter than runs parallel to La Malinche's rape by a Spanish soldier, Malinalli describes her first sexual experience:⁶

Una vez, hace mucho tiempo, yo estaba en un río. Estaba desnuda, era casi niña, y llegó un hombre. Se desnudó y saltó sobre mí. Yo vi que aquello era bueno, y quedó en mí. Quise que ese hombre compartiera lo que yo acababa aprender, pero él salió corriendo. Después lo vieron corriendo, loco por los montes. (184)

The act of rape by the Spanish soldier is implied by how the encounter began (the man "saltó" or jumped on top of the young girl), but Malinalli's telling diverts from the traditional story by how she responds: she converts herself into the "active" sexual partner, which makes her monstrous and fearful. Her sexual "touch," personal enjoyment, and *willingness* to engage with the Spaniard ultimately drive the man insane and force him to flee in fear. Just as feminist writers have retold Malinche's story, Malinalli's story intersects la Malinche's rape with the myth of la Siguanaba (who drives men insane by touching them) to produce an empowering countermemory that reclaims feminine agency as it gives new meaning to an old myth. Malinalli confirms: "Dicen que enloquezco a los hombres al tocarlos, pero yo no toco cómo ellos tocan: te aprietan y creen que lo hacen bien. No saben lo que es acariciar un clítoris con la lengua... cuando ven que trato de satisfacer mis deseos, creen que soy un monstruo" (185). Thus, her monstrosity manifests itself (for the Spaniards and the Salvadoran society that marginalizes her) in her response (as the

⁶ Although it is not explicitly stated that the man is a soldier in Ayala's description, it seems very likely that the man who raped Malinalli was Spanish due to the fact that he wore clothes that he disrobed in order to sexually abuse her.

“savage” Other) to the soldier (ironically, as a “civilized” rapist). Thus, she subverts traditional gendered expectations by expressing sexual desire and enjoyment.

However, Malinalli also strategically reinforces racial stereotypes with her description of her animalistic sexuality. The ghostly woman asks Carmen: “Dime muchacha, que sabes del falo y las costumbres de los salvajes? ¿Has visto a un hombre en erección?” (183). Malinalli refers to the indigenous as “savages” as she also connects the group with an animalistic sexuality. The stage directions call for the shadows of marionettes that show a monkey first sexually mounting a tiger and then with a skeleton on a white screen. With the shadows enacting what she describes, she asks: “Sí, ¿has pasado tu lengua por una glande, has hecho el amor, has tocado el órgano de un perro, has visto a un mono fornicando con un tigre o un mono haciendo el amor con un muerto?” (183). Malinalli describes and summons on the screen images that speak to an eroticized, perhaps exaggerated, Western understanding of indigenous deviance and wild sexuality. Malinalli deliberately reflects back to Carmen (and the audience) a savage, bestial stereotype that has contributed to contemporary perceptions of “primal” indigenous behaviour—at least until they became “civilized” by Christians. Scandalized, Carmen tries to leave, but Malinalli interrupts her by asking: “¿Por qué? Venías por la verdad y te la estoy ofreciendo, clara y desnuda. Hablando de desnudez, ¿sabías que los indígenas no sabían que estaban desnudos? Los blancos les enseñaban que los cuerpos eran sucios” (184). In Carmen’s indignant search for truth, Malinalli taunts her by sarcastically stating that it is the truth that she is offering. Malinalli points out the tensions that exist between indigenous and Western morals, alluding to the ambiguous meaning of words or concepts like truth, savagery, and morality, particularly within distinct cultural contexts.

Although Malinalli never directly states that her desire to dominate men is a result of vengeance, her actions imply a vengeful and defiant response to the repression that she has faced as an Indian and a woman within the Salvadoran historical context. She describes: “Yo aprendí que los hombres temen a las mujeres que piensan y han descubierto el poder de su entropierna” (186). By defying traditional feminine passivity and chastity, Malinalli has learned to use her intelligence as well as her sexuality to control men. She describes some of the men she has dominated or tried to dominate throughout the nation’s history. In particular, she refers to powerful and famous men that she has come into contact with, suggesting how her violent presence has interacted with some of the major leaders who have influenced Salvadoran history. With disdain, she states: “Y el hombrecito Maximiliano, con su legión de espíritus invisibles ha conseguido evitar los filos de mi cadera” (187). Malinalli refers to the military leader Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, who in the distant future of 1931 would become the country’s dictator through a military coup. He is infamously remembered for his belief in the occult or “knowledge of the paranormal” and, more importantly, for ordering the 1932 massacre of over 25,000 indigenous people that opposed his government due to the great economic inequality in the country. As Malinalli speaks about the future dictator, the white screen shows the image of a man being executed and a group of military men passing by, the shortest man being Maximiliano (187). The man executed is presumably Farabundo Martí, the communist leader that was killed after his involvement in the uprising and whose death would inspire armed insurrection. While Malinalli was unable to kill Maximiliano, her association with such a violent and corrupt man is a telling aspect of the play, one that highlights once again a timeless culture of violence, capable of massacring thousands of indigenous people.

At last, Carmen asks Malinalli about how the poet, Bustamante, died. Malinalli replies: “[I]o de Bustamante casi me dio pena. Era un niño y fue como ponerle una carga de dinamita entre las piernas. Lo mismo Peralta, pero él se lo merecía” (188). In terror, Carmen quickly exits the stage as the lights go out. With her concession of killing the poet Bustamante, it is apparent that Malinalli’s vengeance is not just reserved for powerful and corrupt men, but rather, her violence is directed indiscriminately at the male sex. In complete darkness after Carmen has fled the stage, the voices of Malinalli and the *Caballero Oscuro* (Malinalli’s male companion in the play) are heard as they speak to each other, once more evoking a haunting effect. He is characterized, in part, as the Christian devil (as he admits that he fell a thousand kilometers from the sky), but his familiarity with Malinalli speaks again to the likely mixing of Western and indigenous traditions, leaving his identity not completely clear. He reprimands Malinalli for taunting Carmen: “Tú eres cruel con tu hijo, con los hombres” (188). The *Caballero Oscuro*’s reference to Malinalli’s “children” hints at her historical connection to La Malinche, whom Octavio Paz names as the mother of *mestizos*. In response, Malinalli simply scoffs by saying “hombres” at the end of the scene (188).

Near the end of the play, Malinalli’s role within Salvadoran history becomes clear as an embodiment of “*la raza*,” which is depicted as profoundly rooted within the popular national identity. The ghostly woman tells Carmen: “No he desaparecido en siglos. Soy parte de tu raza, de tu piel, aunque tu padre haya venido por la ruta de los conquistadores” (196). Evocative of la Malinche’s story, Malinalli emphasizes her place as the indigenous mother of the *mestizo* Salvadoran nation by locating Carmen’s father (or, the male sex) within a European heritage. Malinalli assures Carmen that, despite that the Spaniards arrived and brought with them new moral traditions, *la raza*—and effectively her incarnation of it—still continues (Ayala 185).

Race, nation, and gender all come together as Ayala's play inserts and melds la Siguanaba's myth into la Malinche's story. In harmony with the legend of la Siguanaba, Malinalli mentions her lost child in her conversation with Carmen. Because there exist two different versions of how la Siguanaba loses her male child (i.e. that he died at birth and also that she was forced to abandon him after her infidelities), Malinalli refers to her son in an ambiguous manner: "Y vino él, el hombre de mi vida. Salió de mi vientre. Dicen que lo que me quedaba de mujer murió con mi parto. Otros dicen que fue el niño el que murió. [...] Buscaba en cada hombre a un hijo para aliviar mi dolor" (186).⁷ Malinalli's monologue echoes popular knowledge about herself, evoking an ambiguous cultural memory: some say that her womanly side died when her son was born (whom she would later abandon), while others say that part of her died when the child died. Regardless, this cultural memory insinuates that her traditional feminine characteristics (passiveness, goodliness, etc.) eventually disappeared along with her child. In other words, after she loses or rejects her maternal role, there is nothing left to her but an aggressive, sexualized creature, thus highlighting woman's traditional importance as a reproducer and nothing more.

Evoking yet another Salvadoran myth, Malinalli describes her lost son as el Cipotín, a young boy with a protruding belly and large hat. With his image projected behind Malinalli on the white screen, Cipotín is characterized (in Ayala's play) as Malinalli's other half of herself,

⁷ According to one version of the myth, the child is known as Cipotín or Cipitío and is also considered a spirit. He too roams the countryside, but rather than terrorize men, he plays pranks on unwitting women. He has a large hat and belly and his feet are turned backwards, so as to confuse people of which direction he is heading (Aracely de Gutiérrez 49).

for which she searches in order to make herself whole, which references the need of the nahual to find its other half and thus reach completion. But, due to her status as a condemned and monstrous woman, she scares men away (thanks, in large part, to traditional Christian expectations), and is thus unable to reach this completion or unite long enough with a man in order to have a child and to become “whole.” Just as *la Malinche* is condemned no matter what she does (she is either a passive *chingada* or an active traitor), Malinalli faces a similar problem of impossible choices.

Endless Cycles

Malinalli’s violent pleasure and sexuality is framed as one way in which she can retaliate against the imposition of an impossible female propriety—an imposition that paradoxically keeps Malinalli from becoming whole. In Salvador’s conversation with Don Chico, he asks if Malinalli can be stopped. Don Chico prophetically replies: “Ella no, pero pueden detenerse los hombres” (197). As an incarnation of violent myths and history, Malinalli is an inescapable and enduring force, but it is still in the hands of human beings to make societal change. At the end of the scene, Malinalli longingly calls to Salvador—symbolically named to refer to her missing child. To become whole, Malinalli (representative, in part, as *la raza* or indigenous Salvadoran identity) calls to Salvador—desiring to become whole through their union, which would require recognition, rather than fear, of her presence. But Salvador cannot hear her and the act closes.

In the epilogue of the play, however, Malinalli expresses her fear that the new generations will not understand the role and presence of myths (as an element of national identity) nor their connection to the repression that women and indigenous people have suffered. As such, if future generations do not understand this past, they will not be able to initiate change.

What is more, without this understanding, cycles of violence might be perceived as something that is natural and unchangeable, rather than dependent on the actions of individuals.

The epilogue takes the audience fifty years into the future. Salvador sits at Carmen's side, as she lies dying of old age. As the two speak about their lives and their friends who have passed away, Carmen also asks what has happened to "ella." Salvador nods his head and says: "Sigue allí" (200). Malinalli, who stands at a distance in the shadows with the *Caballero Oscuro*, replies: "Sigo aquí. Ahora los indios somos todos, mientras tengamos la rebeldía, el indio" (200). As a nation of *mestizos*, Malinalli notes the presence of indigenous heritage in every Salvadoran as she also links the indigenous with rebellion and resistance. As such, her statement hints at different kind of modern "conquest," where globalizing, transnational powers are helping to erase El Salvador's indigenous culture and history. She asks the *Caballero Oscuro*: "¿No ves que estamos muriendo? Cada vez hay más casas, cada vez más gente, hay cajas de luz que piensan por ti, ya no se habla el habla. Huimos al norte, a la montaña, y nada, nada. [...] Ya no se ven las cosas" (201).

The stage directions at this moment call for images of devastation on the white screen: "imágenes de edificios y destrucciones de San Salvador, indias viejas con refajos, soldados de los primeros días de la guerra civil, helicópteros de combate y grupos de niños de la calle" (202). In these last images that are projected, we see how violence has repeated through the generations, all the way up to the late 1970s at the start of the civil war. And in this moment, just as Carmen dies, Malinalli calls out Salvador's highly symbolic name, but he cannot hear her (202). In an attempt to unite with Salvador, to connect with her lost *mestizo* son, she feebly attempts to unite the indigenous spirit and culture with Salvador—so as to create a whole union that would bring together a nation of *mestizos* and indigenous people. And, tellingly, he is unable

to hear her voice. Her ghostly presence no longer beckons him. As she realizes this, the *Caballero Oscuro* states: “Ya no se ven nahuales ni amores bajo las flores. Nosotros somos los nuevos conquistadores” (202), suggesting that all Salvadorans are the new conquerors who have learned and perpetuate a cyclical violence that dominates in current day El Salvador.

Ayala’s play portrays a deeply cynical and pessimistic attitude toward the endless cycles of violence that dominate Salvadoran history. From the ghostly haunting of mythical figures on stage, a relevant lesson emerges: not only can the past’s lessons *not* be taken for granted, but the meaning, bias, and context that are all ingrained in these traditional lessons must be deconstructed in order to find a more profound understanding of cultural and national identity. Malinalli, the embodiment of the nation who contains within her indigeneity, myths, violence, and hope, helps to point out how certain cultural memories have fostered social and cultural ideologies, while also alluding to their persistent and unrecognized strength. The ghostly haunt of Ayala’s play beckons its audience to remember, to recognize, and to reevaluate its own place in the continuum of Salvadoran history, which feebly suggests that there is still hope for change.

Daina Chaviano’s *El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre*

The Cuban author Daina Chaviano is part of what has been called the "trinidad femenina de la ciencia ficción en Hispanoamérica" (Piña 75).⁸ In 1979, Chaviano was recognized as Cuba’s first distinguished woman writer of science fiction when she won the island’s first science fiction competition, *Premio David*, with her collection of short stories entitled *Los mundos que amo*. Since then, Chaviano has been credited with creating a new kind of “hybrid”

⁸ Piña states that writers Angélica Gorodischer (Argentina) and Elia Barceló (Spain) are also included in the trinity.

science fiction, which Raúl Aguiar describes as “una mezcla de ciencia-ficción con magia, erotismo, parapsicología, la fantasía heroica y los mitos celtas, Bíblicos o precolombinos” (1). Distinct from most science fiction written by men on the island in the 1980s, which tends to focus on the technological aspects of science fiction, this new brand of the genre is associated with women writers and focuses more on poetic language and artistic style; it also places less emphasis on the scientific or speculative elements of the genre by delving more profoundly into the characters’ interpersonal relationships and psyches (especially those of female protagonists) (Aguiar 13). Chaviano established this new science-fiction hybrid with a series of novels entitled *La Habana Oculta*,⁹ all of which were written in the years after Chaviano left Cuba and established residency in Miami in 1991. Chaviano acquired international fame in 1998 when her first book of the series, *El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre*, won Spain’s *Premio Azorín* for best novel. Although unavailable and largely unread in Cuba, *El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre* is one of the author’s best-known, internationally recognized works.

The novel follows the existential and psychological state of the female protagonist, Claudia, as she struggles to survive and provide for her son under the Special Period’s economic austerity and governmental repression. After being fired from her job at the National Museum, the novel follows Claudia’s shifting circumstances: she first meets and moves in with a man named Ruben, who is later incarcerated for selling goods on the street without a license. Just as

⁹ In the series *La Habana Oculta*, each novel explores different mystic or spiritual elements found in Cuba, including reincarnation, magic, Afro-Cuban traditions, and ghosts. The series also includes the novels *Casa de juegos* (1999), *Gata encerrada* (2001), and *La isla de los amores infinitos* (2006).

Ruben is arrested, Claudia learns that she is pregnant with Ruben's child, but is unable to contact him for fear of also being arrested by the State. In order to care for her child, Claudia gradually finds herself involved in Havana's infamous sex trade that caters to wealthy foreigners. Creating a separate identity as a sex worker, Claudia is known as *La Mora* when she meets and falls in love with a married man named Gilberto. While Claudia's ethnicity is never explicitly clarified, her alias *La Mora* suggests that she is possibly Afro-Cuban, as *mora* or *moro* are historically pejorative racial terms within Spain that distinguish between white, European races and colored "ethnic" races. Claudia/*La Mora*'s duplicitous identity is highlighted at the very start of the novel, when Gilberto and Ruben—who happen to be friends—discuss Claudia/*La Mora*, unaware that she is the same woman. By the end of the novel, Claudia's separate lives and identities collide, forcing her to finally make difficult decisions: she either must continue along the same line of self-exploitation or tragically leave Cuba behind.

Similar to Ayala's story, ethnically-diverse supernatural entities haunt the female protagonist, a strategy that helps to point out how both gender and race have been historically used to discriminate and enforce hierarchies of power in Cuban society. The three ghosts in Chaviano's novel include an African slave woman, an indigenous Taíno man, and a Chinese mulatto. Distinct, however, from Ayala's play, these ghosts do not allegorically represent the nation, but rather, the female protagonist, Claudia, does. Although Chaviano does not explicitly describe Claudia in terms of race, her second identity (as *La Mora*, a racially-charged name) implies that she is Afro-Cuban. In comparison to Carmen's one-dimensional character, Claudia is an emotionally complex and intuitive protagonist, whose mystic abilities fuel and facilitate her exploration into Havana's historic origins. Thanks to her supernatural, mystic interactions, she is able to interrogate her identity as both a Cuban and an individual. At random times throughout

the novel, Claudia's ghosts visit her in the present, but in other moments, they transport her into the past—at times, as far back as the fifteenth-century—to witness Cuban history with her own eyes. In the process, Claudia learns that many contemporary, newly constructed “myths” (that are perpetuated by the Castro government) are born out of a long tradition of systemic deception and manipulation that has been timelessly committed by those in power on the island through the centuries—a political critique that encompasses all past authorities, not just the Revolutionary government. Just as Ayala's play employs the ghostly Malinalli to guide and speak to Carmen, the ghosts and spirits that haunt Claudia serve as her guides into an unfamiliar hidden past. Also similar to Ayala's examination of cyclical violence, Claudia's personal exploration and her examination into her nation's past lead her to wonder if a better future can ever be salvaged out of a broken, violent system that continues to endlessly repeat itself.

In Chaviano's novel, ghosts take various shapes. They are spectral, much like the ghosts found in Ayala's play, but they also take the form of a rampant physical and spiritual hunger that plagues Havana during the Special Period. Coupled with Claudia's corporal, material concerns and needs, she must also cope with a spiritual and emotional crisis that takes on a ghostly form in the novel. As suggested in the novel's title, hunger plays a fundamental role within the storyline, as it stems from a common Special Period theme, which Esther Whitfield calls “an aesthetic of absence” (37). Whitfield describes this kind of aesthetic as a “thematic repertoire” that is based on material lack, which is a common tendency found in the works of other Special Period writers like Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Ena Lucía Portela, and Zoé Valdés (37). Many times, hunger is not only related to material absence (in the form of food), but it also signifies incorporeal desire—desire to satiate a pervasive transcendent starvation. Claudia describes the three “infernal” hungers of her generation: physical hunger, spiritual hunger, and emotional hunger (54). While

the characters are almost always physically hungry, their “incorporeal” hunger is ever-present, lingering, and evocative of a spectral haunting. Spiritual and emotional hungers are especially apparent in Claudia’s search for existential meaning and self-understanding, which represents an even greater, national crisis of spirit. As Sonia Behar points out in *La caída del Hombre Nuevo* (2009), hunger also works as a character within the story (72). Immaterial and elusive, hunger’s invisible presence stimulates a haunted ambiance in the novel as it takes its ghostly form, giving notice of an intangible, spiritual deficit that propels the story forward.

The spiritual crisis depicted in the novel directly relates to Cuba’s long history of racial and gendered exploitation by portraying Claudia as an allegory to the nation. Similar to Ayala’s ghost (Malinalli), the female protagonist’s body in Chaviano’s novel exemplifies and critiques the cultural double standards that encourage simplified identities for women, which oscillate between mother and whore. While Malinalli’s character is an embodiment of various myths and negative feminine stereotypes in El Salvador, Claudia’s experience runs parallel to Cuba’s struggle to survive while maintaining dignity during the 1990’s crisis. In order to survive, Claudia must exist as a fragmented, disjointed person (as a mother and as a prostitute), which is strikingly similar to how Cuba is depicted in the novel as duplicitous. On one hand, Cuba is portrayed by the government as a socialist, egalitarian paradise. On the other hand, the novel likens Cuba to a capitalistic prostitute, thanks in large part to its tourist trade and the government’s willingness to sell the country’s cultural patrimony. By embodying Cuba’s economic and moral crisis in the form of a struggling, exploited woman who is haunted by Cuba’s historically marginalized minorities, the novel makes critical connections between gender, race, and national identity.

A Haunted Havana

Set during the Special Period in Havana, the novel's physical surroundings and its desperate, emotive tone speak to a distressed social context. Claudia (and her split identity as mother and prostitute) along with Havana's ghosts and spirits fittingly belong to the city's historically rich, yet highly volatile environment, where the laws of logic are often challenged by state sponsored rules and manipulations. Aside from actual ghosts—calculated half-truths, ruinous buildings, inescapable borders, and hunger “haunt” almost every character in the novel. Havana is therefore a scene of economic instability and paradoxical social conditions, where (as Chaviano comments) it is more profitable to be a butcher than a doctor (86). Within this illogical space, ghosts are a logical component to Havana's troubled and unique atmosphere.

Various literary techniques are employed, such as the story's structure and organization, in order to establish a haunted ambiance of instability and paradox within the novel and to emphasize parallels of fragmentation between Claudia and the Cuban nation. In particular, diverse narrators and non-linear chronologies contribute to the novel's enigmatic setting. The novel consists of a range of viewpoints (first, second, and third person omniscient perspectives), all of which add to the confusion and unpredictability of the text. The novel focuses primarily on Claudia's experiences and inner thoughts, which are narrated at times by Claudia in first person or by an omniscient third person. Less often, Claudia's two lovers, Rubén and Gilberto, speak to each other, using a second person narrative, but also in some instances an omniscient third person narrator describes the men's experiences and lives. The different voices and shifting perspectives within the text contribute to a puzzling and fragmented storyline that gradually comes together as the story progresses in a non-linear chronology of events. The story's disjointed progression of events helps to portray a volatile reality in the novel. For example, the novel's prelude enigmatically begins with the story's end: “Ella no lo sabe, pero su vida está a

punto de cambiar, como en esas telenovelas donde las casualidades parecen confabularse contra la protagonista” (11). By beginning with the end, the story’s non-linear structure further reinforces the fragmented and paradoxical environment that the novel strives to depict of Cuba during the 1990s.

Chaviano also toys with strict fictional genres and their typical outcomes: in the cited example above, the metafictional comparison made to *telenovelas* makes a subtle reference to the story’s fictional, dramatic quality, while also understating the gravity and complexity of Claudia’s situation within the Special Period’s historical context. The blurred lines between genres help to highlight the messiness and complexity of “real” or non-fictional life in that lived experience seldom follows literary genre guidelines. The narrator emphasizes that Claudia’s story is not a convenient, Hollywood-like fiction: “Sólo que ella no es un personaje de telenovela y, por tanto, no es seguro que al final aparezca algún hado inesperado—un *Deus ex machina*—que altere su destino” (11). Although the story is clearly fantastic, the narrator suggests that it will not have a fairytale ending, but rather suggests that a more realistic and uncertain ending might befall Claudia. This foreshadowing adds to the dissident ambiance in the novel, which plays with readers’ expectations by shifting between what is real and what is fantasy.

Pointing to the ambiguity and subjective nature of truth and reality, the novel oscillates between impassioned, direct criticism and disquieted and ambiguous searches for truth. As Maribel Tamargo notes in her essay “Hipertexto, ciudad e historia en *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*” (2008), Chaviano’s writing generates tension by continuously pointing toward both abstract and definitive realities: “Por un lado, [hay] un discurso de denuncia, contestatario, que se propone como la verdad, y por otro lado un discurso abierto, ambiguo que tiende a la fragmentación” (186). On one level, Claudia clearly denounces the restrictive and manipulative

political system in which she lives, while she also searches for a greater, less-tangible truth regarding national and personal identity. There is a complicated push and pull between the physical world (of human survival and bodily necessity) and the metaphysical world (of self understanding and existential crisis) that complicates the idea of universal truths. Thus, the story's shifting discourse has a disquieting effect as it encumbers the reader from drawing easy moral conclusions from Claudia's experience.

The novel's fragmented organization, diverse perspectives, and dissident discourse all contribute to depicting Havana as a city where the natural laws of physics cannot be trusted. While there are plenty of supernatural encounters, many of the contradictions and illogicalities that the characters encounter are attributed to the uncertainties and paradoxes that are perpetrated by Cuban authorities, contributing to Claudia's "universo ilógico" (Chaviano 259). For example, Claudia explains that the government makes arbitrary changes to state laws as a strategic political manipulation that will subdue any form of dissent to authority: "lo que hoy está permitido, mañana se convierte en delito; y viceversa. La repetición de ese *modus vivendi* produce la sensación de que uno vive sobre arenas movedizas, encima de un terreno que en cualquier momento puede devorarlo" (258). Indecision about what is or is not permitted has a paralyzing effect on the Cuban population and, as a result, inertia and uncertainty create malleable and easily controlled subjects. Claudia affirms: "Y con esa incertidumbre auestas no queda otra alternativa que la inacción absoluta" (259). As such, Claudia reasons that the Cuban Revolutionary government masks discrepancies between what is said and what is actually experienced as a calculated distraction and mechanism of social control.

As mentioned earlier, hunger also contributes to an anxious tone in Chaviano's novel. Prolonged hunger elicits drastic, sometimes desperate and urgent behavior. However, it not only

contributes to a desperate atmosphere but it also serves as what Gordon might call “the empirical evidence” in Chaviano’s novel that signals that a haunting is taking place (8). Hunger draws attention to the discrepancies between official rhetoric and lived realities: hunger disproves the assertion that the Revolution has eradicated all social inequalities. The widespread physical hunger in the novel disproves the supposed “successes” of the Revolution: Claudia clarifies that the old hierarchies of “those who have” and “those who have not” are clearly evidenced by who is and who is not starving: “al final resulta que hay algunos que sí tienen de todo porque son quienes lo administran, mientras el resto se muere de hambre” (60). Hunger, in the novel, is undeniable evidence against state-sponsored manipulations of reality and therefore helps to reveal the endless paradox and anxiety found in Havana during the Special Period.

Unveiling Ghostly Perspectives

Similar to the spirits in Ayala’s play, Chaviano’s ghosts are given the chance to relate their individual stories, all of which call attention to various polemical characteristics that make up Cuban cultural history and identity. The ghosts’ stories allow Claudia to identify and see beyond the government’s manipulative half-truths and official version of Cuban history. Both friendly and malevolent ghosts show Claudia that “what is missing” (or what is announcing itself) is, in large part, a clear and unbiased understanding of her country’s past, which includes both the positive and negative aspects of it. Witnessing historical events with her own eyes, her visits from spirits and mystic-like visions provide Claudia with counter-memories that function as a form of active remembering. By witnessing the past, Claudia comes to understand contradictions and paradoxes that have helped shape Cuban identity and its current broken system. Through her haunted experience, Claudia sees the connectedness of the past to the

present, which, in turn, makes her question if Cuba can ever exit this exploitive cycle—of the powerful profiting from the weak.

Just as race is imperative to understanding the present-day discriminations and abuses critiqued in Ayala's play, the ghosts in the novel also help to uncover how persisting inequalities are deeply and historically entrenched in a nation's racial and gendered ideologies. The three principal ghosts in the novel—Muba, an African slave woman, *El Indio*, a indigenous Taíno man, and Onolorio, a Chinese mulatto—are representative of peripheral groups from Cuba's history that are associated with one or more forms of exploitation. Consonant with Avery Gordon, exploring these peripheral stories of history “makes all the difference to any project trying to find the address of the present” (195). As marginalized or passive figures in Cuba's “official” history, Claudia's ghosts not only give voice to peripheral groups, but they also emphasize a strong connection between Cuba's origins to Cuba's Special Period realities (i.e. Claudia's present). Gordon argues that ghosts carry with them the violence, witchcraft, and denial that originally created them (208). Indeed, the three ghosts in Chaviano's novel bring their “baggage” from the past to Claudia's present time, which further emphasizes (in both a literal and theoretical sense) how the past informs the future.

Muba is the first spirit that Claudia encounters: she is a black slave woman from Havana's colonial period in the eighteenth-century who acts as Claudia's guide into the past and also as her spiritual “*madrina*.” Born in Africa and brought to the “New World” as a slave, Muba's story is a crucial component to understanding Cuban identity—not only in terms of Cuba's racial diversity, but also in terms of an unflattering historical patrimony. Despite having been enslaved and brought to a foreign land, however, Muba's graciousness and maternal kindness toward Claudia evoke a romantic nostalgia for the island's early beginnings. The novel

does not suggest that Muba is only a victim, but rather, a slave woman who eventually gains her freedom, marries her owner, and has two *mulato* children who later fight and rally against the invasion of the island by the British in the 1700s. This romanticized, nostalgic vision of early, eighteenth-century Havana is highlighted with Claudia's visit into Muba's past. Claudia is struck by the city's cleanliness, vibrancy, and carefree ambiance: "el aire límpido, el aroma a dulce de coco y a zumo de piña—olores que apenas recordaba ya—, y descubriría una belleza salvaje e impoluta en aquel trozo de ciudad a medio construir... no descubriría irritación, angustia o miedo" (184). Claudia is also surprised to learn that slaves and *mulatos* were given opportunities to learn a trade and eventually pay for their own freedom. She later exclaims: "Lo que vi es distinto a todo lo que nos han enseñado" (190). This alternative vision of Cuba works to diminish or subvert the "radical" success of the Revolution to bring about a more equitable society, although the novel never explicitly states this. Muba's story belies the notion that the Revolution saved Cuba from discrimination: instead, her story indicates that the move toward abolishing slavery and providing slaves with more freedom was initiated much earlier before the Revolutions' start.

In the second spirit's story, however, there is no ambiguity in the novel's critique. *El Indio*'s experience highlights the island's dubious history of conquest and human exploitation. With a scarred face, *El Indio* is a silent indigenous Cuban from the sixteenth century who forewarns Claudia of impending danger. At one point in the novel, the Taíno spirit transports Claudia back into time to witness the Spanish conquest and his own death. Claudia watches as Spaniards arrive on the island and massacre *El Indio* and his wife as well as the entire Taíno village (225). With *El Indio* still standing beside Claudia as they observe history, he finally breaks his silence and states: "En el mar está el peligro" (225). While Claudia knows *El Indio* is referring to the Spanish ships, the narrator vaguely states that she interprets his warning in a very

distinct manner. Claudia's interpretation points to the mass exodus of *balseros* (or Cuban immigrants) that, with flimsy, homemade rafts, have crossed the sea (or died trying) in order to reach the United States. This allusion hints at the ever-present question (for Claudia, but also for many Cubans) of whether or not to abandon the island in search of greater political or financial freedom, a question that comes to a head for Claudia at the end of the novel. Suggestively, this question (of whether to stay and fight for a better future or give up and abandon one's country) poignantly comes to Claudia as she's witnessing Cuba's symbolic violent birth—forcing her (and the reader) to consider whether or not hope is even possible within a nation whose dubious beginning is marked by violence.

And finally, the third spirit is the malevolent Onolorio, a *mulato chino* from the nineteenth-century who works to bring about Claudia's downfall. Onolorio's history is much less explicit in the novel, but he explains to Claudia that, after having died because of a prostitute, he now rapes whores in vengeance. When Claudia states that she is not a whore, Onolorio laughs, responding: "Pero, lo serás, mi reina" (122). Onolorio appears to Claudia when she is considering or is engaged in prostitution. In one vision, Claudia finds herself in the midst of a wild and passionate orgy during a festival that—at one time—took place in Havana, but was later eliminated by the Revolutionary government in a "sistemático esfuerzo por borrar todo rastro del

pasado.”¹⁰ Claudia’s vision soon turns erotic as she discovers many *mulatas* and slaves as they participate in a passionate orgy behind the church. She thinks to herself: “Así había siempre... Hambre de lujuria y hambre de sexo: era la marca de esa ciudad mágica y condenada” (Chaviano 199). While some women are raped, others willfully participate. Claudia also surrenders herself to the communal passion and has sex with a man whose face she cannot see, but later discovers that it is the evil spirit, Onolorio.

In addition to communicating with ghosts, Claudia’s visions also help her see how Cuba’s history of exploitation and disregard for historic origins is consonant with her reality, where she witnesses the selling of her country’s cultural patrimony. At the start of the novel, Claudia, a college graduate, loses her job at the National Museum when she denounces the selling of Cuban art to foreigners. When Claudia is transported in time through one of her visions, she sees that this disregard for Cuba’s national patrimony is something that has been passed down throughout the country’s history and sordid past. Transported centuries back, Claudia witnesses the creation and destruction of the oldest convent of the New World: el

¹⁰ These festivals originally took place in January, a month when both Catholic and African religious celebrations took place: El Día de los Reyes and El Día de la Virgen de la Candelaria. However, the festivals were later moved to July by the Revolutionary government so that they would coincide with what is considered the first day of the Revolution. Claudia suspects that these festivities were moved to July in order to erase the country’s past heritage: “Siguiendo el sistemático esfuerzo por borrar todo rastro del pasado, se decretó el traslado de los carnavales habaneros a julio, cuando la canícula es capaz de derretir la atmósfera” (194).

Convento Santo Domingo. In “fast forward” mode, Claudia watches as time lapses: “Las imágenes se sucedían con rapidez casi insalvable, como un filme pasado a alta velocidad” (278). Claudia watches as the convent is first transformed into the island’s first university and then into a school—where, among the many young students, she notices José Martí—the patron poet and revolutionary of Cuba. But the moment passes quickly and Claudia watches as the convent is converted into a governmental building. Next, she sees men destroy the convent’s belltower, but they never quite finish the demolition that they began and the half-destroyed building is finally converted into a *solar* or an apartment building for “familias indigenetas” (278). As Claudia looks on in dismay, the narrator describes: “Entonces comprendió lo que debía aprender: que el esplendor de su pasado y la maravilla de su historia habían terminado en ruinas por la idiotez de algunos hombres” (279). Claudia’s story and experiences frame Cuba as a country of *vende patrias* or “sell outs,” where survival—at whatever cost—is tantamount and, as a result, Cuba has cultivated a false and hollow present.

As Claudia speaks with ghosts and witnesses the destruction of historical artifacts and art, she begins to fully comprehend the importance of the past as she also begins to understand how the past shapes the present and can form the future. Claudia considers: “...la imagen de la iglesia, como vehículo de transición hacia el futuro, descubría una clave importante de su presente. Iglesia... Templo... Templete... Para tener fe en el futuro, uno necesitaba de su pasado: pero su pasado le había sido escamoteado, reprimido y alterado” (186). Indeed, the spirits or the “lost subjects of history” (Gordon 195), endeavour to reveal these hidden parts of Cuba’s past to Claudia.

By dialoguing with the past, Claudia questions if Cuba will ever manage to transform itself and break with its historical tradition of violence and discrimination. Claudia deliberates:

“El pasado [de Cuba] era una historia saturada de guerras y esclavos. Y si era cierto ese refrán de que cualquier tiempo pasado fue mejor, ¿qué podía esperar mañana?” (163). As Claudia negotiates the polemics of her national, cultural, and racial origins, she begins to consider for the first time whether or not to abandon Cuba, afraid that Cuba’s future will simply be a continuation of its past.

Cuba: Forever A Nation of Prostitutes and Vendepatrias

Through her mystical experiences and ghostly interactions, Claudia learns that almost nothing is as it seems. Despite the many successes of the Cuban Revolution, Chaviano’s novel endeavors to show that the island has not truly changed at its core. Claudia contemplates: “Nadie quiere reconocer que el sueño se perdió, que los ideales ya no existen, que dejaron de existir hace mucho” (125). Black market exchanges, governmental hypocrisy, and the tourism sex trade are framed as Cuban realities, all of which are in dissidence with many of the social and economic ideals that shaped the Cuban Revolution. Just as Malinalli serves as an allegory to the Salvadoran nation, Chaviano’s novel emphasizes the Revolution’s failure by establishing parallels between Claudia’s individual situation and the situation, in general, of Cuba as a nation. A betrayal of one’s country—which is also framed as a betrayal of one’s self—is physically portrayed through prostitution in the novel: Claudia sells her body as a commodity to foreign tourists in order to provide for her child and, much along the same lines, Cuba is likened to a prostitute who struggles by any means to survive the economic instability brought on with the fall of the Soviet Bloc. Cuba is framed as a country of prostitutes (who exploit themselves) but also of *vendepatrias* that are willing to exploit their cultural patrimony for economic gain. The means of survival include selling national art to the highest bidder and opening Cuba’s beaches and opulent hotels only to foreign tourists. Claudia states: “Esta isla se vende. Ni siquiera se subasta:

se vende al por mayor” (23). The notion that anything and everything has a price—especially in socialist Cuba—speaks to a deep-seated disillusionment with the Revolution’s outcome. The novel depicts how a strong sense of national pride has been replaced by the shame and deception of these prostitutes and *vendepatrias*.

Claudia’s self-exploitation therefore constitutes a means of survival—but at a high cost. As a prostitute, she is able to afford certain Special Period “luxuries,” such as soap, shampoo, and meat to care for her son. As a single mother, she is only able to acquire these items at the cost of selling her soul—a metaphor that Claudia also links to a collective “we” that includes all of Cuba. Claudia muses:

¿Putear o no putear? He aquí el dilema. ¡Y pensar que íbamos a acabar con las lacras del viejo imperio! Pero nada salió como esperamos. Ahora todos venden su alma al diablo o al mejor postor con tal de conseguir un jabón o un viaje al extranjero. No importa el fin ni los medios; no importa si el acuerdo se hace entre sábanas o en un bar. (122)

Claudia emphasizes that there are different ways in which all Cubans survive—whether they be business deals made in bars or sexual contracts made between the sheets—Claudia signals that prostitution is simply one form of many kinds of exploitation and that *everyone* is selling their soul for goods—but this does not comfort or alleviate Claudia’s shame. Aquiles, a friend of Claudia’s, laughs in surprise at her embarrassment at being a prostitute: “Todavía sigues con esa bobera? Mira que eres zonza, hija. Media Cuba es jinetera y todavía tu te preocupas por el qué dirán” (266). Aquiles’s statement reinforces how commonplace prostitution is on the island, but the statement also shows how Claudia grapples with the guilt and shame of her means of survival—a guilt that undoubtedly contributes to the spiritual hunger that shadows her.

The novel also outlines how duplicity is a consequence of these exploits for Cubans in the 1990s, highlighting how many Cubans have learned to live dual lives in order to survive. In an attempt to keep the shameful side of her life hidden, Claudia appropriates an alternate identity when she acts as a prostitute. By using the pseudonym *La Mora*, Claudia avoids problems with Cuban authorities while she also distances herself from her “real” life, which revolves around caring for her son. When customers ask what the name means, her friend, Sissie (who gave her the name), explains that it comes from José Martí’s poem, “La perla de la mora.” Within eight short verses and two stanzas, the poem describes a Moorish girl from Trípoli, who—tired of looking at her pink pearl—throws the pearl into the sea with disdain. In the second stanza, however, the poem states that, a few years later, the townspeople listened to “la mora loca” as she cried out to the sea: “¡Oh mar! ¡oh mar! ¡devuélveme mi perla!” The novel’s reference to Martí’s poem explicitly links Claudia to Cuban culture. The poem’s verses also poignantly speak to Claudia’s ambivalent situation of being both drawn and repelled by her country—of having both disdain and longing for a polemical, yet beloved homeland. The racial aspect of the poem is also significant. Within Claudia’s personal context, using the name “*La Mora*” is suggestive of racial and social hierarchies that exist between her two identities: Claudia, the sacred mother, and *La Mora*, the shameful and racialized prostitute.

Claudia’s split identity is further emphasized by her two ex-lovers’ dialogue. By coincidence, Ruben and Gilberto are two friends who, unawares, have had a romantic affair with the same woman. Up until the end of the novel, the men describe *La Mora* and Claudia as two different people, unaware that she is one and the same person. Ruben brags that Claudia was the perfect woman, a lady in the kitchen and a slut in the bedroom (17). But, Gilberto responds to Ruben’s story about Claudia, stating: “Al lado de ella [*La Mora*], tu Claudia es una niña de teta”

(31). What is more, Gilberto falsely senses that he never came to know the *true* character of *La Mora*, who was often guarded and kept her secrets to herself.

Allegorically connected to Claudia's split identities, the island is also divided: one Cuba exists for the Cubans (in its socialist form) and the other Cuba exists for the tourists (which is more capitalistic). While the government makes money with tourists enjoying Cuba's luxurious hotels and beaches, the Cuban people desperately search for creative ways not to starve in the socialist system, for example, cooking and eating banana peels. In a sarcastic tone, Claudia highlights the incongruity of these two worlds: "Existen otras delicias por el estilo, todas ellas igualmente folclóricas y típicas del país. Es una lástima que no se las muestren a los turistas" (103). So as to not disrupt a constructed fantasy of paradise being *sold*, tourists are deliberately shielded from the harsh economic realities on the island. The government also deceives tourists in order to perpetuate the myth of the Revolution's success and its loyalty to its ideals. Just as Claudia uses deceit and split identities, Cuba as a nation is also framed as disingenuous and fragmented. The novel emphasizes that nearly all Cubans participate in capitalistic enterprises that betray socialist ideals. Claudia goes so far as to explicitly equate prostitution to capitalism: "Era como vivir en el capitalismo. Qué maravilla: ser independiente, trabajar a cambio de dólares y, por si fuera poco, ganar más por cada jornada adicional... Así era un gusto. Así era un placer la vida de proletaria" (220). Despite living in socialist Cuba, Claudia calls herself a wage-earner within a capitalist system, which calls attention to a split capitalist/socialist economy, despite the official socialist and communist rhetoric propagated by the Castro government. And, with tongue in cheek, Claudia also alludes to how independence and freedom to earn money (even as a prostitute) is better than being a part of socialism.

Endless Cycles of Violence

As Avery Gordon affirms, ghosts often linger among the living for good reasons. Muba and *El Indio* haunt the living in order to contribute to a larger hegemonic historical discourse that informs Cuban identity. As such, they serve as reminders of an unfavorable national past—where indigenous people were wiped out of existence and Africans were forcefully brought to the island as slaves. Claudia's interactions with the spirits and her mystic experiences allow her to learn about a past that has been glossed over by history books. She learns beyond a doubt that exploitation and violence have always been a part of Cuban identity. And, what is more, these legacies cannot be eliminated by simply ignoring them, because they always persist as lingering manifestations: the mere presence of ghosts in Cuba's Special Period points out the connectedness or fluidity of the past to the present.

One manifestation of this fluidity of time is clearly seen in the case of the Chinese mulatto, Onolorio. Cycles of violence are particularly evident in how his ghostly presence is the result of his murder. In vengeance, he haunts and tempts Claudia, because a prostitute caused his death. He only vaguely explains his past: "Aquí terminó mi vida por culpa de una puta. Ahora me sirvo de ellas" (122). The two other principal spirits, *El Indio* and Muba, do not hold on to the violence that created them in their lifetimes, but they do serve as reminders of a tainted legacy. With the arrival of the Spaniards at the time of conquest, *El Indio's* past is marked by violence and exploitation that eventually wipes out the entire Taíno indigenous population on the island. As for Muba, the novel hardly focuses on her own exploitation as a slave kidnapped and sold into slavery. Still, Muba is given a voice and an audience to tell her own story—one that does not simply define her as a victim—but as a strong survivor who ultimately flourishes in her time.

Chaviano's novel ultimately leaves Claudia grappling with how she should use her newly acquired knowledge and self-awareness to move forward into the future. Considering her options for the first time, the narrator describes: "Irse de Cuba: por primera vez lo sopesó seriamente... lo haría sin miedos, sin tener que fingir o mentir más" (221). As Claudia struggles to manage her two identities, the prospect of casting off all shame and duplicity is tempting. But at the end of the novel, Claudia's crisis of duplicity and inner-conflict culminates when she finds herself face to face with both Ruben and Gilberto and the men suddenly realize that *La Mora* and Claudia are one and the same people. This unexpected meeting occurs in the midst of large protests against the Cuban government for sinking a hijacked ferryboat that was heading for the United States on July 13, 1994 and that ultimately drowned 32 Cubans. As an allegorical connection to Claudia's inner-turmoil, protesters represent a divided Cuban nation in crisis as they pass the streets, chanting "Libertad" and demanding justice.

After being haunted, Claudia understands how the past can perpetuate violence, but on the other hand, she sees that it also can be a source of inspiration that gives foundation and pride to national and individual identities. When her two worlds eventually collide at the end of the novel, Claudia struggles with two impossible choices. The first option is to stay in Cuba, which would obligate her to continue fighting a powerfully ingrained social and cultural system that (in the novel) is posited as unchanged throughout Cuba's history. And the second option is to leave Cuba, which would allow her to escape from a social and cultural system that has obliged her to live a duplicitous life. She also realizes, however, that abandoning Cuba would be tantamount to abandoning the spirits and land that have given her a sense of identity.

Chaviano's novel concludes in ambiguity, leaving the reader to grapple with the difficult choices with which Claudia is presented. This polemical situation is what Claudia calls the

“lingering question that haunts her generation” and therefore allegorically refers to Cuba’s situation as a whole: will Claudia submit herself to further exploitation as Cuba has, or, can the Cuban nation change its social reality, something that not even the Revolution was able to fully achieve? *El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre* is an exploration of Cuban identity and of intimate self-understanding. Just as Ayala ends his play in uncertainty, Chaviano’s novel leaves the future to indecision and ambiguity, imploring that the reader contemplate all that he or she has learned to move forward.

Conclusion

The ghosts that beckon to Carmen and Claudia bring to light the subjective nature of reality and truth. In Ayala’s play, Carmen is not very responsive to her haunted experience. At her deathbed, she asks about “her,” but there is little evidence of the impact Malinalli has had on Carmen or Salvador. This lack of responsiveness is evocative of the time in which she passes away: the start of civil war in El Salvador. Written in the 1990s, Alaya’s play entreats its contemporary audience to recognize what Carmen was unable to see or fully appreciate. The play haunts its audience, announcing the importance of understanding the past—especially in terms of how race and gender ideologies are formed—in order to better understand the present and change the future. Claudia, on the other hand, is profoundly impacted by her mystical and ghostly experiences that ultimately prepare her to decide on how she wants to move forward in her life. Her personal predicament and choices speak to a similar national crisis that depends on recognizing and responding to the deeply engrained gendered and racial ideologies that have kept the Cuban Revolution from fully achieving a truly egalitarian society. Just as Claudia’s story ends in ambiguity, the novel likewise hints at Cuba’s uncertain future. For both Claudia

and the Cuban nation, the act of choosing one's own future imparts hope to the reader, even if that hope is fragile.

Thus, rather than being removed from reality, the ghost stories within works such as *Mujer de las aguas* and *El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre* are intimately tied and rooted in their respective historic and national realities told from the perspective of peripheral voices. With the unfinished business that haunts each nation's reality, the two works speak to the difficulty and complexity of reforming firmly entrenched ideologies that dominant authorities reinforce and manipulate in order to consolidate their own political power. The victims of destructive ideologies concerning race and gender serve as ghostly messengers in both works as they signal that the past is not separated from the present or future, but rather it is part of a continuum of time and consequences. The ghosts are stubborn reminders to the living that the normalization of traditional structures of power ensures that social hierarchies are passed down from century to century, recycling acts of violence, discrimination, and exploitation through the years. But as well, they hold within them the "utopian," inviting readers and audiences to examine these repeating destructive cycles and to think profoundly about how a new awareness might help in the search for answers.

Chapter Two: Uncanny Domestic Spaces in Contemporary Costa Rican and Cuban Literature

In the short story “Lluvia en el trópico” (2007) by the Salvadoran author Claudia Hernández, a first-person narrator describes the sensation of waking up one morning to the sound of rain and the stench of animal feces. Due to an ongoing feud with the neighbor and her dogs’ incessant barking, the narrator suspects that the neighbor has vengefully thrown dog feces at his house. Upon opening the front door, however, the narrator discovers instead that animal feces have rained down on the house the night before, covering every inch of the city with shit. Seeing no immediate remedy, the city dwellers decide to go on with their lives by trekking through the knee-deep excrement to their jobs and trying to eat their lunches. Eventually, city workers slowly clean up the feces, which the officials have named “una enfermedad ambiental” (70). Life gradually returns to normal, except for the fact that everyone begins to miss the stench of excrement after having lived with it for so long. As a result, dog owners begin selling their dogs’ feces and they also allow their animals to defecate inside the house—so as to maintain the now-desired smell of excrement. The narrator concludes by dismissively saying that—at the end of it all—one always adjusts to everything and anything.

Hernández’s short story illustrates a recurrent manifestation of disenchantment within Central American and Cuban literature at the turn of the 20th century. Hers is not a singular case.

Many writers, playwrights, and poets¹ from the two regions have published short stories, novels, and poems that tell the story of human beings living in vanquished, filthy, or decaying environments. Defying affluent socio-economic class sensibilities, the juxtaposition of a community or domesticated space within wretched, hopeless living conditions can serve as a particularly powerful literary tool to expose socially constructed understandings of normalcy within a Special Period or Post-Revolutionary context. Hernández's "Lluvia en el trópico" hints at a society's collective abandonment of hope for any real or tangible socio-economic change: unable to do anything but resign themselves to their dire situation, the townspeople quickly learn to live and even desire that which has become "normal." And just as Hernández irreverently imagines how that which is seen as odd, insufferable, and awful, can eventually become normal, expected, or even desired, other writers have used abject and unsettling environments to challenge social norms.

In this chapter, I employ psychoanalytic categories to address Costa Rican and Cuban narratives in which, like Hernandez's townspeople, the protagonists accept the normalization of disaster and decay. Critics like Jerry Hoeg and Ana Patricia Rodríguez have affirmed that literary portrayals of human beings living in decay, waste, and ruin serve as representations of

¹ See Ena Lucía Portela's novel *Cien botellas en una pared* (2002); Carmen Naranjo's short story "Y vendimos la lluvia" (1989); Pedro Antonio Valdez's novel *Carnaval de Sodama* (2003); various short stories by Jacinta Escudos, including "Biografía de un pequeño indeseable" (1993); director Ishtar Yasin's movie *El camino* (2007); and various short stories by Claudia Hernández, such as "Trampa para cucarachas" (2002).

disenchantment in both Central American and Cuban literature.² In particular, I seek to complicate the notion of disenchanted normalcy (or grotesque notions of normalcy) by exploring gender's role within abject or uncanny spaces. In the novel *Única mirando al mar* (1993) by Costa Rican author Fernando Contreras Castro and the short story "Al fondo del cementerio" (1999) by Cuban writer Ena Lucía Portela, I examine how physical space functions as one structure of patriarchal power that traditionally relegates women to the private sphere and excludes them from public places of power. Both stories are set within the space of the home, but centered within unlikely, ruinous environments—an element that has the potential to disrupt normative gender roles typically found in those traditional domestic spaces. I also look at how a normative social order disrupted by ruin and abjection provides a theoretical space in which readers may not only see the social-constructedness of gendered roles and spheres of influence, but also to imagine new ways of being and inhabiting the domestic sphere.

Within cultures of disenchantment, relationships between the Self, the Other, and broader social expectations are strained and distorted, which is why categories and patterns recognized as part of psychoanalysis are effective interpretive tools for literary texts produced in Cuba's

² See Jerry Hoeg's "The Landscape of the Consumer Society: Fernando Contreras Castro's *Unica mirando al mar*" (2009) and Ana Patricia Rodríguez's "Wasted Opportunities" in *Dividing the Isthmus* (2009).

Special Period and in Post-revolutionary societies.³ By examining Freud's concept of the uncanny, my readings will focus on how the destabilization of traditional dualisms reveal a deep uneasiness that is associated with the changing power dynamics between the sexes in both societies. Though the single-family home is a familiar domestic space associated with traditional values, it also evokes the German term *unheimlich*, or "unhomely," a term from Freud that is often translated as "uncanny" (or, something unfamiliar).⁴ Freud's framing of the production of the uncanny will allow me in this chapter to explore how unsettling feelings are triggered when the familiar, domestic space of the home (positively associated with life, tradition, and order) blends with unfamiliar, repressed feelings toward death. In the essay "The Uncanny," Freud explores how unsettling feelings are triggered when the familiar blends with the unfamiliar or,

³ Seymour Menton notes that this period began with the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union along with the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (1990) and the signing of the peace accords in El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1996).

⁴ Freud explains that while the German word *heimlich* means "homely" or something "familiar, intimate, and friendly" (222), the word *unheimlich* ("unhomely") is not the opposite of what is familiar, but rather, it is the blending of the familiar with the unfamiliar: "for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" ("The Uncanny" 241).

when repressed impulses or ideas surface to consciousness.⁵ Furthermore, Freud explains that many people experience uncanny feelings “in the highest degree” when confronted with death, dead bodies, or the return of the dead (241), which is repeatedly seen in both literary works explored in this chapter.

As stewardesses in charge of their grotesque, domestic spheres, Portela’s and Contreras’s female protagonists are linked by a maternal association with Otherness and death. Drawing from Freud, I establish connections between the maternal figure, death, and uncanny reactions in order to highlight deeply engrained cultural misogynist beliefs that frame women as Other. The maternal figure and her association with death are typically overlooked in Freud’s Oedipal Complex,⁶ a concept that is central to his theory on psychosexual development. Also known as the “father complex,” the Oedipal Complex describes a child’s unconscious sexual desire for the maternal figure and a desire to kill the paternal figure, who stands as the obstacle or rival to his erotic desires. Freud later described a “negative form” of the complex, where the maternal and paternal roles are switched, wherein a child can also desire to kill his mother and be loved by his father. Theorists like Diane E. Jonte-Pace also note that Freud makes occasional connections

⁵ Freud defines the uncanny as “nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (241).

⁶ Jonte Pace iterates: “But, on rare occasions, and with hesitation, Freud discusses death fantasies in relation to the mother, rather than the father, exploring matrophobic and misogynist fears and fantasies: fears of the mother, desires for her death, and fantasies of immortality... [these explorations] represent analyses and interpretations of psychological and cultural misogyny” (2).

between the maternal body and the Afterlife through the uncanny. Jonte-Pace iterates that Freud's exploration of death fantasies (in relation to the mother) point to "matriphobic and misogynist fears and fantasies," which, according to Jonte-Pace, represent an analysis of psychological and cultural misogyny (2). Therefore, familiar, yet repressed ideas that associate the maternal with death and immortality incite uncanny feelings in an individual. As life's ultimate aim is to reach death (according to Freud's theory of the "death drive"), the place of beginnings (i.e. the maternal womb) becomes the end (the tomb) in a circular fashion. Jonte-Pace notes that this circular tendency in Freud's writings links the uncanny (and the maternal) with both birth and death: "[h]uman beginnings are linked with endings [...] images [of circularity] return us to our place of origin, but leave us with an uncanny sense of alienation" (68). Thus, literary representations of uncanny maternal bodies and domestic spaces link death to the mother. While an explicit death drive toward the mother is absent in Portela's and Contreras's work, a strong connection between mother and death is established, as each female protagonist takes on a maternal, dominant roles in uncanny domestic ambiances of waste and ruin.

In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject is similar to Freud's concept of the uncanny in that what is unfamiliar (or Other) tends to produce negative, unsettling feelings of horror or distaste. In Freud's concept of the uncanny, a dead body is experienced as foreign (abject), but also strangely familiar (in that it was once a living person). According to Kristeva, abjection (a visceral, human reaction to horror) occurs when normative or familiar boundaries (that define identity, system, and order) are disturbed (4). Thus the abject, uncanny domestic space is redefined by erasing and blending together boundaries that divide and separate dualistic categories such as life/death, cleanliness/filth, and man/woman. Consequently, the comingling of waste, death, and Woman works alongside the uncanny and opens up a critique of

gender relations in Costa Rican and Cuban societies by revealing hegemonic and internalized cultural values that denigrate the feminine and associate it with abjection.

By manipulating uncanny and abject elements within the stories explored in this chapter, the domestic space serves as an unattractive metaphor for each nation's future: the dump in San José and the cemetery in Havana are bleak microcosms for Cuban and Costa Rican societies. In these narratives, their dysfunction is a product of destructive patriarchal traditions: as discussed in detail in this dissertation's introduction, these traditions include economic and political policies that ultimately reinforce a private/public division of labor between men and women. As the theorist Susan Berger has suggested, "globalizing forces" in Central America have exploited women as representatives for restructuring gender roles that fit within neoliberal policies. For example, as government social programs are cut, women have taken on traditional roles as mothers, health care providers, teachers, and social workers to meet community and familial needs (5). In Cuba, despite the nation's commitment to creating progressive gender-based legislation, deeply ingrained and persistent gender ideologies give shape to social hierarchies of power. As Johanna Moya-Fábregas confirms, these gendered ideologies are imbedded in the revolutionary government's constructed image of womanhood, which centers on traditional domestic characteristics (such as those attributed to the mother and the wife), while also framing women as useful "producers" within the Revolution (62). However, Cuba's economic crisis during the Special Period led to the closure of many social programs, including those on which women depended (like daycares) for them to work outside of the home (Campuzano, *Las muchachas de la Habana* 40; Del Mar 63-65). As divorce and single-mother homes increased,⁷

⁷ As Del Mar notes, many of those people who fled Cuba were, in their majority, men (64).

many Cuban women were expected (in addition to providing for their families) to return to their traditional roles as caregivers for children and the elderly (del Mar 71). Both works speak to the manner in which deeply ingrained gender ideologies (about women's natural inclination toward motherhood and the domestic sphere) become especially apparent during times of economic turmoil. These economic crises are manifested in the uncanny domestic environments depicted in each work.

In Contreras's and Portela's works, the uncanny home is ideal for illustrating how gendered ideologies give shape to the larger, disenchanting realities of each respective society. As academic Lucía Guerra-Cunningham notes, it is within the home that a child understands and accepts the social laws and expectations established in society: "Más importante aún, la casa es el primer lugar de entrenamiento para los futuros ciudadanos: es allí donde los niños aprenden el control y pautas culturales del cuerpo, los primeros procesos de normalización social, un sentido de la individualidad y los guiones performativos de 'lo femenino' y 'lo masculino'" (820). Consequently, home environments in crisis (both physically and emotionally) disclose the destabilization of traditional gendered behaviors or performances. Many times, protagonists' reactions to uncanny domestic environments critique or challenge the status quo by revealing its social constructedness and by revealing the porosity of the boundaries between false or unnecessary dualisms. But these traditional, socially established dualisms or norms can also be strategically manipulated (and sometimes, unwarily appropriated) by female protagonists in order to circumvent a system that marginalizes them. In the stories examined in this chapter, the female protagonists' supposed affinity to and authority in their macabre domestic spheres facilitate the realization of self-determination that defies the status quo. Nevertheless, the two stories' female protagonists do not achieve equal results: while Portela's protagonist is successful

in fostering a space that protects her from an institutionalized patriarchal system (via the State), Contreras' uncanny mother ends up reestablishing the same traditional system within her highly untraditional domain of influence.

Death and ruin are abject elements that provide the narratives studied here with images that suggest cynicism and disenchantment, and they also stage the critique and the subversion of traditional patriarchal structures of power (like physical space) in Costa Rican and Cuban societies. When domestic spaces become unfamiliar, readers are prompted to imagine alternatives to a normative socially accepted order. These alternative visions of traditional life can be linked to what literary scholar Lucie Armitt calls feminist "grotesque utopias" (16). As noted in the introduction of this dissertation, feminist literary utopias invite the disruption of normative lifestyles (which are particular to each individual's socio-historical context), because this disruption opens up the opportunity to transform traditional narratives into something new. Grotesque utopias in literature embrace social upheaval (the disruption of the status quo), wherein female protagonists are afforded an innocuous space to explore and grapple with self-determination and empowerment. Both stories' unsettling domestic environments—of stinking garbage dumps and cockroach-infested houses—serve as rhetorical literary strategies (as grotesque utopias) for disrupting traditional understandings of normalcy and perversion (or notions of natural and unnatural states) by accentuating how aberrant conditions become normal for the characters in the stories. The abjection produced from mixing dualistic boundaries, systems, and identities, calls attention (and thus opens critique) to strict and limiting understandings of the status quo. And, in this unlikely and creative space of the uncanny—a mixing of familiar and unfamiliar elements, where traditional gender and sexual ideologies are especially foregrounded—the reader is invited to rethink conventional and hierarchal structures

of power, especially as they relate to gendered structures of power in Central American and Cuban society.

The first chapter of *Única mirando al mar* begins with the sun rising over Río Azul, a real San José garbage dump, which is overrun with swarms of flies, circling vultures, and *buzos* (or garbage divers or pickers) who search for recyclable items to sell. The novel's female protagonist, Única Oconitrillo, submits to her reality as a discarded human being and maternal figure within the traditionally structured community of *buzos* in Río Azul. The story begins when an omniscient narrator describes Única's discovery of a "discarded" older man from the middle of the dump, whom she helps to adapt to the new, uncanny environment. Eventually, Única, the man, and *el Bacán* (Única's adoptive son who is a mentally handicapped 20 year-old "boy") form an unlikely family unit. Through the entirety of the novel, Única passively resigns herself to the status quo by helping to construct a parallel world that perpetuates the same social structure and dualisms that exist outside of the dump. As she is martyred and defeated by the end of the novel, Única's story depicts how traditional gender norms circumvent individualized choices pertaining to social behavior or self-development within contemporary Costa Rican society.

In Ena Lucía Portela's short story "Al fondo del cementerio" (1999), the female protagonist, Lavinia, defiantly resists the normative lifestyle that Contreras's novel recreates. While Lavinia is the maternal stewardess of a ruinous domesticated space, her Oedipal relationship with her younger brother, Lisandro, subverts and destabilizes the idealized maternal archetype that is embodied by Contreras's protagonist, Única. Lavinia languishes in the squalor and filth of her rotting home as she defends it from a state-employee pest exterminator intent on saving the house from an infestation of cockroaches. While the outside, public world (embodied

by the exterminator) tries to “penetrate” the house, the story also follows Lavinia’s unorthodox and conflictive relationship with her brother and her new lover—a macabre-looking man called *el Momia*. The gothic setting and characters are abject manifestations that destabilize an ideal home space while forcing a re-examination of what “normal” means in an upset Patriarchy. Thus, in distinct ways, the authors examined in this chapter either reconcile or reimagine gender roles of “femininity” within the uncanny domesticated space, which inevitably discloses the decaying and degenerative gender relations and ecological environments that are depicted in each story.

The uncanny plays a crucial role in both narratives, evoking visceral, unconscious anxieties about disturbing the status quo through unsettling representations of domestic spaces in a garbage dump and in a cemetery. I explore the explicit abject/feminine connection found in each story as well as the male protagonists’ anxious reactions to shifting gender relations. Contreras’s and Portela’s works link women (namely, the maternal figure) to the abject categories of death and waste. Though these abject domestic spaces are dehumanizing in many ways, both narratives demonstrate that they can also redefine traditional spaces by erasing and blending together boundaries that divide and separate dualistic categories such as life/death, cleanliness/filth, and man/woman. In other words, the co-mingling of waste, death, and the maternal figure opens up a critique of gender relations in Costa Rican and Cuban societies by revealing how hegemonic and internalized cultural values denigrate the feminine and associate it with abjection. Though the critiques of normative gender relations in both narratives share many characteristics, their resolutions ultimately complicate each other. On one hand, Contreras’s novel falls short of its preliminary critique by recreating the very same gendered system that initially posited Única as an abject Other. In this manner, the novel’s main critical intervention is

in fact its depiction of a gender system that traps the female protagonist within a limited, normative lifestyle—a lifestyle that ultimately renders her silent. On the other hand, Portela’s short story unabashedly upsets and challenges traditional gender relations as it disavows normative family structures. The two works therefore share in common the co-mingling of abject categories that ultimately link women to death, filth, and the Other—but they arrive at social critique to differing degrees and dimensions.

Fernando Contreras Castro’s *Única mirando al mar*

Maternal Agency in Uncanny Spaces

As a celebrated and well-known Costa Rican writer and academic, Fernando Contreras Castro has authored various novels, short stories, and essays.⁸ Of his works, the novels *Los Peor* (1995) and *El tibio recinto de la oscuridad* (2000) have won national literary awards and the novels *Única mirando al mar* (1993) and *Cierto azul* (2009) are recommended readings by Costa Rica’s Ministry of Public Education (“*Fragmentos de la tierra prometida*”). Contreras’s literary production tends to focus on national issues of social inequality and his protagonists, like *Única*, oftentimes take on collective identities of marginalized groups. As Carlos González Hernández notes about Contreras’s work: “la realidad se condensa en la vida de los personajes” (4). Contreras is considered part of a generation of Costa Rican writers known as the

⁸ Contreras’s works include novels, such as *Única mirando al mar* (1993), *Los Peor* (1995), *El tibio recinto de la oscuridad* (2000), *Canto de sirena* (2006), *Cierto Azul* (2009) and books of short stories, such as *Urbanoscopio* (1997), *Sonambulario* (2005), *Fragmentos de la tierra prometida* (2012), and *Relatos* (2013).

“*Generación del Desencanto.*”⁹ In the introduction to an anthology of Costa Rican short stories, Guillermo Barquero and Juan Murillo describe the generation’s thematic tendency in terms of a larger, regional disenchantment: “predomina una preocupación del denuncia, la crítica social, y las reivindicaciones de las minorías étnicas y sexuales visible en obras que rondan el desencanto originado en el fracaso de los proyectos revolucionarios de los sesenta y setenta y el surgimiento del neoliberalismo y sus políticas afines” (XII). As Laura Barbas-Rhoden notes, although Costa Rica did not experience social revolution, it felt the effects of revolution in the region, especially as Costa Rica saw many exiles and illegal immigrants flood into the country (173).

These elements of disenchantment and rhetorical strategies are revealed in *Única mirando al mar* (1993). In the novel, an omniscient narrator follows the birth of a family (complete with father, mother, and child) within a garbage dump, a place where things often meet their end—not their beginning. Paradoxically, the San José garbage dump¹⁰ in Contreras’s novel serves as a grave for discarded commodities and people while it also is a place for the creation of new identities, opportunities, and communities. The novel begins with Momboño Moñagallo, an unemployed and desperate older man who joins a landfill community of *buzos*, or trash “divers,” after he has literally thrown himself away into a garbage truck. At the moment of the man’s metaphorical death, a woman *buzo* named Única Oconitrillo assists Momboño in his rebirth within the *buzo* community. Having lived in the *botadero* for many years, Única rescues the man, nurses him back to health, and gives him the compassion and empathy that he

⁹ This generation also includes writers such as Ana Cristina Rossi, Tatiana Lobo, Uriel Quesada, and Ana Istarú (Viquez, Guillermo, and Murillo XII).

¹⁰ San José’s Río Azul was a real landfill created in 1972 and finally closed in 2007.

could not find in his prior existence as a “normal” human being. Just as importantly, Única also helps to restore Momboñombo’s sense of masculinity and pride, which he had lost in the exterior world beyond the dump.

The dump, Río Azul, is a symbolic consequence of global and neoliberal policies that have exacerbated socio-economic inequalities in the last last 30 years. While Costa Rica is generally identified as Central America’s most prosperous, democratic, and ecologically minded country, in reality, the nation struggles with high rates of poverty as well as maintaining ecological sustainability, thanks (in large part) to the liberalized economic policies that were adopted in the 1980s.¹¹ According to a 2014 report from the CATO Institute, Juan Carlos Hidalgo writes that despite healthy economic growth rates over the past 30 years, Costa Rica has not been able to significantly reduce poverty since the early 1990s (“Growth without Poverty Reduction”). This disproportionate trend is attributed to Costa Rica’s liberalized economy, which maintains a strong mercantilist bias.¹² Hidalgo predicts that, with Costa Rica’s biased economic

¹¹ Hidalgo notes that Costa Rica’s “liberalized” economic model maintains a strong mercantilist bias. Hidalgo writes: “Successive administrations adopted monetary, trade, tax, and regulatory regimes that benefited the export-oriented sectors of the economy at the expense of the overall population, particularly the poor” (“Growth without Poverty Reduction”).

¹² Hidalgo explains: “Successive administrations adopted monetary, trade, tax, and regulatory regimes that benefited the export-oriented sectors of the economy at the expense of the overall population, particularly the poor” (“Growth without Poverty Reduction”).

model and high number of unskilled workers,¹³ the gap in salaries between skilled and unskilled laborers will only continue to widen in the years to come. In terms of ecology, Costa Rica has been heralded (and commercially advertised) as a natural paradise. In connection to the neoliberal policies that were implemented in the 1980s, the Costa Rican political and economic establishment began promoting a “market-centered conservation” that commodified the nation’s natural resources (Herrera-Rodríguez 198).¹⁴ As a result, Costa Rican politicians have sought to preserve natural resources considered monetarily valuable, while ignoring the country’s “other” realities (i.e. those lands or regions not attractive for marketing purposes) (Herrera-Rodríguez 199).¹⁵

¹³ As the 1980s marked an acute economic crisis for Costa Rica (and much of Latin America), many desperate parents were forced to withdraw their teenagers from school to send them to work, creating a “lost generation” of unskilled workers.

¹⁴ Mauricio Herrera-Rodríguez explains that this practice has encouraged uneven practices of conservation that typically are applied only to those resources/lands that are profitable within an “international real-estate market.”

¹⁵ Furthermore, government officials in the 21st century not only seem incapable of stopping or reversing the pollution of streams, air and soils, but that they also continue to participate in controversial extractive practices (like mining), killing sharks for their dorsal fins, using biocides, and encouraging careless tourist developments (Herrera-Rodríguez 195).

Perhaps, then, it is no wonder why Contreras's work is a celebrated text in Costa Rican literature.¹⁶ *Única mirando el mar* makes a compelling critique of the nation's apathetic ecological practices and treatment of marginalized groups. Many Latin American literary theorists like Ana Patricia Rodríguez, Jerry Hoeg, Michael T. Millar, and Minor Calderón Salas¹⁷ have all noted how the novel is a captivating literary representation of Central America's struggle for environmental sustainability amid a wasteful and neoliberal consumer economy. As such, Contreras's work is representative of various other Central American texts that similarly entertain themes of waste and excess with strong tones of disenchanting cynicism.¹⁸ Critics like Hoeg, Calderón, and Rodríguez have also pointed out that, while Contreras's novel critiques the nation's inept management of the Río Azul garbage dump and its *buzos*, it does nothing to subvert the conventional family structure or social values within Costa Rican society. The novel commemorates how a Costa Rican community survives dire situations of economic crisis,

¹⁶ In the past two decades, it has also been required reading for the nation's 9th grade students (Hoeg 177).

¹⁷ See Rodríguez's *Dividing the Isthmus* (2009), Hoeg's *Reading and Writing the Latin American Landscape* (2009), Millar's "Los ciegos ven mejor lo invisible: Visión, ceguera, y crítica social en la literatura contemporánea costarricense" (2013), Calderón's "Los cronistas de lo urbano en la literatura costarricense" (2009).

¹⁸ For example, see Nicaraguan Giaconda Belli's novel *Wasala: Memorial del futuro* (1996), the Costa Rican film *El camino* (2008) directed by Ishtar Yasin Gutiérrez, Salvadoran Jacinta Escudos's short story "Pequeña biografía de un indeseable" from her book *Contra-corriente* (1993), and Costa Rican Carmen Naranjo's 1989 short story "Y vendimos la lluvia."

maintains dignity in the face of harsh adversity, and keeps traditional family values alive, all despite the grim circumstances surrounding the country. Particularly with the recreation of hierarchical gender roles within the *buzo* community, the novel undoubtedly advocates, celebrates, and mimics traditional social and cultural values found outside of the *botadero*.

While an explicit critique of traditional, patriarchal relations is practically absent from the novel, I contend that the narrative makes a paradoxical and inadvertent social critique of traditional familial and gender structures by revealing the female protagonist's tragic fate within the context of Costa Rica's neoliberal, globalized state. Theorists like Marlise Matos, Clarissa Paradis, and Jennifer Bickham Mendez have noted how neoliberal policies have proven especially problematic for women in Latin America, who have borne the brunt of neoliberal structural adjustment.¹⁹ As government regulation decreases in Central American states, privatization and government cutbacks profoundly affect women, who are the primary caretakers of children and the elderly (Beckham 12). Única's final outcome ultimately illustrates the destructive and limiting nature of traditional gender roles that are reinforced by neoliberal policies. Hoeg claims that Contreras' rendering of Única as a "faithful portrayal of human nature" has stimulated the novel's popularity in Costa Rica (172). As such, Única represents the idealized Costa Rican woman: an innately graceful, kind, and sacrificial matriarch. Following this logic, her fate is also representative of many other Costa Rican women's fate, one that renders women both silent and submissive within the traditional familial structures and gender

¹⁹ See Marlise Matos and Clarissa Paradis's "Los feminismos latinoamericanos y el Estado" (2013); and Jennifer Bickham Mendez's "Gender and Citizenship in a Global Context: The Struggle for Maquila Workers' Rights in Nicaragua" (2002).

roles found in the country's social structure that are particularly reinforced during times of economic crises.

Thus, despite that her name implies her “uniqueness,” Única is portrayed as a strong, independent “every woman.” Literary critic Benedicto Víquez Guzmán describes Única as representative of the collective lives of trashpickers: “[...] ella no es tan única, es el símbolo de muchas mujeres y hombres, que como ella, representan una sociedad desigual, injusta, corrupta, despiadada. La vida de Única es la misma de miles de seres que viven en los basureros [...]” (“Fernando Contreras Castro”). In terms of gender, Única also willingly accepts her role as a maternal archetype within the *botadero* community. As the theorist Misha Kokotovic notes in the essay “Neoliberal Noir: Contemporary Central American Crime Fiction as Social Criticism,” many postwar narratives, primarily written by men, tend to reinforce traditional gender roles: “perhaps unwittingly, [many postwar narratives] thematize and in some cases, even seem to endorse the relegation of women to their traditional roles” (18-19). Indeed, Momboñombo praises Única in her instrumental role in founding the Río Azul community. He explains that she began the community as a way to reproduce and preserve what he calls “la vida misma” (127), which is framed as a normative life that follows traditional Western ideals of family. As a maternal, unifying figure, Única serves the *buzos* in the most traditional way possible: by perpetuating and bringing together traditional Costa Rican values that are found outside of the *botadero*. As Amy Kaminsky asserts, being a woman creates the obligation to passively reproduce (not to produce) and “to maintain whatever is worth maintaining in the culture,” which she argues serves masculinist agendas of preserving a system that favors men (16). Despite the squalor of the dump, Única preserves the most traditionally important aspects of Costa Rican

culture, which include family relations, community ties, and the emotional security of having a protective space to call home.

While clearly a strong and capable woman, Única is far from being a social revolutionary: she is fully resigned to a passive fate decided by her gender and socio-economic class and, what's more, she has no interest in changing the way things are. In Contreras's novel, Única expresses her resignation and her apathetic feelings towards hope for change. She explains to Momboño when he first arrives how one must come to tolerate the flies and the stench of the dump. She states: "...y no podés hacer nada más que acostumbrarte, porque o te acostumbrás o te jodás" (*sic*, 24). Contrarily, Momboño, who comes to represent the paternal head of the family, resists such passivity and insists on fighting for the garbage pickers' rights. Unmoved, Única replies: "[e]so ha sido así siempre desde que el mundo es mundo y las cosas no van a cambiar solo porque a vos se te ocurre" (107). In fact, Única insists that redemption or relief will only be achieved once she has died, a common sentiment that liberation theologians²⁰ fought against during Central America's revolutionary period. She states: "El infierno es aquí, Momboño, y yo de aquí voy derecho para el cielo... pero no vale la pena ponerse a pensar en eso. Más bien, yo le doy gracias a Dios de que todavía tenemos donde vivir y algo para comer, porque hay gente que ni eso" (24). Despite the transformable potential of the *botadero* (as an uncanny, destabilized space), Única is not interested in restructuring or reimagining an

²⁰ Liberation Theology is a religious movement that began in the 1970s and was led primarily by Roman Catholic priests in Latin America. The movement sought to combine Catholicism and revolutionary socialism.

alternate reality, but rather, she fully commits to her socially pre-assigned, conventional role as nurturer and caretaker within a conventional familial structure.

Alongside Única, Momboñoombo happily participates in and endorses the recreation of a traditional Costa Rican family unit, one that places Momboñoombo as the head of the house. As a result, his survival, new identity, and sense of masculinity are all contingent upon his inclusion in the traditional familial unit fostered by Única. As a domesticated space, the *botadero*—despite its unconventionality—gives stability and purpose to Momboñoombo’s new life as well as an identity that is still connected to the traditional social institutions found outside of the *botadero*. He becomes his own “dueño” within the recycled traditional family unit and social structures that originated outside of the *botadero*’s borders. Momboñoombo’s welcomed inclusion in this newly “completed” familial unit serves as a recognizable vestige from the outside world, a continuation of stable human connections and normalized sensibilities. The *botadero* gives both Única and Momboñoombo a family, but also a sense of normative identity and self-purpose that follows traditional gender roles and expectations within highly untraditional parameters.

But while Momboñoombo finds happiness in the “modelos aburguesados” (125), Única’s ultimate transformation by the end of the novel depicts a much more destructive fate. With the tragic death of her adoptive son, *el Bacán*, the familial structure that Única strove to create is suddenly destroyed and her reason for living is nulled. Without the identity that defined her, Única stops speaking and remains in a comatose state for the remainder of the novel. As the sacrificial Virgin Mother, Única has truly given all of herself by the end of the novel; she is completely used up, docile, and silent. Momboñoombo recognizes that Única no longer has the strength to recreate another domestic, traditional world (127). As an older woman weathered by perpetual disappointment and struggle, Única’s exhaustion is not only related to her age but also

to her disillusionment and lack of hope for a new beginning; by the end of the novel, it is evident that Única is working against the same system that defeated her in her previous life outside of the *botadero*, as a motherless, unskilled woman. Finally giving up on the status quo, Única shuts down completely and abandons her one-dimensional maternal identity, which, in turn, leaves her in a comatose state without any identity at all. Therefore, after recreating the outside world's "gendered" realities within the *botadero*, she surrenders herself to complete silence and passivity when she sees the uselessness of her efforts within a game she cannot win.

Dismayed by Única's inert state, Momboñoombo rebukes his wife in sorrow, reproaching her for having lived a lie: "Te mentiste durante veinte años de tu vida para no morir de tristeza, te trajiste todo para acá, la tradición familiar, las buenas costumbres, la maternidad, el horario de las comidas, todo, todo para no volverte loca. Pero, ¿qué locura era esa?, ¡Única, por Dios!" (124). Momboñoombo's accusation that Única lied to herself is at odds with the fact that she was painfully aware of her limited options. She wholly believes that resisting the status quo is a useless endeavor when she states: "te acostumbrás o te jodás" (27). Única is frustrated by Momboñoombo's idealist plans that she knows will never bring about social change. In fact, Única is the one character best rooted in reality, despite Momboñoombo's sudden belief that what she constructed in the *botadero* was all a lie: "todo era falso" (124). Momboñoombo's accusation against Única also hints at the question of whether or not the outside world beyond the dump is also a "lie," i.e., that it is simply a recreation and recycling of the same culture and social expectations.

Undone by his wife's silence and withdrawal from the world, Momboñoombo decides to take Única away from the *botadero* "sea" of trash to the actual seaside, where the two pass their time looking out at the ocean. Far from a romantic or optimistic ending, the novel closes with

Momboñoombo hoping that, one day, Única will return from her silent, absent state, but there is no indication or guarantee that she will ever in fact recover. In a foreshadowing moment stated earlier in the novel, the narrator notes: “Solo se deja o unas cuantas cosas que lejos de pesarle le aligeren la carga, por eso hay que ir botando el lastre para no zozobrar al final, sino encallar suavemente en alguna playa serena de la muerte” (67). Única, with her dashed hopes of creating a livable world, is silenced and disillusioned to find that the *botadero* is, in the end, not any different from the world beyond its gates, especially as the same social order is essentially still intact. And perhaps most bitterly, it is Única herself who has recreated this communal and familial system that encourages her to embody a singular maternal identity—one that ultimately impedes her from imagining or reaching a more complex self-realization.

While Hoeg initially calls Única a “classic version of Marianismo” (i.e. a self-sacrificing, moral representation of the Virgin Mother), he claims that the stereotype breaks down by the end of the novel when Única abandons all hope (172). Conversely, I insist that the end of the novel achieves the opposite effect. Única’s embodiment of *Marianismo* is played out to its limit as, after having sacrificed her life to her maternal duty, she no longer has an identity or a purpose to live. In this way, the novel inadvertently depicts the limits and flaws of *Marianismo*; Única’s story opens up questions about its impact on actual women’s lives. Despite that Momboñoombo, Única, and *el Bacán* form “la vida misma” within the (dis)utopic space of the *botadero*, it is Única who is ultimately ruined in her unchanged world. Through Única’s martyred end, the novel subtly points to the frailty of the familial system and its detrimental impact on female identity and agency. Millar writes: “La debilidad de este sistema ilusorio, no obstante, está claramente ilustrado por el proceso destructivo que experimenta Única al final de la novela” (37). Thus, Única is utterly silenced and undone once she can no longer embody the feminine

ideal that she has internalized as her only option, even within the uncanny, creative space of the *botadero*.

Intermingling Otherness in Río Azul

Única's fate is linked to the perpetuation of traditional gender ideologies in the dump. The novel critiques the "naturalness" and value of these traditional ideologies by placing them within an untraditional space, which allows the reader to see an uncanny connection between domesticity, trash, death, and Otherness. As this connection becomes evident, Contreras's novel inadvertently critiques the construction and privileging of normative and hierarchal dualisms by revealing their social constructedness. The garbage dump—a place composed of unwanted, expelled items and misfits—therefore provides a space where Othered categories can be identified and united.

Surrounded by trash, the *buzos*' domestic space sets the scene for uncanny encounters. As John Scanlan asserts, trash is uncanny in so far as it is "a ghostly foe" (160). As a byproduct of consumption, trash is most uncanny when it does not conveniently disappear. It is an unwelcome reminder of our material selves—a sign that we are not immaculate beings and that we do indeed create and expel foulness from our bodies and our homes: trash, then, comes from us; it is a part of us. Thus, dualistic boundaries are crossed when trash reappears once it has already been rejected, much like a ghost reappearing among the living. Scanlan writes that trash is a "shadow of our supposedly cleansed reality, where its method of disposal [...] ensures that it no longer really comes to light. Instead, it vanishes into a spectral reality that is uncanny" (160). Thus, waste is made into an uncanny, abject, or unsavory reminder of that which we would rather believe has not come from us or is a part of us.

In Contreras's novel, the garbage dump becomes excessively uncanny when the *familiar* culture and space (that Única recreates) is constructed within the *unfamiliar* space of the *botadero*—unfamiliar, that is, for anyone who is not a *buzo*. The excess of garbage within Única's domestic space creates emotional dissidence by subverting the familiar with the unfamiliar. In a common desire to banish trash from view, it is moved “over there,” away from *our* “here.” But, what happens if “over there” is, in fact, someone else's “here?” As trash lingers where it is not wanted, it acts like a ghost that is unable to successfully cross over the here/there boundary. In this sense, the uncanny is closely related to Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection in that the uncanny occurs with the blending of certain boundaries that are presumed to be absolute. Trash undermines cultural understandings of human being's divine separation from nature, corporeity, mortality, and the sacred space of home.

For Momboño, the *botadero* initially proves unsettling especially as he comes to grips with its uncanny aesthetics. The most striking challenge for Momboño is adapting to his life mired in filth. For example, he must learn to defecate in the open air, “el acto de cagar en cuclillas,” while the other *buzos* move around him, unfazed (Contreras 22).²¹ But while the environment of the dump is unsettling, he eventually finds comfort in and adjusts to a familiar and conventional social structure. Momboño's evolving experience with the *botadero* depicts how an uncanny, abject environment eventually becomes a normal, natural space for those who live within it. Framing the uncanny space as “normal” or “natural” forces a reevaluation of what “normal” means and it also points out traditional standards that shape ideas

²¹ See Gay Hawkins's chapter entitled “Shit” (2006), where the author looks into the ways in which the public and private binary is established in part thanks to commerce and “shit.”

of normalcy. As a microcosm for Costa Rica's male-dominated state and neoliberal excess, the *botadero* subtly illustrates how naturalized hierarchies of gender, power, or importance are perhaps not organic or essential, but constructed.

Thus within the confines of the *botadero*, filth and materiality intermingle with supposedly "clean" human beings, which creates tension in the novel. As a sharp critique of Costa Rica's neoliberal economic model (which depends on hyper-consumption), the "materiality" of the trashpickers reflects how neoliberalism tends to dehumanize and transform citizens into commodities. Once citizens have been "used up" and are no longer productive contributors to a capitalist state, they are then equated with trash and are literally disposed of in the dump. Rejected, miserable individuals like Única and Momboñombo are "thrown away" and then "recycled" within the boundaries of the *botadero*. Along with the rest of the *buzos*, Única—a childless, unemployed, unlicensed teacher (i.e. unskilled worker)—has been "botada" by the outside world as a non-productive citizen. For the past two decades of her life, Única has lived in the ever-growing *botadero* and cared for her adoptive, mentally challenged son, *el Bacán*, who was also "echado" from the legitimate world beyond the garbage dump. Through the course of the novel, the reader comes to understand that the spectral uncanny "there" actually constitutes the *buzos*' normative "here." Graphic images of human beings co-existing among extreme filth and waste as a norm destabilizes the boundary that delineates "here" from "there." By demonstrating how the "there" actually exists in the *buzos* "here," the novel creates a disquieting effect.

What is more, the novel emphasizes that women, in particular, are linked to waste as an uncanny category of underprivileged Otherness. Within the unproductive (rather than reproductive) space of the home, Única explicitly associates women with waste as she ponders

over how both are eventually disdained and disregarded. Both Momboño and Única are “discarded” due to their age, which signals their worthlessness via their non-productivity. But it is Única who comments on the ideological and emotional effects of what garbage, rubbish, and waste all represent—especially as it interacts and relates to traditionally feminized or domesticated spaces. In gendered terms, Única signals how waste is intimately associated with the inferior, secondary category within a hierarchal valuable/worthless binary. She states: “Vos sabés que yo he llegado a pensar que la basura también es mujer, mirá, es *La basura*, como *La mujer*, de género femenino... es *La basura* y al principio a todo el mundo le gusta cuando está nuevita y apenas se pone vieja ya nadie la quiere, pero esas son tonterías mías” (52). Since both *la basura* and *la mujer* have a feminine article, Única explicitly points to the connection between trash and women. She emphasizes the feminized characteristics of trash in dehumanizing terms: women often serve as an object or fetish, and her material value depends on the newness and novelty of her being. This is a clear critique of global over-consumption as well as a cultural commodification and fetishization of women in patriarchal societies. As well, it is striking that Única immediately dismisses her own insightful thoughts by stating “pero esas son tonterías mías.” Única’s mistrust in her own intellectual, non-material value is revealed in this statement, underlining how she is a product of a patriarchal, neoliberal culture that, above all else, values women’s materiality or intellectual passivity.

In the cultural binary that privileges the (active) human over the (passive) non-human—waste (and women by association) is condemned to a passive, inferior category. However, within the *botadero*, both “passive” categories of women and waste do indeed exert and exhibit power: Única creates and fosters the *buzo* community and waste has the ability to contaminate. Therefore, in Contreras’s novel, garbage’s non-animate agency (i.e. an emotive and material

strength from inanimate objects) helps to destabilize cultural notions about power structures that posit humans as superior to (or more powerful than) non-humans. As a non-human and inanimate object, the *botadero*'s ability to impact the lives of human beings disrupts a traditional, hierarchal understanding of power within the human/non-human binary. Rather than being a passive entity, trash is framed as an object with material power. It is an entity with agency that threatens the rest of San José, which highlights the blurred boundary between the Western human/non-human dualism, a notion that ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo describes in her book *Bodily Natures* (2010). In her work, Alaimo points out how a new ethics can be conjured by emphasizing the interconnections between the seemingly separate (and traditional) spheres of human and "more-than-human" nature. By centering on physical materiality, Alaimo claims that we can better envision reality as it is deeply and profoundly connected to both the human and non-human world. The idea of a "viscous porosity" between dualisms, to use Alaimo's term, allows for a better understanding of how the human and the non-human are inextricably linked. What's more, by showing how human beings are interconnected to material, non-human entities, it becomes apparent that these inanimate objects indeed have a material power or agency that impacts human beings, via environmental contamination.²²

As previously discussed by Scanlan, many people would rather not associate trash with the Self, but with a distant, disconnected Other. The narrative voice refers to the *botadero* as *el Más Allá* (the Great Beyond or the Hereafter), which emphasizes distance, difference, and

²² See Jane Bennett's text *Vibrant Matters* (2010), as she calls attention to what she terms "vibrant matter." Rather than being passive objects, Bennett highlights the "vitality" of things, objects, and materials that have traditionally been deemed unresponsive and without agency.

division—a state of Otherness. *El Más Allá* evokes an otherworldly, indefinite place that is completely disconnected from normative notions of the “here and now.” It is also strikingly similar to what Freud used to refer to as an afterlife: “Jenseits,” which means “the other side,” the “hereafter,” the “beyond,” or the “other world” (Jonte-Pace 50). Within the novel, various metaphors conjure up deathly, moribund images of the *botadero*—so much so that Río Azúl becomes a character (with latent powers) in its own right. The narrative voice describes Única as a witness to the trash heap’s slow death: “[...] veinte años de estar soportándolo, viéndolo crecer y viéndolo morir en una agonía infinita de cadáver palpitante y afiebrado que les llenaba las casas con sus estertores nauseabundos...” (68). Not only is waste personified as a dying entity, it also serves as a literal burial ground when an infant is buried alive and when the dump also swallows *el Bacán*’s corpse at the end of the novel.

As both a cradle and a grave—the *botadero* is a place of possibilities, challenged dualisms, and destabilized borders. But even within this malleable space, Momboñombo observes the importance of Costa Rican cultural and social values in the *botadero*: “[e]ntre más marginal es su situación, más se aferran a las costumbres urbanas” (25). In this community founded by Única, the *buzos* cling to the urban customs and habits—from hanging an antenna to Única’s house (when she doesn’t have a TV) to confessing sins to another *buzo* who happened to have unearthed a discarded priest’s frock. The traditional customs serve as the basic structure for everyday “civilized” living, but this conventionality is complicated with paradoxes and incongruities. As a result, Contreras’s story mimics the traditional customs of typical Costa Rican society, but almost always ironically or with a dark and scatological humor that reframes the *superficie*’s normative or acceptable behavior within the *botadero*. Única’s role is essential in legitimizing and forming this domestic refuge in the dump. However, since she is unable (or

unwilling) to see the dump's grotesque, utopic potential for social restructuring, she therefore assists in reproducing a traditional patriarchal system that ultimately works against her own interests. Mute and comatose at the end, Mombañoombó acts as her "príncipe azul" (Contreras 127), taking her away from the symbolic sea of trash to the real seaside. Despite Mombañoombó's hopefulness, the novel ends with her "looking into the sea"—unaltered, because, in the end, both the illusory seaside and real seaside offer her the same fate.

Ena Lucía Portela's "Al fondo del cementerio"

Feminine Agency among the Dead

Ena Lucía Portela has been named one of Cuba's most provocative and internationally renowned contemporary women novelists.²³ A prolific writer, Portela has published many short stories and novels.²⁴ Most significantly, her novels *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china* (1997) and *Cien botellas en una pared* (2002) and her short story "El viejo, el asesino y yo" (2000) have all

²³ María del Mar-López Cabrales notes that Portela was the first Cuban writer to include lesbian themes in her stories (75). Luisa Campuzano names Portela as "the most internationally renowned of the contemporary Cuban women novelists" (*Open Your Eyes* 17).

²⁴ Portela's corpus includes the novels *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china* (1997) *La sombra del caminante* (2001), *Cien botellas en una pared* (2002), *Djuna y Daniel* (2008), as well as books of short stories such as *Una extraña entre las piedras* (1999), *El viejo, el asesino y yo* (2000), and *Alguna enfermedad muy grave* (2006).

won various literary awards.²⁵ Alongside other Latin American authors like Diamela Eltit, Cristina Rivera Garza, and Jacinta Escudos, her work is associated with dirty realism,²⁶ which focuses on the grittier aspects of everyday life and that oftentimes employs rough a aesthetic and everyday, colloquial language. The scholar Nara Araujo describes Portela's literary aesthetic (in terms of the themes, composition, and style that she employs) as one that deliberately engages with social marginality in order to ignore normativity: "la marginalidad entendida como la posición que ignora a conciencia el mundo de la 'norma,' la extrañeza y la excentricidad" (31). In the short story "Al fondo del cementerio," a brother and sister live within a decrepit home at the back of a graveyard in order to avoid the "normalcy" that exists beyond the cemetery's gates. Published in 1999 by Editorial de Letras Cubanas, "Al fondo del cementerio" is included in the collection of short stories *Una extraña entre las piedras*. The story is full of gothic images, irony, and a sharp, dark sense of humor, which Ariana Hernández-Reguant describes as typical for literature of the period: "epic tales of survival, seldom void of black humor, form the lore of the time" (2).

²⁵ Her novel *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china* (1997) and was awarded best novel by UNEAC (Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba) and *Cien botellas en una pared* (2002) won the Premio Dos Océanos-Grinzane Cavour in France for best Latin American novel. Portela's short story "El viejo, el asesino y yo" was awarded the Certamen de Cuento Juan Rulfo in 2000.

²⁶ Coined by the North American writer, Bill Buford in 1983, other Cuban dirty realist writers include Anna Lydia Vega Serova and Juan Pedro Guitiérrez. The *Cambridge History of Latin American Women's Literature* (2016) characterizes Portela as a "'hard-core', dirty realism" writer.

In stark contrast to Contreras's novel, "Al fondo del cementerio" depicts an uncanny space where the female protagonist utilizes her domestic "sphere of influence" as a way to undermine traditional cultural dualisms and patriarchal power dynamics found in Cuba during the Special Period.²⁷ Within this story's unlikely domestic space of a cemetery, uncanny aesthetics assist in disturbing the established social order by challenging the supposedly "innate" qualities of femininity and masculinity. In the opening lines to the short story, a nameless state-employed exterminator sighs to himself and wonders: "¿Hasta cuándo esa gente iba a seguir en lo mismo?" (64). He is exasperated and dumbfounded by the highly unnatural, macabre, and disturbing behavior of the two siblings that live in a decaying, cockroach-infested house located at the back of a Havana cemetery. With a strong sense of what is and is not a normal way of living for human beings, the exterminator is determined to reason with and convince the older sibling, Lavinia, to allow him to do his duty of rescuing her home from the pestilence that has, in his opinion, overpowered it. The man reasons that Lavinia is—after all—a human being *and* a woman at that, and, thus, he is certain that he can eventually convince her to conform.

The exterminator's assumption that Lavinia will come to her (natural) senses and allow him to fumigate her home speaks to a shift in social expectations for women in Cuba that occurred between the 1980s and 1990s. In her book, *Rompiendo las olas durante el Período Especial* (2007), theorist María del Mar López-Cabrales notes that popular Cuban films such as *Lucía* (1968), *Retrato de Teresa* (1978), *Cecilia* (1982), and *Hasta cierto punto* (1983) all

²⁷ Named the "Special Period in Time of Peace" by the Castro government, Cuba found itself in harsh economic straits starting in the 1990s, with the fall of the Soviet Bloc, which had previously been an important trade partner and source of military aid.

illustrate the Revolution's portrayal of a "*supermujer*" who is not only dedicated as a mother and a productive citizen, but also as a patriot committed to the Revolution's cause.²⁸ Since the start of the Revolution, the Castro government endorsed progressive laws and support mechanisms meant to insure women's rights and enable them to incorporate themselves into the public sphere.²⁹ However, the onset of a harsh economic crisis in the 1990s drastically weakened this progress in gender equity (Campuzano, *Las muchachas de la Habana* 40; Del Mar, *Rompiendo las olas* 63-65).

As Luisa Campuzano has noted, Cuban society continues to be eminently patriarchal, which is only exacerbated in times of crisis (*Open Your Eyes* 13). Gendered "differences" (manifested by gender roles) between men and women were accentuated in Cuban society during the Special Period as necessity required a division in public and private spheres. For example, when the Revolutionary government was forced to make cuts to social programs (like childcare),

²⁸ According to del Mar, from the beginning of Cuban history (starting with the image of strong Taína women) Cuban women have been framed as fighters and cultural producers: "... la mujer cubana en las letras ha tenido una larga tradición de personalidades luchadoras y productoras de cultura" (*Rompiendo las olas* 27).

²⁹ These advances included the creation of the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas and the implementation of the 1979 Family Code that sought to encourage gender equity in the home.

working mothers were left with few choices (Del Mar, *Rompiendo las olas* 71).³⁰ In order to survive the economic crisis, the Cuban government also made “adjustments” to socialist economic policies, opening itself to global markets and to international tourism. Cuban journalist and writer Georgina Alfonso González contends that globalized markets and neoliberal policies accentuate difference: “el patriarcado en su versión neoliberal y globalizada acentúa sus significados clásicos: el individualismo, el divorcio entre lo público y lo privado, la desigualdad natural de género” (“La mujer en la lógica económica”). As various theorists have noted,³¹ while all of Cuba endured the economic crisis, the 1990s were especially difficult for Cuban women, who were expected to assume the larger responsibility for maintaining and caring for the family unit. As cultural expectations obliged women to return to traditional roles as caretakers for the sake of economic survival, many women felt a deep sense of disillusion as they felt like decades of progress in gender equity was retracted: “la crisis de los 90 hizo, una vez más, que la madre tuviera que transformar su vida para mejorar la de los demás” (Del Mar, *Rompiendo las olas* 65).

³⁰ Del Mar explains further: “Durante el período especial, esta situación si hizo más dura, ya que el estado no pudo seguir cubriendo las necesidades de muchas madres solteras y estas tenían que seguir trabajando para mantener a sus familias, además de hacer miles de piruetas para inventárselas y darlas de come a sus hijos durante esos años tan largos y aciagos por los que pasó la Isla” (*Rompiendo las olas* 68).

³¹ See Campuzano’s “Ser cubanos y no morir en el intento” in *Las muchachas de la Habana no tienen temor de Dios* 205; Hernández Hormilla’s *Mujeres en crisis* 115; and Del Mar’s *Rompiendo las olas* 65.

As a result of this return to more traditional gender roles, Luisa Campuzano argues that *los años duros* of the 1990s promoted the appearance of more female writers like Portela, who worked to contest the restrictive, monolithic image of a sacrificial, productive, and idealized Cuban Woman (*Open Your Eyes* 13). Portela's female protagonist is, indeed, far from the traditional ideal. As an act of resistance via anti-social behavior, Lavinia revels in the uncanny disorder of her dilapidated home. Her resistance to "el hombre con aparato" (the state-employed exterminator) demonstrates part of her struggle to create an oppositional space that is independent from the normative and "legitimate" world outside of the cemetery. As she refuses to join in the greater normative structure of Cuban society in the 1990s, she acts in a paradoxical way by both participating in and rejecting certain normative gender roles. While this contradictory performance is a form of resistance against the established social order, it also reinforces her illegibility as normative subject. In return, this illegibility helps to undermine monolithic, idealized notions of women.

Supposedly knowing what is best for Lavinia, the state-employee represents persisting paternal attitudes toward women in Special Period Cuba. He is an embodiment of an unofficially sanctioned, patriarchal ideology, where economic necessity has justified and reinforced hierarchies of power. However, Lavinia strategically uses the traditional roles against the exterminator by exerting her power as mistress of the domestic sphere. As the ultimate "uncanny mother," she also defies conventionality by fostering a domestic space that reflects Freudian notions about the interconnectedness of maternity, mortality, Otherness, and the uncanny. At the start of the story, the omniscient narrator explains matter-of-factly how the siblings' father and mother decided that they had had enough of the ruin and cockroaches and thus abandoned the house and their children. As a consequence of her parents' abandonment, Lavinia takes over the

deserted maternal role by constructing and nurturing “un retiro fantasmal:” an isolated, alternative space for her brother (much like Contreras’s isolated *botadero*). While she accepts her position as substitute mother, she does so in a manner that allows her to determine her own unique role as a completely independent and nontraditional matriarchal figure. As part of her maternal duty, Lavinia fosters this “alternate” domestic reality in an attempt to distance and protect her brother from the ambitions, conflict, and normativity of the world outside of the cemetery (66).

Paradoxically, however, the “protective world” that Lavinia cultivates is a socially taboo environment. In the macabre backdrop of the cemetery, Lavinia’s Oedipal relationship with her brother Lisandro works as an unsettling crossing of social and cultural boundaries that forbid and abhor incest. The text indirectly describes the siblings’ queer sexual relationship. For example, the narrator mentions a sexual encounter while in the midst of describing how cockroaches have infiltrated almost every aspect of Lavinia and Lisandro’s lives. The narrator states: “Las manos de Lavinia resbalaban por la línea de la espalda del hermanito sobre ella y... cucaracha. La mordía él, suavemente allí dónde más duele, miraba hacia arriba por alcanzar su rostro y... cucaracha” (70). In an evasive, yet highly suggestive style, the narrative continues: “Apenas podían hacer un gesto algo violento (un resbalón tras el primer fluido, un himen roto) sin apachurrar alguna [cucaracha]” (70). In this manner, the narrator points to the degenerative state of the siblings’ relationship by associating the abject filth of the cockroaches with their non-normative sexuality. Thus, the text depicts a state of domesticity that has fallen into decay and ruin. The social laws that structure civility have collapsed within the uncanny household: Lavinia is an eroticized mother figure who actively participates in an incestuous relationship that goes against social convention or propriety.

The macabre and sexualized maternal space that Lavinia cultivates also points to Freud's theory of the death drive—the yearning to return to one's origins. Jonte-Pace describes the drive as a “consistent trajectory toward decreasing tension, seeking the ultimate cessation of all tension and stimuli in death” (49). Part of what makes the mother uncanny is that her womb serves as a reminder of life “origins.” In Portela's story where the biological mother has abandoned her children, the decaying home works as a symbolic womb for the children; it is an evocative symbolic space of origins. Guerra-Cunningham describes the maternal, refuge-like quality of the traditional home space: “la casa como vientre materno es, para Bachelard, aquel espacio que protege de todas las contingencias de un Afuera que el hombre, en sus funciones productivas y políticas, debe enfrentar” (822). And, as a maternal figure with deathly affiliations, Lavinia serves as Lisandro's guide to understanding and accepting death, or what Peter Homans might call an “instructress of mortality” (98). As Jonte-Pace also asserts, the mother's connection to death allows for her to act as the “master teacher in a pedagogy of death” (Jonte-Pace 54). This connection is evident throughout the short story, especially so when the two siblings play among the tombstones and find an inscription on a tomb. Lavinia translates “SVM QVOD ERIS” as “Soy lo que serás” (Portela 67). Unfazed, she explains the quote's meaning to her brother who is clearly distressed at the thought of his own death. Lisandro asks: “¿Quiere decir que yo también voy a ser calavera y esqueleto y eso? [...] ¿Y los gusanos me van a comer?” (67). Lavinia only replies that it is very likely and she maliciously (and perhaps erotically) adds: “tú eres muy apetitoso” (68).

What's more, Lavinia's role as a mistress and mother allows her to dominate the men in the story. Traditional gendered power dynamics are subverted as Lavinia dictates the terms of her relationships and dominates her partners, which include her new lover, *el Momia*, and

Lisandro. When Lavinia replaces Lisandro with *el Momia* as her lover, her brother sulks and hides his jealousy from his father-like rival who has usurped his place as her lover. Like Lisandro, *el Momia* submits to Lavinia's desires and whims. Formally a gravedigger, *el Momia* (as Lisandro calls him) is an epileptic janitor in a cancer hospital. The new lover is described as an incredibly passive and patient man: "No le molestaban para nada los huesos de Lavinia [...] ni sus repentinos cambios de humor, ni los asaltos o repliegues de las cucarachas, ni las pesadillas infernales..." (78). With both Lisandro and *el Momia*, Lavinia's autonomy and authority go unquestioned within the sacred space of her uncanny home.

Nevertheless, Lavinia's matriarchal authority is eventually challenged when the public and the private collide with the exterminator's arrival. Portela never explicitly links her story to Cuba's socio-political context, which is a common characteristic among the younger generation of Cuban women writers (Campuzano, *Las muchachas* 151). Nevertheless, the emphasis placed on the exterminator's gender (with his symbolic "aparato") and his official association with the State speaks to an overtly controlling and paternal presence in Cuba's public sphere in the 1990s. With this said, it is notable that while the man is clearly frustrated through the course of the story, he never reacts in an unprofessional or unlawful manner. His restraint, perhaps, speaks to Cuba's success in passing successful legislation meant to assure women's rights.³² While he is respectful of Lavinia's rights, his disapproving paternal attitude suggests a more generalized belief in his (men's) responsibility in counseling women, which is a reflection of gender hierarchies in Cuban society during the Special Period

³² These laws include Código de la Familia, Ley de Maternidad, Ley de protección e higiene del trabajo, Ley de Seguridad social y Código Penal (del Mar 76).

On behalf of the state, the exterminator tries to convince Lavinia that the elimination of pests is a public concern. Defiantly, she replies: “En esta casa no hay nada público, señor. Todo es privado. Se le interesa algo público, ahí enfrente tiene el cementerio” (71). By reiterating her traditionally assigned authority over the home, Lavinia exercises her legal (and traditionally assigned) right to preserve the sanctity and privacy of her home. Although she knows that the man cannot disregard her rights, “el hombre con aparato” infuriates Lavinia because of his (paternal) presumption that he knows what is best. Alone in her home, Lavinia’s shows her fury and defiance toward the exterminator and his phallic “aparato” in a scene where she kills a swath of cockroaches around her. She rages: “¡Se cree un elegido de Dios sólo porque tiene un aparato! ¿A quien le importa eso? ¡No a mí! ¡Yo también las mato! ¡Así, así, y así!” (75). Despite her private, internalized frustration toward the exterminator, however, in his presence she aloofly flaunts her control and authority over the domestic space while she also actively works to disquiet her adversary by emphasizing her abject Otherness.

Lavinia’s union with a domesticated authority and abjection is notably unsettling for the exterminator. The story begins with the exterminator’s focalization in order to set up a striking contrast between the perspectives of the insider and outsider. Suggestively referred to as *el hombre con aparato*, he is an unwelcomed intruder to the siblings’ world, but his role serves as the only “normal” character in the story. Much like Momboñombo’s initial role in Contreras’s novel, the exterminator’s focalization recognizes the uncanniness of the situation before him and before the readers, as well. His reaction to the grotesque elements around him contrasts with the siblings’ calm acceptance of what they assume is a natural state being, especially as they have never known any other kind of state. Therefore, the reader may identify with *el hombre de aparato* as he is a reminder of the civilized world beyond the cemetery gates. As a representative

of the outside patriarchal world, his highly developed sense of masculinity (tied to the traditional Patriarchy) is linked to duty, public service, and a sense of entitlement toward conquering or assimilating those that resist the “correct” way to live.

The exterminator is thus surprised when he encounters Lavinia’s resistance to his normative expectations for her. The narrator describes the man’s frustration: “[...] pero él tenía que hacer su trabajo. No para otra cosa lo habían colocado en el mundo. La obligación, el deber, la ética. Las sagradas normas profesionales. Nunca nadie se le había resistido y no sería ésta la primera vez... Al final era él, exorcista, ángel exterminador, quien cumplía una misión en nombre de Dios” (81). The exterminator’s masculinity is linked to his God-given duty to maintain the “sacred” norms. What is more, he uses his “*aparato*” to complete this mission. With powerful masculine connotations attributed to it, this phallus is also likened to a weapon that is destined to destroy and prevent any “take over”³³ from unwanted and unsavory elements. The nameless exterminator’s identity is also reduced to a one-dimensional and highly metaphorical description: he is simply a man with an *aparato*. Alluding to the importance of his sexual organ, his *aparato* is, in a sense, his criterion for masculinity, power, and a sense of public duty. At the same time, by mentioning his “*aparato*” in such an obvious and repetitive manner throughout the short story, he is set apart from Lavinia and her lack of a phallus highlights his place in a sexual hierarchy of power.

³³ In Portela’s story, the narrator makes explicit reference to the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar’s short story “Casa tomada” (1951) (82). Cortázar’s famous story is similar to Portela’s in that a brother and sister try to defend their ruinous, ancestral home from ghostly entities.

Nevertheless, Lavinia causes him intense anxiety as she usurps his power and authority by drawing upon her own traditional authority over the private sphere. As he reasons with Lavinia in vain on the front porch of the house, he notes to himself the many cockroaches that pass in front of him: “Y él allí, de bestia, pensaba, de mulo de carga, sin poder arruinarles el paseo” (83). The narrator explicitly refers to the exterminator’s “aparato frustrado,” alluding to his feelings of emasculation and impotency thanks to one, odd, morbid girl who defies his sense of public duty. Aware of this frustration, Lavinia toys with the exterminator, never letting him “enter” or symbolically penetrate the space where she maintains her advantage: the private domain.

Death Becomes Her: Disturbing the Patriarchy

As mentioned earlier, Portela is well known for her particularly abject and, at times, uncanny portrayals of Havana life.³⁴ In the writer's work, abjection routinely serves as a tactic to break with conventionality through the formation of transgressive identities. Similar to other literary works produced by women during the Special Period, Portela’s work explores themes that have been traditionally considered taboo, including stories about abortion, domestic abuse, prostitution, eroticism, and drug addiction (Campuzano, *Las muchachas* 153). In general, abject transgressions occur in literature when protagonists dismiss, reject, or show a disdain for the strict boundaries in traditional societies—such as the boundaries that separate the Self from the Other, good from evil, cleanliness from filth, and men from women. Kristeva asserts that abjection is what ultimately disrupts stability and identity while it provokes revulsion due to its disregard for borders or limits; it is “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” that tends to

³⁴ One important example is her novel *Cien botellas en una pared* (2002).

be the most disturbing (4). The abject therefore provokes horror, disgust, and uncanny reactions to the breaking down of meaning that occurs when traditional boundaries are crossed or muddled. Portela's work destabilizes traditional symbolic boundaries by subverting the home's inviolability as a sacred place: instead of a familiar, life-affirming refuge from the outside world (or from the Other), it is framed as a macabre, perverted place whose stewardship is intimately connected to uncanny categories like death and ruin. This subversion also places in question the neutrality of what "natural" means within a normative social context.

As discussed previously, incest serves as an affront to the traditional ideologies that structure what is considered civilized and acceptable behaviors, it also questions what is and is not "normal." Without adult instruction, the siblings grow up "uncivilized" and ignorant of the traditional sensibilities and customs of "decent" people. The narrator explains how, for example, the siblings lack the disgust and hate that they *should* have felt (i.e. what is *learned*) toward cockroaches and uncleanness. The narrator states in Freudian terms: "no lo llevaban [el asco] impreso en el superego, así de sencillo" (70). Along these same lines, Portela frames the siblings' incestuous relationship as a "natural" outcome of their isolation and of their wild, orphaned childhood. Therefore the children follow the natural Freudian stages of psychosexual development: in the mother's absence, Lavinia serves as the maternal figure to Lisandro and, without a father-rival, Lisandro is able to satisfy his erotic desires toward the substitute-maternal figure. While incest has socially been framed as an unnatural sexual act, the siblings' "natural" sexual behavior (as the story frames it) contests social and cultural laws and serves as a defiant and disruptive revolt against the established order.

For many, a cemetery is not "natural" place in which to live. Within the macabre and uncanny space of the graveyard, human remains (or "discarded" human bodies) are, in a sense,

exiled or relegated to a final resting place—similar to what happens to trash in Contreras’s novel. Portela’s story disintegrates the socially constructed barrier or distance between death and life, renewal and decay, in order to generate palpable anxiety for a patriarchal state whose power depends on the continuation of the status quo. Lavinia and her younger brother Lisandro are “discarded” or abandoned people, much like Única or Momboñombo. Within this morose environment, all three “misfits” (Lavinia, Lisandro, and *el Momia*) are associated with ruin and death, which challenges a clear demarcation between the living and the dead. Conflict is established between the traditional home’s fostering, life-giving atmosphere within the deathly ambiance of a graveyard. Life and death thus come together under the same domain in order to emphasize how they have been traditionally estranged in Western/Christian perceptions of death. As an Othered state of being, death is a provocative reminder of each individual’s potential for eventually becoming the Other, or the dead. Catherine Heard asserts: “The more closely one observes the freakishly Other [i.e. the dead], the more persistently one is reminded of the cost of normality...” (35). One is reminded not only of the fragility of “normality,” but of life itself (as it is framed as the privileged category in a life/death binary).

The unsettling imagery of the decaying house is a threatening reminder that nothing lasts forever; every person and everything will pass away into decay. The narrator comments: “[...] se resisten a descubrir en sí mismos, puro reflejo” (89). This resistance (of accepting one’s mortality) is seen in Lisandro’s reactions toward various symbols of death, such as the tomb’s Latin inscription that Lavinia translates. As Lisandro struggles and resists recognizing or accepting his mortality, his environment impacts his formation. The exterminator observes Lisandro’s macabre state of health: “Sí, el muchacho era una ruina, un lamentable despojo [...] era un ripio, una porquería, casi un cadáver viviente” (64). As Lavinia’s dependent, his sister’s

macabre realm profoundly affects him. Thus, while the story shows how the siblings have grown up “naturally” wild, it also alludes to how the environment has a notable impact and role in shaping who they are.

Lavinia is clearly at peace with death’s intermingling among the living. The fact that Lavinia is able to appropriate and control this marginalized, unwanted space speaks to her own proclivity toward Otherness and marginalization. She is unfazed by grotesque objects or even people, especially as their abjection arises from the threat or reminder of death. Her relationship with *el Momia* reinforces her inclination toward death and the uncanny. *El Momia*’s name alludes to his “walking dead” status and his profession within the graveyard or the hospital allows him to encounter death on a daily basis. The narrator describes the man as a grim, stooped over individual, a similar kind of species to Lavinia (77). To show his love for Lavinia, *el Momia* steals “un regalo especial” from the oncological hospital in which he works. The gift is a jar of formaldehyde that contains an unrecognizable organic entity—an abject organ of some kind with veins and an eye showing in the jumbled mass of flesh. Intrigued and thrilled by the jar’s contents, Lavinia lovingly passes the gift on to her brother as an intimate sign of her love. Fearful of the frightening eye that seems to follow him, the contrast between his and his sister’s reactions to the jar highlights Lavinia’s comfort with and affinity toward death.

Additionally, Lavinia’s ease with abject reminders of death alludes to stereotypical characterizations of pale elegant ladies found in gothic or romantic novels from the 19th century. However, the story subverts these stereotypical tropes from gothic literature by emphasizing how Lavinia is in reality nothing like the sensual and elegant protagonists: “Se sabía fea, miserable y probablemente infectada por una legión de microbios” (73). As the narrator insists, Portela’s leading lady is a far cry from the stereotypical female protagonists that appear in stories like that

of Heinrich Von Kleist (73). Despite the story's gothic ambiance, Lavinia's abject and filthy appearance does not neatly fit into the category of the enchanting heroine, which not only undermines monolithic notions of an idealized heroine in literature, but it also aligns women with the abject. As Debra Covino asserts, the abject woman serves as a "subversive trope of female liberation" from constrictive gendered categories (29). This kind of woman thus associates herself with the grotesque by speaking an "alternative, disruptive language, immersing herself in the significances of the flesh, becoming willfully monstrous as she defies the patriarchy" (Covino 29).

While Lavinia is attractive to *el Momia*, she is particularly monstrous to "el hombre de aparato," once again pointing out how "normal" is a contextual notion. In no part of the text is Lavinia's monstrousness so obvious as when she scoops up a cockroach and kisses it to the horror of the exterminator. Defiantly opposing social convention, the unromantic reality of Lavinia's ugliness and filth disrupts a more traditional narrative by focusing on an everyday, plain, dirty woman, not a lovely and pale "dama de los castillos horripilantes" (73). Portela's story is an effective mixing of the gothic genre with a familiar, everyday reality associated with poorer classes which not only creates an uncanny effect, but it also highlights a kind of coalition between the female protagonist and the abject.

Thus, the manner in which Lavinia reconciles her traditionally assigned life-giving, nurturing role within a decaying environment uncovers a surprising resource for her. By intermingling with abject elements, she becomes powerful as a stewardess of an uncanny domesticated space, which serves as a critique and, at times, as a denial of male-centric values that delineate notions of normalcy regarding gender hierarchies produced in traditional Western society. Similar to Contreras's novel, the subversive pairing of the sacred domestic space with

ruin encourages readers to reflect upon the conflictive pairing of what seems to be “natural” opposites or binaries—such as literally living among the dead, sibling incest, and the intimate co-existence of insects and humans. These “unnatural” pairings create an uncanny ambiance that destabilizes traditional ways of being.

Conclusion

In the 1990s for both Costa Rica and Cuba, economic pressures helped evince deep-seated gender ideologies, especially in regards to traditionally assigned gender roles. Without mechanisms of support (such as government-funded social programs), many women were obliged to take on more than their lion’s share of domestic and caretaking duties, which, in turn, limited their access to public sphere. Contreras’s story paints a critical portrait of Costa Rica’s neoliberal economic model and poor ecological policies regarding waste and pollution. The novel shows the destructive social consequences to the country’s economic model, where people are disposable commodities. And in terms of gender, the novel highlights—perhaps inadvertently—how a consumer-based, neoliberal economy is especially destructive toward women. It is no wonder that Única is used up by the end of the novel, similar to the trash in the dump. In the novel, Única sacrificially gives everything she has to a system that not only favors male interests, but also one that associates traditional feminine categories with waste, trash, and death.

Under different circumstances, the 1990s also proved challenging for Cuban women. Due to the island’s economic crisis, women were disproportionately affected by austerity measures, obliging them to fulfill a sacrificial role, similar to the role that Única accepts. In order to foster and reinforce her authority, Portela’s short story defiantly and strategically manipulates gender ideologies on the island. As Lavinia’s actions emphasize the division between the private and

public spaces, she is able to create her own grotesque utopia. Markedly distinct from Contreras's novel, Lavinia welcomes and revels in her association with abjection—because it gives her the freedom to create a unique, discordant identity.

In an overflowing garbage dump and in a decaying house at the back of a cemetery, the female protagonists therefore comply with the typical female-assigned gender role of the “*ángel del hogar*” in atypical ways, which not only reveal the social constructedness of those roles, but they also provoke a critical reexamination of the perpetuation of those social traditions—not just for women, but for society as a whole. The blending of abject categories within the domestic space helps to reveal ideological and physical relationships between women, domesticity, death, and Otherness. These relationships point to constructed beliefs about underprivileged categories that are perpetuated by the privileging of dualistic thinking. But while stories like these respond to the idealized notion of Woman as the sacred guardian of tradition and the steward of a pure domestic space, they also set the stage for envisioning new, inventive ways of being.

Chapter Three: Erotic, Abject Others: Expressions of Feminine Autonomy in Central American and Cuban Short Fiction

In contemporary, post-war literature from Nicaragua and Guatemala and in Special-Period literature from Cuba, a morbid and sensual tone recurrently emerges from the pages of many anthologies dedicated to women's short stories.¹ In these oftentimes-small publications, stories of incest, abortion, suicide, murder, and eroticism simultaneously repulse as well as fascinate the reader. The majority of these stories play out in domestic zones that are traditionally associated with the feminine, providing these *cuentistas* with unexpected creative spaces for critiques of the current social reality in each respective country. I examine three short stories from Cuba, Nicaragua, and Guatemala (respectively): “La muchacha que no fuma los sábados” (1999) by Ana Lidia Vega Serova, “El hechizo” (2009) by Patricia Belli, and “Mis noches de luna llena” (2000) by Lucía Escobar. Each author employs female first-person narratives that expose focal moments in the lives of the protagonists. These fictional moments evoke the desire for a sense of feminine autonomy, which is understood as independence and separation from traditional expectations of gender that hem in and restrict individual self-expression and realization. These literary expressions of autonomy are achieved in a paradoxical manner: the female protagonists resist conventional social expectations for women by reappropriating and exaggerating two traditionally ascribed female characteristics: eroticism and Otherness. Through excess of the erotic, the protagonists make themselves abject, empowering themselves to exist—

¹ For Cuba, see anthologies *New Short Fiction from Cuba* (2007) and *Open Your Eyes and Soar* (2003). For Central America, see *Mujeres que cuentan* (2000) and *Huellas ignotas: 1991-2005* (2009).

even if only temporarily—outside of the traditional and hegemonic narratives typically attributed to women. These female protagonists are conceived within each story as an emboldened and liberated Other through the pairing of abjection and an intensified eroticism.

Within this chapter, I build upon previous studies that have explored or observed abject and erotic tendencies within contemporary Central American and Cuban literature. In particular, Central Americanist scholars like Yansi Y. Pérez, Yajaira Padilla, Magdalena Perkowska, and Ileana Rodríguez have commented on abjection's literary function as a discursive challenge to hegemonic or official notions of identity and/or social propriety.² In contemporary Cuban literature, Francisco Leal notes that abjection is a recurrent literary trope in Special Period literature that is often equated or associated with *realismo sucio*, *literatura popular*, or even *manual de perversiones* (53).³ Similar to the abject's application in Central America, Cubanist scholars like Linda S. Howe, Alina Mazzaferro, and Esther Whitfield emphasize how abjection is often used to redefine contemporary notions of Cuban social realities as well as to critique the

² See Pérez's "El poder de la abyección y la ficción de posguerra" (2012), Padilla's "Abject Guerrilleras: Re-defining the 'Woman Warrior' in Postwar Central America" (N.d.). Also, see Perkowska's "La infamia de las historias y la ética de la escritura en la novela centroamericana contemporánea" (2012) and Rodríguez's "Globalización y gobernabilidad" (2006).

³ See Francisco's essay "*Trilogía sucia de la Habana* de Pedro Juan Gutiérrez: Mercado, crimen y abyección" (2005).

political order.⁴ Correspondingly, the erotic also plays an important role within contemporary literature in both Central America and Cuba. For critics like Beatriz Cortez and Hector Leyva,⁵ the works of Central American writers like Jacinta Escudos, Gioconda Belli, and Ana María Rodas illustrate erotic themes that have been representative of an explosion of feminine subjectivities that are particular to the region. In a similar vein, the Cuban writers Zoé Valdés, Ena Lucía Portela, and Miguel Barnet are often cited in studies that discuss eroticism in Cuban contemporary literature.⁶ This chapter draws from, but also moves beyond these works of scholarship by showing how the erotic and the abject work together in order to produce a subjectivity of intentional Otherness. This deliberate Otherness speaks to a critical commentary on gender relations and, moreover, it also evinces an evolving situation of autonomous women's groups in each country's current socio-economic circumstances.

The appearance of an alternative Other (created by abject and erotic excess) is notable in three countries where revolutions have profoundly shaped women's post-revolutionary groups and movements. Revolutionary, egalitarian rhetoric led many women (especially so in Nicaragua

⁴ See Howe's *Transgression and Conformity: Cuban Writers and Artists After the Revolution* (2004), Mazzaferro's "Puerco, iracundo y obsceno: representaciones del cuerpo abyecto en la literatura latinoamericana de los '90" (2010). Also, see Whitfield's "Autobiografía sucia: The Body Impolitic of *Trilogía sucia de La Habana*" (2002).

⁵ See Leyva's "Narrativa centroamericana post noventa: Una exploración preliminar" (2005) and Cortez's *La estética de cinismo* (2010).

⁶ See Howe's *Transgression and Conformity: Cuban Writers and Artists After the Revolution* (2004) and Allen's "One Way or Another: Erotic Subjectivity in Cuba" (2012).

and Cuba) to believe that with equal opportunities (written as law), gender equality would naturally follow. But, as sharp discrepancies between official rhetoric and lived experiences became obvious, women's groups from Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Cuba (explored more fully in the following pages) formed or struggled to establish autonomy from the larger, male-dominated political parties. Unwanted or ignored within the larger parties, the desire for autonomy signals a cynical realization that traditional male-dominated politics would not provide women with the egalitarian changes that they sought. Thus, I contend that a literary female Otherness (i.e. a protagonist's conscious act of making oneself Other, via abjection and eroticism) is an emergent expression of each country's culture of disenchantment. And, arising from the historical and literary circumstances that are outlined in the introduction of this dissertation, I argue that the presence of Woman as an abject Other within the three short stories can be interpreted as a desire for autonomy from the revolutionary movements that, according to some feminists, have betrayed the very women who once supported them.⁷

With this in mind, I contend that each short story speaks to the desire for feminine autonomy from the phallogentric societies in which the female protagonists live. From showing strange occurrences such as a woman biting off the penis-shaped head of a gecko to exploring how a wife kills her husband slowly with a knife, these women writers unapologetically take on provocative themes in order to assert a declared independence from convention and "good taste."

⁷ For example, several feminist groups from Nicaragua, like Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres and El Partido de la Izquierda Erótica, consider many of the current reactionary policies of Sandinista leader and Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega as political compromises that only serve to maintain male political interests (Kampwirth 67).

These expressions of autonomy provoke new conceptions and possibilities of what it can mean to be Other by rejecting the idea that Otherness is a secondary, dependent, or powerless state.

Although these three short stories could be read and generally understood outside of their historical context, an examination of the political and social environment from which each author writes enriches our understanding of why longing for a feminine autonomy is present in the short stories I examine. What is most notable about the three countries from which these women write is that each has undergone revolutions that have not only profoundly shaped a regional literary aesthetic, but they have also shaped women's post revolutionary movements in each country. In both Central America and Cuba, many women's initial desire to join the revolutionary causes had little to do with interests in gender equality, but rather with a desire to help generate fundamental socio-economic change and to overthrow oppressive authoritarian governments. In all three countries, new governments initially passed or proposed progressive legislation that were in line with egalitarian principals that promoted better gender equity. Nevertheless, many of these new laws (explored in detail below) were unenforceable or simply ignored and they therefore served only as symbolic gestures. As critics such as Beatriz Cortez and Yajaira Padilla have noted, while the revolutions had a profound influence on the proliferation of feminists in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Cuba, it was the "return to business as usual" in terms of traditional gender and socio-economic relations *after* the revolutions that bred acute disenchantment for a majority of the women's post revolutionary movements.

As a response to exclusionary politics (outlined in this dissertation's introduction), autonomous groups began to appear, especially so in Central America, in order challenge the existing inequalities of power perpetuated by persisting patriarchal beliefs in the postwar years. While what it means to be a feminist differs greatly from country to country, common concerns

about improving women's representational powers are similar in each nation. In Central America, there is an endless and ongoing debate of how women can achieve a stronger role in national politics dominated by men: by either promoting change from within existing political parties (*las institucionalizadas*) or by creating autonomous feminist or women's groups (*las autónomas*).⁸ The desire for autonomy is an alluring one for many disillusioned women who wish to move beyond symbolic legislation and are searching for a total and complete overhaul of existing patriarchal systems and globalized economies.

The narratives explored in this essay are therefore evocative of the complex and conflictive nature of women's post revolutionary movements in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Cuba starting in the 1990s. In the three short stories explored in this chapter, the abject Other physically manifests itself in a *mujer-lobo*, a castrating fairy tale "princess," and a murderess wife. Within cultures that reinforce and perpetuate patriarchal standards, these female protagonists show that by tapping into erotic powers and by embracing that which is considered "abject," women can achieve an empowered Self that is not slave to restrictive cultural norms. Drawing from Audre Lorde's foundational text on the erotic, I explore how eroticism is framed as an empowering and rebellious drive that allows women to part ways with traditional notions of what it means to be a woman and to also reject victimization. What is more, this chapter explores how eroticism and abjection come together to create an intentional Otherness that

⁸ Matos and Paradis describe *las institucionalizadas* as feminists that are formally associated with the government or international organizations, while *las autónomas* were feminists that are part of feminist collectives or institutions that oppose patriarchal institutions (97).

challenges convention and that speaks to the female protagonists' intense desire for autonomy from male-dominated politics or culture.

Reappropriating “Feminine” Characteristics: Eroticism and Abjection

Aside from the risk of universalizing theory across distinct cultures and value systems, there is also a danger of valuing feminisms as if the course of feminist theory were evolving in a linear fashion. In *Talking Back* (1992), Debra Castillo responds to a generalized assumption that feminist theory in Latin America has not developed as sophisticatedly as it has in the Anglo-American or European nations, asserting that Latin American criticism has grown “in multiple directions, not always compatible with directions taken by Anglo-European feminisms and frequently in discord with one another” (xxii). Many contemporary Cuban and Central American women artists display this “multi-directional” criticism by commenting on societal norms in ways that do not necessarily reflect the same strategies seen in current Anglo-European literary and feminist criticism. For example, feminist strategies from different temporal movements might be paired together—such as pairing second wave feminism with third wave feminism. Due to differing historical, social, and cultural contexts from North America or Europe, it should not be surprising that Latin American and Cuban women writers employ distinct discursive and theoretical strategies that respond more accurately to their particular intersectional challenges, such as race, socio-economic status, gender, and sexuality.

While Latin American feminists have recourses whose specificity depends on their particular region, they also share some similarities with Anglo-European feminist movements, some of which are considered “outdated” theoretical approaches. For example, in North American Second-Wave and French Poststructuralist feminist theory, utmost importance is placed on an intrinsic and empowered female essence. Also, these feminists were the first to

analyze the presumption of Man's place as the universal subject and Woman as the secondary "Other." Many current feminist theorists have contested both of these premises, arguing that they reinforce traditional binaries and homogenize women's identities as a stable, essentialist category. However, as Ana Lorena Carrillo explains in her essay "Otras palabras de fuego: Notas sobre ensayo y compromiso político en Centroamérica" (2007), the debate on whether or not Woman can be considered a "subject" is still an on-going and relevant question in Central America. Without a doubt, Second-Wave and French movements have faded from the forefront of feminist and literary criticism and poststructuralist Anglo-European feminists have all but abandoned the notion of "Woman as a subject." Nevertheless, these ideas continue to be relevant for a nuanced discussion of the "traditional female" within a persisting patriarchal binary system. As Nicaraguan theorist Nydia Palacios Vivas affirms, Second-Wave and French feminists have had a profound influence on current Latin American women writers: "Su influencia ha sido poderosa en las escritoras latinoamericanas, las cuales abordado los temas eróticos sin ambages despojándose de la máscara y mostrado su verdadero rostro" (136).

Although it is impossible to know if Vega, Belli, or Escobar have directly drawn from Anglo-European feminist theorists, it appears that many similar ideas have (perhaps organically) emerged from the social situations in all three countries, such as an emphasis on Woman's equivalence with the Other, her desire for radical autonomy, and her intrinsic feminine power. These ideas are particularly relevant to my project not only because they emphasize the conflictive role of the traditional female identity but also because they speak to the erotic and the abject Other. Similar to Second-Wave and French Feminists, Vega, Belli, and Escobar appropriate the traditional male/female binary in order to deconstruct it. Also, each writer creates protagonists that are capable of tapping into traditional feminine characteristics as part of a

conventional binary system, which shares features with Third World woman feminist Audre Lorde's foundational theory of eroticism in "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (1978). And in the construction of this binary, the three writers exaggerate the erotic in a way that creates a monstrous effect through excess. As reflected in Kristeva's theory of abjection, this excess renders each protagonist as a strategic Other through the deconstruction of the traditional binary.

One feminine characteristic that is "tapped" is feminine sexuality. Blanca Guifarro, a Honduran feminist and theorist, affirms the power of female sexuality: "En la sexualidad femenina, residen poderes, desde aprender a amar el cuerpo, acariciarlo y cuidarlo, pasando por no embarazos prematuros (edad muy temprana), hasta tener libertad de decidir y romper con la subordinación" (42, *Desde el feminismo*). Guifarro's statement mirrors how many North American Second-Wave feminists envision the intrinsic power of the feminine. For Lorde, eroticism is a highly emboldening feminine life force, one that is based on sexual difference. She defines the erotic as "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings," noting that it is "an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire" (570). Therefore, the satisfaction that is achieved by experiencing such a profound sense of feeling through eroticism obligates the female subject to hold herself to a higher standard of integrity and self-respect. In this way, eroticism becomes an asset of power to women, a resource that "lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane" (Lorde 569). Similarly, Honduran poet and scholar Lety Elvir emphasizes how Central American women writers willingly represent themselves as desiring subjects in order to reappropriate their own sexuality: "son voces de mujeres que se han apropiado o buscan apropiarse de sus cuerpos, de su sexualidad, de sus afectos [...]" ("Cuerpo e identidades en la poesía contemporánea escrita por mujeres centroamericanas"). The erotic (through sexual and corporal reappropriation)

therefore enables women to reject powerlessness as well as “resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, [and] self-denial” (Lorde 573). As a resource that is strategically embraced as feminine, the erotic stands as a distinct feminine approach or method that exists outside of patriarchal resources of power, which advantageously gives women a tactic to politically or socially mobilize. Although emotional qualities have been traditionally rendered as negative aspects of the feminine, these elements become highly empowering within the erotic. Through the power of the erotic, elements such as autonomy, pleasure, and excess are lauded as tactics of subversion used to challenge and dismantle restrictive traditional understandings and structures of gender.

This empowerment is evident in the three short stories examined in this chapter. Each protagonist is most independent and emboldened in the moments when she is connected with her emotions and sensual feelings and, as a result, the erotic is implemented as a resource for feminine empowerment. Particularly within Vega’s story, we see how the naked body represents a desire for defiant difference and freedom. In Belli’s story, an erotic impulse toward oral sex and a mix of overwhelming emotions lead to a representative castration of the would-be male hero or lover that frees the protagonist from the typical fairy tale script. And finally, in Escobar’s story, the protagonist’s orgasm represents an unhappy wife’s release of emotions from the repressive role of feminine passivity. In all three instances, the erotic enables the protagonists to tap into their feelings, which are characterized as a feminine life force that helps them achieve autonomy or momentary escape from the “master’s house,”—a limiting conceptual space that restricts the protagonists’ self-expression. And, within the social contexts from which these stories have been published, the “master’s house” also allegorically refers to the male-dominated

social, political, and economic systems of power that give shape to gender relations and expectations in society.

Similar to the eroticism found in these short stories, abjection also serves as a tactic to promote an intentional break with conventionality and uniformity through the formation of transgressive identities. In particular, abject transgressions occur in literature when protagonists dismiss, reject, or show a disdain for the strict boundaries in traditional societies—such as the boundaries that separate the Self from the Other, good from evil, and Man from Woman. As Kristeva asserts, abjection is what ultimately disrupts stability and identity while it provokes revulsion due to its disregard for borders or limits; it is “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). The abject provokes horror and disgust because of the breakdown in meaning that occurs when the distinction between the Other and Self is muddled. Therefore, a disturbance of established boundaries in society may cause abjection.

The abject subject is especially deliberate in assuring its autonomy as Other. By appropriating a transgressive or unappealing identity, it is less likely that different groups or individuals might re-appropriate—or ironically, pervert—these unorthodox identities. As Keith Booker notes, bourgeois culture tends to appropriate radical or subversive social movements for its own ends. For example, Booker writes that this is what occurred for some feminists and queer activists in the past decades, where the original social movement has been altered, “tamed,” or institutionalized (9). In this sense, the unsavory and unflattering aspects of abjection—which may portray characters as murderesses and deviants—helps to maintain a desired *autonomous* distance from any attempts of institutionalization.

Notably, the erotic can intersect with the abject in order to subvert traditional societal expectations. For example, the overly erotic female can be made abject or monstrous due to her

disregard for traditional societal rules and boundaries. By placing what are typically considered “private” sexual acts in a public viewing (via literature), eroticism exposes the flaws in traditional monolithic identities of women—particularly of the chaste, decent woman who “properly” separates the public from the private sphere. Especially for women, the mere act of writing challenges the private/public dichotomy, because a woman—by nature a domestic and private being—loses part of her femininity (i.e. normalcy) by inserting herself into the public sphere via writing. Elena Poniatowska notes that this has been true for many of the first modern Latin American women writers: “They were afraid even to admit that they were writers as if saying so would annihilate their capacity for being women and would transform them into some kind of freak” (160). While this kind of perception of women writers has certainly improved in recent times, Poniatowska’s assertion is arguably still applicable to Central America and Cuba, where many gendered hierarchies and traditionally defined notions of womanhood still persist.

The intersections of the abject and the erotic mark the protagonists’ identities as Other. Although the female Other has been traditionally seen as an inessential and subordinate figure to man, Vega, Belli, and, Escobar provide evidence of an alternative, strategic Other that transcends her supposed secondary nature. This strategic Other is empowered by embracing emotion and sensuality as traditional feminine characteristics, while also subverting established expectations for women in male-dominated societies: emotion becomes enraged and female sensuality becomes insatiable and aggressive. By rejecting traditional, Western standards set out for women (especially in terms of emotion and eroticism), the female protagonists fully embrace their rejection from conventional society. In their desire for autonomy, they willingly proclaim themselves to be Other.

In all three short stories, each protagonist narrates her own story, intimately portraying how she confronts and negotiates the negative qualities associated with the Other. For Lety Elvir, this subjective, first-person narrative stands out as a key technique in Central American women's writing: "hablan por ellas mismas y no quieren ser descritas sólo desde el imaginario del otro; sus malestares, ideales, identidades de género, clase, etnia, son dichos en primera persona" ("Cuerpo e identidades en la poesía contemporánea escrita por mujeres centroamericanas"). The protagonists speak for themselves as they attempt to rework the question of Woman as an inessential or secondary self. In "La muchacha que no fuma los sábados," Vega explores repression and imprisonment through a detailed representation of her protagonist's Otherness, which is physically manifested by her "monstrous" appearance. Even though the protagonist/narrator does not fully transcend her isolation, she longs for transcendence both consciously and unconsciously. As a result, she not only embodies a strong critique of restrictive patriarchal categories of beauty, but also, Vega's inhibited protagonist could be read as representative of the unhealthy suppression of an autonomous women's movement in Cuba. In contrast, both Belli's and Escobar's short stories challenge feminine passivity and patriarchal norms with protagonists that deliberately break free from the status quo by fully embracing the status of Other. By empowering themselves through subversive acts and identities, the protagonists consequently convert themselves into an alternative Other, which reveal expressions of autonomy from the patriarchal system that structures their respective worlds.

Anna Lidia Vega Serova: "La muchacha que no fuma los sábados"

Undoubtedly, Cuban women's participation in the public sphere has increased dramatically since the Revolution's success in 1959. However, as Joseph de la Torre Dwyer notes, while an increasing number of women occupy managerial positions in the workforce, it is

principally men who continue to hold the major positions of power in the institutional domain of politics, the military, and the economy (217). Despite Cuba's growing progress toward gender equity, women on the island are still not advancing as far as men in positions of power due in large part to the gendered division of labor that endures in Cuba (de la Torre Dwyer 215).

Scholars like Ilja Luciak warn that progressive (but not necessarily enforced) legislation and the creation of the government-sanctioned women's organization, Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC), have led to an exaggerated sense of "the country's achievements regarding substantive gender equality" (*Gender and Democracy in Cuba* 105; Moya 79). And, as Julia Shayne notes, this exaggerated sense of progress has helped render feminism as "an unnecessary distraction since a classless society theoretically creates equality for all" (150). In effect, these kinds of exaggerations and perceptions of feminism, along with governmental intolerance for any challenges to authority, have in large part helped thwart a cohesive independent or autonomous women's movement in Cuba (Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba* 104-05).

As an illustration of this intolerance, Luciak points to the government's reaction to the autonomous feminist group *MAGIN*. Formed in 1993, the feminist group was "deactivated" by the government by 1996 when it was denied approval for its registration, and its members were informed that the organization could no longer operate (Acosta, "Women Journalists in Cuba Revive Transgressive Group"). Even so, members of the organization, like Helen Hernández, point out that an "informal network" of *MAGIN* members still convenes to promote gender awareness in the media. Hernández notes: "*MAGIN* no longer exists, but it lives on in the memories and actions of the women who were its members" (Acosta, "Women Journalists in Cuba Revive Transgressive Group"). *MAGIN*'s legacy and its unofficial and silent existence

speak to the possibility that a women's autonomous movement might only be quietly hibernating in Cuba.

In the short story “La muchacha que no fuma los sábados” (2001) by Cuban-Russian writer Anna Lidia Vega Serova,⁹ the longing and struggle for empowerment and autonomy are made evident through the very personal and intimate portrait of a physically deformed woman whose entire body is covered with dark thick hair.¹⁰ In the short story, not only does the anxiety of being physically different haunt the protagonist, but also the subconscious plays a crucial role in her self-imposed marginalization. By way of her dreams, the protagonist's unconscious state reveals the socially internalized patriarchal beliefs (in regards to beauty and womanhood) that emotionally paralyze her from asserting her own autonomy from a system that names her as unacceptable, grotesque, Other. When read within the country's cultural and historical context,

⁹ Ana Lidia Vega Serova—originally a plastic artist of sculptures and paintings—is also one of the better-known contemporary women writers in Cuba. She was born in Leningrad, Russia, (1968) to a Russian-Ukrainian mother and a Cuban father, but currently lives in Cuba. Her works include anthologies of shorts stories: *Bad Painting* (1997) and *Limpiando ventanas y espejos* (2000); the novels *Noche de ronda* (2001) and *Ánima fatua* (2007); and a collection of poetry, *Retazos (de las hormigas) para los malos tiempos* (2004). Ana Chover Lafarga includes this short story in her dissertation (2010), where she explores how the protagonist's sexuality becomes a signifier for “eroticismo sucio” (a term that equates sexual relations with animal instincts and the experience of hunger rather than the ritual of seduction) (89).

¹⁰ This medical condition is known as hypertrichosis, but it is also known as the “werewolf syndrome” in the Western Hemisphere.

this short story functions as a potential critique of the inertia and virtual absence of women's autonomous movements in Cuba.¹¹ Distinct from the other two short stories examined in this chapter, Vega's story expresses an unconscious longing and desire for autonomy that is never completely fulfilled. This inhibited longing for change seen in the protagonist's dreams is representative of a similarly suppressed women's movement within Cuba. Although the protagonist chooses a self-imposed isolation, she does so knowing that her Otherness is incompatible with the dominant society. Therefore, Vega's story demonstrates how self-marginalization—done out of fear and self-denial—is contrary to a feminine autonomy that embraces difference as a form of power. Even though Vega's protagonist longs for an empowerment that is initiated through the erotic, in the end she is unable to overcome her fear and thus, is caught in a cycle of futile inertia.

While Vega's story does not explicitly reference autonomous feminism or feminine autonomy, I contend that the protagonist's physical monstrousness and her internal struggle embody a quiet and growing social desire for an independent Cuban women's movement: the story reiterates an intense internal struggle that pits an unconscious longing for autonomy and dissent against internalized patriarchal beliefs that promote conformity. As a critique of the inertia and virtual absence of women's autonomous movements in Cuba, Vega's story can be read as an allegorical exploration of the political repression and internalized patriarchal ideals that have kept an independent women's group from forming in Cuba. The protagonist's futile

¹¹ Due to the government's control and censorship of any group outside the official authority of the Communist party, any attempt to create a strong autonomous movement has been effectively thwarted (Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba* 104-05).

longing for physical normalcy and a liberated individualism are linked to a similar desire to conform to the political status quo, but also to combat patriarchal ideals regarding women's secondary status.

In Vega's story, the nameless protagonist, a young woman who lives alone, refuses to leave the confines of her home for fear of the mockery and the humiliation she will provoke. With her body covered completely in dark black hair, she dreads the screams of little children and the terror of old ladies who, she suspects, will throw stones at her if she ever steps beyond her front door. She narrates her story in the present tense by describing her daily activities. She passes almost everyday sleeping and smoking—with only Saturdays as the exception. Every week on this day, the protagonist listens to her reggae cassette, dances around naked as she cleans her house, refrains from smoking, and meticulously bathes herself by combing and trimming each hair and applying perfume and powders. Also on this day, her lover, Jorge Luis (or "Doc") comes to visit. They alternate between arguing and making love until he leaves at night—and then she is left, once more, to sleep, dream, and smoke.

The protagonist's dreams and nightmares evidence her unconscious yearnings as well as deep-seated fears about the social boundaries that delineate differences. Just as difference threatens normality and social acceptance, it also can allegorically speak to the fear of being politically disowned or disavowed within the historical context of the Special Period in Cuba. Structurally, the protagonist's internal voice alternates between narrating a lucid description of daily events and a stream-of-consciousness description of the dreams and nightmares that the protagonist experiences, which is marked by italics. In order to highlight the protagonist's fragmented identity, the structural division (between the italicized and standard text) emphasizes the split between the conscious and the unconscious state of the protagonist. By emphasizing the

importance of her dream state, her stream-of-consciousness narration reveals the powerful impact of cultural and ideological influences on an individual, especially in terms of desire and longing for normality. While sleeping, she mostly encounters horrific images: such as being suffocated and overtaken by her own hair, of Doc cruelly and viciously turning on her, and of being on show in “el gran carnaval de las mujeres-monstruos” (59). Despite primarily experiencing these nightmares, the protagonist sleeps with the conscious intention and hope of escaping from her abject self: “*en busca de un sueño, entre tantas pesadillas, un sueño único, aquel sueño*” (57).

As a form of escapism, it is only through her dreams that the protagonist can hope to momentarily change herself from the physically abject Other to a more socially accepted form of beauty or normalcy. In an essay on the abject human monster, Catherine Heard notes that freaks are a clear representation of the Other and that they threaten “the individual or the community from outside established physical and psychological boundaries” (29). Trying to “contain” her Otherness through self-imposed boundaries, the protagonist only crosses this illusory border of separation through particular dreams. Since she vows to never leave her home and cross the *literal* boundary of her front door—her unconscious state serves as a deceptive kind of empowerment that allows her to cross back into the realm of sameness and normalcy. The protagonist’s frustrated and limited lifestyle underscores how her dreams are useless, benign fantasies that generate no real change in her conscious, real life, which potentially mirrors a similar frustration with the resigned, political inertia of autonomous women groups in Cuba.

From time to time, the protagonist is able to have the erotic, emboldening dream that she desperately seeks to avoid her abject self and to feel free. She dreams of “la muchacha que camina desnuda entre la multitud exhibiendo su piel blanca y lisa” (57). In plain contrast to her

confined, monstrous self, in her dream she walks erotically exposed among crowds of people. If eroticism is a source of feminine power as Lorde asserts, then this dream, which she longingly searches for in her sleep, expresses a yearning for empowerment, autonomy, and freedom from fear. This dream also illuminates how the protagonist does not wish to anonymously disappear into the “sameness” of the crowd, but rather she subconsciously desires to distinctively stand out among a multitude of people. What is pointedly clear, though, is that in this fantasy she is no longer covered in the physical Otherness that she fears. Therefore, while her nakedness signals her desire for empowerment, defiance, and freedom, she mistakenly envisions that this empowerment is only possible through rejecting her abject physical appearance and by conforming to a monolithic standard of beauty. Deborah Covino asserts that the abject Woman takes on a transgressive role when she embraces her exclusion from traditional standards of beauty (29). Despite the protagonist’s clear desire for transgression and empowerment (via the erotic desire), she utterly and completely denies her grotesque and abject self by vicariously living through her dreams and fantasies. Alternatively, the protagonist’s unconscious desire for social conformity (in the form of a normal, beautiful body) also speaks to a desire for the ease of political conformity. But, by conveniently erasing any symbolic difference or dissent (physically or politically), the status quo goes on unquestioned or improved.

Markedly, the protagonist’s mother serves as a highly symbolic, patriarchal figure that supports traditional ideas of normality, conformity, and the perpetuation of the status quo. Just as feminism in Cuba has popularly been framed as an unnecessary and negative social influence, the mother not only affirms that her daughter’s monstrous difference is socially unacceptable, but she also helps facilitate her isolation from the rest of the world. One way in which she makes her child’s isolation feasible is by coming to visit her once a month in order to bring supplies, food,

cigarettes, and money. As well, she reaffirms the protagonist's sense of physical abject Otherness by tearfully offering to shave the hair off of her body. In this sense, the mother attempts to make her daughter more "normal" (i.e. embracing the status quo) rather than accept the difference that she incarnates. As a result, she enables the protagonist to maintain her life of inaction and impossible dreams.

The mother also plays a dominant role in many of the protagonist's dreams, constantly encouraging her to sleep, cooing the words "[s]ólo dormir. Dormir-dormir-dormir" (54). In one particular dream, the protagonist, in a childlike fashion, frantically points out to her mother that patches of hair are rapidly spreading over her body. The mother begins by tenderly kissing the patches, until she starts to tear the hair and skin off of her daughter's body: "luego comienza [a] arrancar la piel con los dientes, muerde mastica, traga y vuelve a morder. La sangre corre por la comisuras de los labios" (54). In this highly vampiristic and animalistic depiction, the mother appears to almost devour her own daughter, perhaps mercifully in order to save her from the misery produced from such excessive difference. By dreaming of her mother devouring and destroying her, the protagonist unconsciously associates her mother with socially-ingrained patriarchal structures of power that work to eliminate of any kind of difference that would challenge the status quo.

Saturdays stand in stark contrast to the other six days a week, where the protagonist spends most of her time sleeping, smoking, and pacing around her home. The narrator clarifies that Saturdays are not necessarily special days because her lover comes to visit, but rather the opposite, "Doc viene precisamente porque los sábados son días especiales" (56). Saturdays are a day of acceptance, if not resignation, and purification of herself and of accepting the Otherness that she physically incarnates, but only in the privacy of her home. On this day, the narrator takes

great care to groom and clean herself and to freely enjoy her nakedness as she dances about her house. Thus, on Saturdays, what is truly transgressive is her momentary acceptance of her abject appearance and, not surprisingly, the protagonist is her most alive and empowered self on these days.

What's more, her lover visits on Saturdays, which allows her to connect with her erotic self as she taps into an empowerment that is founded on reality, rather than on a dream (as depicted in her nude dream). Quite distinct from the other two stories from Central America, the male figure in Vega's story does not try to suppress or coerce the protagonist into a traditional role. Perhaps as a testament to Cuba's progress in gender relations since the Revolution, Doc encourages her to break free of her suppressed state. Doc explains that he won't be able to come the following week due to a wedding he must attend. But when he asks the protagonist to join him in public and finally break with self-imposed isolation, she panics and accuses Doc of abandoning her. Declaring emphatically that she will never leave her home, she also threatens that if he leaves, he should never come back. Defiantly, Doc slams the door, perhaps leaving forever. In contrast to the mother's urgings toward conformity, Doc insists that the narrator abandon her self-pity and join the world: "¡te crees demasiado importante! [...] ¡a nadie le importas, esa es la realidad, a nadie le importa si sales o no!" (58). In an attempt to pull the protagonist out from her isolated world, Doc points out the egotistical and purposeless nature of her seclusion. Even with encouragement, the protagonist is unable to dissociate herself from the strongly ingrained and interiorized beliefs that prescribe "normative" beauty as well as self-regulation.

On the following Saturday, Doc does not visit her. The narrator does not clean the house nor does she dance. She states: "estoy sucia, más peluda de costumbre, tengo ganas de fumar y

miro por la ventana” (62). In this last section of the short story, Vega fully reveals the destructive consequences of the protagonist’s rejection of her Otherness. No longer able to sleep, the narrator affirms that “el insomnio también tiene sus pesadillas” (62). Different from the rest of the story, the last paragraph’s sentences alternate between an awake and dream-like state. The narrator affirms, over and over that she will never leave her house, but in italics, she dreams of stepping out into the garden in her front yard, moving toward Doc and embracing him. In the final line, she dreams: “*Doc aparece de pronto y me levanta y da vueltas conmigo en los brazos y unas figuras humanas se detienen delante de mi casa a mirarnos*” (63). The ambiguity of this ending makes it impossible to know whether she embodies the abject, “mujer-monstruo” or the beautiful “muchacha” that she searches for in her dreams. Therefore, it is unclear whether the spectators are watching out of general interest or horror. Regardless, the protagonist dreams of stepping over a literal and symbolic threshold that separates her from the rest of the world, accentuating her longing to move beyond the fears that bind her to a nonproductive self-imposed isolation. Caught in an ambiguous state of dreams and reality, she is paralyzed from doing anything meaningful to change her world.

Evocative of a larger collective issue for *las autónomas*, the protagonist’s suppressed transcendence as an Other as well as her metaphoric imprisonment within restrictive structures of power is mirrored in the Cuban government’s repression of an independent or autonomous women’s movement (or any such challenge to its authority).¹² By exploring a physical manifestation of Otherness through her female protagonist, Vega demonstrates how embracing one’s Otherness leads to empowerment and by denying it, stagnation and a continuation of the

¹² See Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba* (2001), pages 104-105.

status quo are inevitably accepted instead. In this representation of female Otherness, the short story demonstrates how a rejection of the abject leads to self-regulated isolation and marginalization—one that is supported and perpetuated by dominant social structures of power that wish to preserve social hierarchies of gender.

Patricia Belli: “El hechizo”

In an online article entitled “El País de las Maravillas: Nicaragua, el más equitativo en la desigualdad,” Sofía Montenegro, a founder of the autonomous Nicaraguan groups Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres (MAM) and El Partido de la Izquierda Erótica (PIE), ridicules a report generated by the World Economic Forum, which claims that Nicaragua was the 6th best nation in the world for gender equality in 2014 (“Global Gender Gap Index: 2014”). After Montenegro notes how this article provoked a lot of laughter from many citizens throughout Nicaragua, she succinctly explains how the report’s results are deceiving:

Por lo demás, los investigadores del foro seguramente se engañaron también al hacer su “check list”: ¿Tienen Ley de Igualdad?, sí. ¿Tienen Ley de Participación Ciudadana? Sí. ¿Tienen Ley 50/50? Sí. ¿Tienen Ley Integral contra la Violencia hacia las Mujeres? Sí. — “¡Ve que lindos estos nicas, se la ganan a los suecos!”

Que ninguna de estas leyes se respete o se aplique, es lo de menos.

(“El País de las Maravillas”)

Similar to Cuba’s 1970 Family Code that called for mutual respect among men and women, Montenegro points out the symbolic and unenforceable nature of many of the gender equity laws that exist in present-day Nicaragua. Indeed, in the first two years of the Sandinista revolutionary triumph in 1979, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) demonstrated an initial, promising commitment to creating gender equality amongst all *compañeros* by proposing

progressive laws that regulated gender relations.¹³ Also, just as Cuba created a government-sanctioned women's organization, the FSLN formed the Asociación de Mujeres Nicaraguenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza (AMNLAE), which made important contributions to advocating for women's issues in the early 1980s.¹⁴ Nevertheless, as Norma Stoltz notes, many women eventually began to question the efficacy of the official women's organization, especially due to its intimate association with the male-dominated FSLN party and interests ("Women's Movements in the Americas").

With the start of the contra war in 1981, the Sandinista's earlier, forward-thinking momentum was soon stunted. Under political duress, FSLN leadership fell back on lessons it had learned during the country's years of armed struggle: avoid controversy and suppress any dissent that might arise within the party (Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution*, 21). Later in the 1990s, the division between the Sandinistas and feminists widened even more thanks to reasons such as the party's many compromises that it made with the Right and Catholic Church and the still-unresolved sexual-abuse accusations against the nation's president, Daniel Ortega, by his stepdaughter (Friedman 418). Thus, with the FSLN's electoral defeat in 1990, the number

¹³ For example, the 1982 Nurturing Law proposed equal pay for equal work, state pensions, and the right of nursing mothers to take an hour off work everyday to breastfeed, but ultimately, it did not pass (Kampwirth 23).

¹⁴ In the early 1980s, the AMNLAE worked to contribute to the revolution's success by participating in organizations that directed state policy, joining the literacy campaign, creating health brigades, and encouraging productive collectives of women (Kampwirth 28, quoted in Murguialday 1990, 104).

of autonomous women's groups increased as they began to address the gender issues neglected by the Sandinista women's movement.

One core belief of *las autónomas* from Nicaragua emphasizes how women should make a “clean break with the hierarchical, male-dominated political organizations of the past,” so that they needn't justify the importance of their projects to male politicians (Stoltz, “Women's Movements in America”). Bertha Massiel Sánchez Miranda, a Nicaraguan feminist and social worker, reflects on FSLN's dramatic shift in ideology when the party returned to power once more in 2006: “este partido revolucionario de los 80's subió al poder [en 2006] con una ideología conservadora promoviendo un modelo familista que afecta principalmente a las mujeres, una vez más, a las feministas nos toca luchar para no seguir perdiendo derechos humanos” (“Nicaragua no es un país para las mujeres”). Signaling toward the need for feminist activism, women like Sanchez have taken on roles as human rights activists as the autonomous feminist movement in Nicaragua continues to become notably “large, diverse, capable, and increasingly daring” (Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution* 63).

In contrast to the ambiguity found in the Cuban short story by Vega, “El hechizo” (1995) by Nicaraguan writer and sculptural artist Patricia Belli¹⁵ is a powerful short story that boldly declares autonomy from conventional gender relations, likely reflecting the strength of autonomous and feminist movements in Nicaragua since the 1990s. In the story, the erotic and the abject work together to create a modern fairy tale that critiques and declares independence from a conventional patriarchal imaginary. North American feminist Mary Daly coined the term “patriarchal myth” in order to describe a normative manner of thinking within male-dominated cultures. According to Daly, in the patriarchal myth, biased perceptions of normality are encouraged in order to deceive and manipulate women into accepting submissive and passive roles, which then allows the patriarchy to maintain its authority in politics and in society. Heterosexual marriage and traditionally acceptable gendered-behavior are typically framed within fairy tales as the ultimate goal and conclusion to the lives of the female protagonists. As a

¹⁵ Belli also has published the short story “Cicatrices” in the anthology *Cicatrices: un retrato del cuento centroamericano* (2004). However, she is best known in Central America for plastic arts and she is a collaborator for the magazine *ArteFacto*. Lindsay Jones writes in her essay “ArteFacto in Contemporary Nicaragua” that ArteFacto appeared after Violeta Chamorro’s election to power in 1990 as a response to the new government’s efforts to privatize all nationally funded programs of art and culture (18). Jones asserts that a group of artists, including Belli, became part of a “dissident, neo-Dadaist, artistic movement called ‘Artefactoria’” (17), which sought to unionize artists and to create strategies in order to “maintain their progressive visions of the future” (18). Aside from her plastic artwork, there have been no critical studies or reviews written about her fictional literature.

radical feminist, Daly asserts that women must finally become aware of the deception and fraud that is being used against them in everyday speech and in fictions (like fairy tales), which try to manipulate women into believing that nothing beyond romance awaits them.

The short story “El hechizo” demonstrates how abject and erotic transgressions can disturb typical fairy tale fates or spells by crossing socially accepted boundaries and binaries, which in turn allow for a sharp critique and revision of the standing social order. Theorists like Ilja Luciak and Lorraine Bayar de Volo assert that many of Nicaragua’s conventional gendered structures of power have persisted through the years as traditional gender roles, binaries, and hierarchies have securely stayed in place for the majority of women in the country. Although Belli never makes explicit reference to Nicaragua, revolution, or the autonomous women’s movements, expressions of autonomy are evoked by the protagonist’s fierce rejection of conventional gendered behavior that are typically inscribed in contemporary fairy tales and myths.

Belli’s story draws from a Brothers Grimm version of the folkloric German fairy tale “The Frog Prince,” in which violence, abjection, and an erotic undertone are all evident.¹⁶ In the “Frog Prince,” the Brothers Grimm tell the story of a young princess who loses a golden ball down a well when suddenly a frog appears, offering his help. The frog offers to rescue the ball, but only if the princess agrees to let him dine with her and, rather erotically, sleep with her in her bed. Later regretting her promise to the frog, the princess—overcome with disgust at the idea of having to sleep next to (or with) a frog—violently throws the amphibian against a wall. As a result, the spell is broken and the prince is returned to his human form, which allows him to then

¹⁶ The original German title is literally “The Frog Prince or Iron Henry.”

marry the princess, thus fulfilling a fate that reinforces hegemonic cultural expectations for women. Perhaps not surprisingly, contemporary versions of the story erase almost all signs of abjection or violence from the original tale. In these better-known variations, the female protagonist must kiss the frog in order to release the prince or male protagonist from his enchantment, which she usually does willingly and without any sign of disgust. This kiss embodies a romantic notion that love can transform and overcome any obstacle—including breaking the spell under which the prince is enchanted.¹⁷ This fairy tale notion of love as a source of empowerment ultimately exemplifies Daly's concept of the patriarchal myth, because it ultimately leads to a limiting normative fate.

In Belli's version of "The Frog Prince," a nameless female protagonist hears the chirping sound of a gecko hidden in her room and comes to believe that the reptile is singing a coded message intended solely for her. Through internal narration, the protagonist describes how the gecko gradually captivated her interest and desire. Infatuated with the special attention bestowed on her, she searches out the assistance of her friend, Toño, to help decode the strange chirping message emitted by the gecko. By coming to the conclusion that the gecko is repeating the code "Ahí viene tu amor," Toño insists that the narrator kiss the reptile in order to see what may happen, just as the princess does in the contemporary Disney-like versions of the story. But rather than kiss the gecko, she bites off the gecko's head and then immediately vomits from disgust.

¹⁷ The romanticized idea of the transformative power of love (via a kiss) is also portrayed in the three popular Disney films *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009).

Belli's modified fairy tale thus harkens back to the violent tradition of the Brothers Grimm, especially in terms of how both female protagonists intentionally try to kill the frog/gecko. Abjection and eroticism, however, are used in a direct and spectacular way within Belli's version. In "El hechizo," the female protagonist lustfully desires the phallic-shaped gecko, but ultimately murders him by a symbolic castration, which is described in gruesome detail. This distinction speaks to Maria Tatar's claim that a fairytale "endlessly adjusts and adapts itself to every new culture as it takes root" (191). Within a Central American context, Belli's new version reflects aspects of the cynical aesthetic where official and normative discourses are scrutinized and questioned by subversive voices that challenge the legitimacy of the status quo. Perhaps as a reflection of the suspicion and distrust felt by various women's movements in Nicaragua after 1990, Belli's story passionately rails against traditional expectations that have limited women's life-options. Belli's version does not portray the traditional happy-ending of heterosexual marriage, but rather, one that signals disillusionment with and defiance of the traditional fate that awaits women within many contemporary Disney-like fairy tales that have emerged in the past century. In fact, Belli turns fate on its head, portraying new possibilities for the young girls or "princesses" (who are usually the personification of femininity) by abjectly subverting traditional expectations.

Belli therefore turns the contemporary versions of "The Frog Prince" into a much more abject and erotic experience for the female protagonist. Like the frog in all versions of this particular fairy tale, the gecko represents an incarnation of the masculine figure whose intention is to symbolically join with and lead the princess or female protagonist into a union of marriage or love. It is generally acknowledged that the educational and socializing effects (or, *enajenación*) of many contemporary fairy tales promote traditional gender roles as well as

conventional hierarchies of power within those relationships (Kawan 31). However, in Belli's modified tale, an upheaval of conventional expectations not only allows for new imaginings of gender roles, but it also establishes a revision of the power structures that are implicitly established within the more contemporary versions of the fairy tale. Rather than accepting the normative fate that awaits her, Belli's protagonist instead pursues an individualistic autonomy (in place of marriage or a union based on love) by utilizing an abject violence against the gecko-prince. In dissidence with tradition, Belli's story speaks to a defiant desire for feminine autonomy from conventional gender relations, which mirrors a similar sentiment seen in the 1990s as women's autonomous groups separated from the male-dominated political parties.

Initially, the narrator/protagonist in "El hechizo" feels strong trepidation toward the gecko, which represents a strong anxiety of uniting with the masculine and succumbing to the typical fairy tale fate. In the socio-historical context of when this short story was written, her trepidation shows parallels with wary feminists who feared being invisible or coopted by the larger male-dominated parties like the FSLN. In a first-person narrative, the protagonist explains her apprehension of the transparent and repugnant-looking gecko: "había oído historias de veneno y agresividad que entonces no recordé, pero que me dejaron una pertinaz sensación de inseguridad" (78). Aggression is a stereotypical characteristic of masculinity and venom potentially represents semen, an association that the narrator makes with the gecko's tears later in the story. The narrator also states that she has always associated geckos with evil and the basilisk.¹⁸ This initial caution toward the potential danger and evil of the gecko becomes laden with symbolism when the protagonist reveals, moments before she decapitates the reptile, how

¹⁸ The basilisk is a mythical reptile known to kill by making eye contact with its victim.

the gecko's body is shaped like a penis. Thus, in part, her initial wary attitude toward the gecko relates to a generalized distrust of men and their potential to cast an "enchantment" of love that ultimately sentences female protagonists to a conventional fate and passivity.

As part of his "enchantment," the gecko actively casts his spell on the passive female character through a conventional courtship—the nocturnal serenade—which reinforces the active/passive binary that delineates male from female. The narrator finally dismisses her uneasy feelings toward the gecko (and thus, the male gender) (78). With the gecko's nightly courtship, the protagonist lets her guard down and becomes spellbound. In the nights that follow her discovery of the gecko, she grows increasingly dependent on the reptile: "tú me fuiste volviendo necesario" (78). At times, the narrator addresses the gecko directly, signaling not only her growing affection for the reptile, but also her personification of it as a human lover with whom she gradually grows intimate.

While the princess in the Grimm story felt horrified at the idea of kissing a frog, the narrator in Belli's story is horrified by her own feelings of intimacy and lustful attraction toward the gecko. Although the narrator had at one time felt repulsed, she now worriedly admits her growing sexual attraction toward the phallus-shaped body of the gecko: "el deseo de besarte era intenso, besarte y lamerte la piel que no era en verdad gelatinosa, sino lisa y estirada, como debía ser" (82). To combat feelings of sexual attraction, she instead tries to provoke feelings of abjection, but she is betrayed by her feelings of tenderness for the creature: "[e]n las tripas lo que se me derramó fue una tranquila cascada de ternura" (81). As a reaction to these conflictive feelings, the narrator takes drastic steps in order to break with the conventions that would shackle her to a traditional fate for the role conventionally assigned to her in a fairy tale.

In the end, narrator decides that she cannot forgive or excuse the symbolic phallic form of the gecko's body. She rhetorically asks: "¿Cómo podía justificar sublimemente mi amor, si tenías la forma exacta de un pene, con tu cabecita levantada? Y para mayor calamidad ahora estabas llorando tus lágrimas de semen. Era demasiado" (82). The narrator suddenly bites the head off of the gecko and in this moment the protagonist finally achieves what she desires: to feel disgust—not from her weak sexual and emotional desires that would lead her to a loss of autonomy—but from the fluids in her mouth. Physically disgusted, she thus vomits "suicidios rezagados con tuquitos rancios de tu cara" (82).

This powerful and erotic kiss—or the "mordiscobeso fatal" (Belli 83)—serves as a source of empowerment that the protagonist employs in order to undo the typical hierarchies of power found in many fairy tales. The fatal "kiss," which represents an oral sexual exchange between the protagonist and gecko, transfers agency to the typically passive feminine role within many conventional fairy tales. A literal severing of the phallus represents a clear overthrow of symbolic paternal power. As Keith Booker asserts, as an abject and subversive motif within literature, castration holds special resonance with the oppression of women (132). He states that "castration functions both as a figure of liberation from the power of the father and of anxiety over the loss of one's own power through paternal domination" (137). The castration and death of the masculine figure in the short story not only assure a violent and erotic victory over the threat against the female protagonist's autonomy, but also affirm the potential for power that emerges from the erotic.

Thus, the narrator releases herself from enchantment without any assistance from a prince on a white horse. Initially, it appears that she will in fact conform to the typical script by romantically kissing the gecko-prince. She even confirms this expectation when, taking the

gecko in her hand, she states: “Mi decisión no pareció sorprender a nadie” (81). But the protagonist does indeed break with what Covino would call her “confinement to the category of the beautiful” (29) by diverting from the typical fairy tale that idealizes beauty, love, and passivity—all by actively making herself abject. In this sense, the narrator becomes an active agent in her own destiny and frees herself from her own “enchantment” (i.e. the usual fate of princesses). The narrator breaks with the figurative “spell” that Daly describes in order to liberate herself from the patriarchal myth that tries to bind her to the traditional and restrictive role of a princess in a fairy tale. The protagonist’s action ultimately releases her from an enchantment that she fears—one that would lead to a loss of autonomy and individuality.

Appropriating a cautionary tone typical of various fairy tales, the narrator also comments on the unexpected outcome for the gecko-prince. Describing the defunct body of the gecko and its decapitated head, the narrator affirms in the last sentence of the short story: “Tu rostro, era tu rostro, el mismo que tenías antes, cuando inadvertido galán me declarabas tu amor, sin miedo a los hechizos” (83). According to a typical structure of certain fairy tales, the masculine figure inevitably achieves his goal, which also inevitably culminates in the betrothal of the two lovers. In this last sentence of Belli’s story, the narrator addresses the gecko-prince’s arrogant belief in his own inevitable success. Undoubtedly, the gecko’s confidence is founded on a patriarchal order, wherein most fairy tales endorse and guarantee masculine dominion. Nevertheless, Belli asserts in this last key sentence that, in the end, not even fairy tales have the last definitive say on the “fate” of women but rather, through autonomy and erotic empowerment, women have the potential to break free from repressive master scripts or patriarchal structures.

Lucía Escobar: “Mis noches de luna llena”

Similar to Nicaragua, a strong but fragmented women's movement (of both *institucionalizadas* and *autónomas*) formed in Guatemala at the end of the country's prolonged 36-year civil war (Berger 39). With the 1996 peace accords, Guatemalan women looked to the Nicaraguan Revolution for strategic lessons, especially in terms of gender-interest negotiations. In a collection of interviews, Stoltz notes how Nicaraguan women warned Guatemalan women that they should not equate their participation in revolution with gender equality. Nevertheless, a strong and vocal women's movement (mostly in the form of autonomous NGOs) appeared in Guatemala and activists demanded that gender equality be placed into the agenda of the peace negotiations (Luciak, *After the Revolution* 55). While Guatemalan women were ultimately more successful than the Sandinista women at strengthening their role within the larger political parties, they too experienced a profound sense of disillusionment with the eventual outcome of the Peace Accords (Ascencio Álvarez 76). Ana Silvia Monzón, a Guatemalan sociologist, confirms: "los esfuerzos de democratización real se han visto limitados por el escaso impulso que ha tenido el cumplimiento de los Acuerdos de Paz..." (11). Therefore, as seen in both Cuba and Nicaragua, a stubborn gap persists in Guatemala between symbolic gender-equality legislation and political leaders' inability (or indifference) to enforcing those laws. As Susan A. Berger suggests in her book *Guatemaltecas: The Women's Movement 1986-2003* (2006), the gap between official rhetoric and lived realities has led many *guatemaltecas* to question the benefits of working within the government: many women believed that the state was effectively coopting and subordinating gender reforms along with women's participation, despite that important

institutional reforms (now seen by many as mere gestures) were included in the 1996 Peace Accords agenda (38).¹⁹

Autonomy from the mainstream political parties has also been problematic for women's groups in Guatemala. Many autonomous NGO groups have survived via international capital, but as a result, they have found themselves influenced by outside, global forces (Berger 33-34). For these groups, there exists a contradictory space of resistance and of complicity with neoliberal practices: global restructuring has helped open more democratic spaces for women's groups, but at the same time, its neoliberal policies have also encouraged these groups to become "the helpmate of the state in imposing its neoliberal agenda" (Berger 2). As a result, these "globalizing forces" tend to use women as convenient representatives for restructuring gender roles under the new neoliberal policies. Therefore, many women employ their traditional roles as mothers, health care providers, teachers, social workers, and heads of households in order to help those suffering from neoliberal cut-backs, thus inadvertently reinforcing globalization's "gendered relations of domination" (5).²⁰ As the dominance of neoliberal policies and global capitalism increases in Central America, disenchantment within women's movements becomes even more acute, which only perpetuates a more fervent insistence of the need for autonomy

¹⁹ Important institutional changes include gender quotas in political parties and outlawing discrimination and violence against women (Berger 38).

²⁰ Berger therefore clarifies that, although Guatemalan women have been successful at strengthening their role within national politics, some scholars believe that their current participation and collaboration with the government has only helped "globalization reproduce and intensify gendered relations of domination" (5).

from both the patriarchal system and an increasingly globalized economy. In brief, many women activists in Guatemala face the dilemma of either enduring invisibility (as *institucionalizadas*) or complicity with neoliberal policies that reinforce current gender relations (as *autónomas*).

As many women activists strive for representation within Guatemala's male-dominated politics, pressing gender-related issues like femicide and sexual abuse are very slowly being addressed. Victoria Sanford, an academic and human rights advocate, describes the State's culpability in regard to the high numbers of femicide in Guatemala: "El feminicidio nos remite a las estructuras del poder e implica al estado como culpable, sea por acción, tolerancia u omisión. En Guatemala, el feminicidio es un crimen que existe por la ausencia de las garantías que protegen los derechos de las mujeres" (62). According to a 2013 Small Arms Survey, Guatemala has the third highest rate of femicide in the world (El Salvador is listed as the first and Honduras as the 7th), which averages two women murdered everyday (52). In part, scholars like Sanford attribute these high numbers to the legacy of Guatemala's 36-years of civil war, a time when countless women, the majority of which were indigenous, were systematically raped. They also attribute such violence to a pervasive *machismo* that is deeply engrained in Guatemalan culture. Sanford explains that, as impunity increases the number of women's murders, "protecting" women means limiting their ability to move around in public. Sanford therefore equates this solution (of limiting women's access outside of the home) as yet another way in which men are justified in controlling women and in limiting their participation in activities, such as politics (63).

The short story "Mis noches de luna llena" (2000) by Guatemalan writer and journalist Lucía Escobar is (on a micro-level) evocative of extreme frustration and anger directed at male-dominated political and social systems that seeks to limited women's options. In the story, a

nameless female protagonist recounts a crucial and violent event in her life when all her emotions erotically climax into a transient moment of empowerment.²¹ Through the course of the short story, the erotic and the abject work to create an autonomous freedom from repressive cultural norms and expectations that limit women's self-expression and independence. Escobar demonstrates how, by embracing the repressed abject and erotic tendencies within oneself, the protagonist's actions become an expression of feminine autonomy. Her erotic and abject actions subversively demonstrate how feminine autonomy liberates her from the confinements of a conventional and passive ideal for women, even if only momentarily. Similar to the first two stories explored in this chapter, Escobar's story never makes explicit reference to its particular political climate or Guatemalan women's movement, but rather, it is an evocative expression of longing or desire for feminine autonomy that emanates from a profound disappointment with Guatemalan women's continued political and social marginalization.

²¹ Escobar has also published various short stories on the Internet (through her blog, <http://lasotrasluchas.blogspot.com/>), and in online literary magazines such as *Página de Literatura Guatemalteca*). The author is primarily known as a journalist and civil rights activist in Guatemala. According to Zack Tackett in his article from the online magazine *Sampsonia Way*, Escobar was recently added to the Index on Censorship's 2011 Freedom of Expression Awards after she wrote an opinion column in *El Periódico* that criticized human rights abuses in Guatemala. Facing death threats after publishing the article, Escobar went temporarily into hiding. Undeterred by these threats, she continues to write as a journalist and operate the Guatemalan digital radio station *Radio Atí*. There have been no critical studies or reviews done on her work.

Escobar's story begins with the protagonist's first-hand account as she describes how much she detests the full moon due to its cyclical nature and its customary connections with the idealization of romantic love. She explains her story in a linear fashion, reflecting back on her own youthful naivety with cynical passion. She recalls how, on an evening when the full moon was in the sky, both she and her boyfriend swear to eternally love one another. Her boyfriend assures her that as long as the full moon appears in the sky every month, he too would be present watching over her. The protagonist later comes to regret her promise of love to her boyfriend. Feeling trapped by her promise, the protagonist then goes on to describe losing her virginity not to her boyfriend for whom she was initially saving herself, but to a neighbor uninterested in romantic ideals or notions. However, as she is about to reach her first orgasm with the neighbor, she suddenly sees the full moon rise above her and is unable to climax. From this moment forward, the protagonist is unable to have an orgasm, even after she marries her boyfriend. After only two years of marriage, she comes to resent and hate her husband who is oblivious to her estranged feelings and who is completely content with what she considers is a mundane marriage. The story concludes on the day of their anniversary: the narrator becomes overwhelmed with rage and without thinking, slowly and deliberately stabs her husband through the chest. In this moment with her husband doubled over her, she is finally able to orgasm for the first time in her life. During this final scene, the narrator notices the full moon passing by in her window. Unimpeded by its looming presence, she concludes the story by asserting two statements: that the moon did not matter and that the power to kill was beautiful.

Just as a fairy tale "enchantment" (found in Belli's story) almost certainly condemns women to a prescribed role, the notion of romantic love is conceived in a similar vein in Escobar's story. Many North American radical feminists from the 1960s, 70s, and 80s saw

romantic love as a tactic that is used to distract women from their ordinary lives and to render them as dependent, vulnerable, and unfulfilled human beings (Donovan 156-57).²² As mentioned before, Mary Daly frames the patriarchal myth as a deceptive tool of the patriarchy that is used to manipulate and trap women into believing that their fates and behavior must comply with normative standards of heterosexuality. This is seen in Escobar's story when the narrator associates romantic love with entrapment. She recalls: "Un día de esos en los que sientes que estás enamorada, y que nunca amarás a nadie como al novio del momento, caí en la trampa" (93) and admits to falling for this "trap" by initially embracing the idea of romance when she was younger: "Pero me dejé arrastrar por la cursi que todos llevamos dentro" (93). The protagonist states that "la cursi" within each person leads to this entrapment, which demonstrates the strength of what Blanca Guifarro calls "*enajenación*." *Enajenación* occurs when another's ideology (in this case, a patriarchal ideology) is gradually acquired and made normative in everyday life: "Esta se construye de rato en rato, día en día, en la medida en que el entorno socioeconómico, político, religioso y patriarcal, define los caminos para apropiarse de la voluntad de pensar, sentir y actuar" (80). As an unconscious normative and internalized belief, the protagonist implies that this trap invitingly begins with love, but later imposes restrictive conventional expectations that encourage women to follow a typical, limited gender role assigned to them in a romantic context. These limiting roles offered to women prod them to imitate the traditional ideal of the patient, passive female who is satisfied by scripted romantic gestures and symbols, such as red roses and full moons. However, the narrator cynically

²² Radical feminism emphasizes the notion that male supremacy is strategically maintained in a patriarchal system by systematically oppressing women.

addresses the inadequacy of romantic love to satisfy women's physical needs. For instance, she describes how she must fake orgasms with her husband: "Aprendí [a] fingir los orgasmos perfectamente bien, como casi todas las mujeres" (94). The protagonist implies that this condition is not unique to her own situation, but it is the fate of many women who emulate, whether consciously or unconsciously, the learned gender roles in which they persistently find themselves.

Despite the fact that Escobar's protagonist initially agrees and participates in this idea of romantic love, the narrator eventually develops a growing rage against her husband, traditional representations of romance, and even herself for not being able to break the "silly" promises that she made to her boyfriend years before. Within Escobar's story, romantic symbols like red roses and full moons are deliberately transformed into hateful reminders of a patriarchal entrapment that limits her to a traditional, passive role. For the protagonist, these romantic symbols become insufferable representations not just of romance itself but what romance signifies: either a conscious manipulation or, an unquestioning unconscious acceptance of traditional gender structures. The oppressive, controlling power of romance is exemplified by the recurring presence of a full moon. One night, under a full moon, the narrator's boyfriend professes his love to her, promising that "mientras que ella [la luna] salga cada mes, yo estaré viéndote, esté donde esté, y con ella mi recuerdo y mi amor llenarán tus noches" (93). Although initially thrilled by this declaration of love, the protagonist later feels the vigilance and repression of the moon.

Important social parallels exist between romance and security for women within highly patriarchal societies: obtaining romance and protection (within a patriarchal culture) requires women to willingly submit to men. As Sanford suggests about the hegemonic, patriarchal culture within Guatemala, if a woman wants protection from violence, she must submit to male control

and vigilance (63). Likewise, if a woman desires romance and love, she must also submit to prescribed restrictive gender roles defined by patriarchal beliefs. Thus, just as protection from sexual abuse is exchanged for a price, the same is true of romance. When the protagonist loses her virginity in an alley with her neighbor, she is unable to climax due to the oppressive presence of the full moon. Like a Foucauldian panopticon, the moon serves as a source of patriarchal power that domineeringly watches over the protagonist's actions and ultimately keeps her from engaging with her own erotic powers. In this scene, the moon effectively thwarts her sexual rebellion against the passive, pure ideal that she does not realistically embody. The protagonist rhetorically asks how she can evade the moon's power: "Pero, ¿cómo luchar contra ella? ¿Qué podía hacer yo? Una simple mortal contra la puta esa que lleva no sé cuantos miles de años ahí dando vueltas o parada, la verdad no sé" (94). The protagonist's inability to fight the moon is as daunting as destroying the patriarchal culture that surrounds her and obliges her to remain passive and dependent.

On a physical level, the moon is also a sharp reminder of patriarchal conceptions regarding the limitations of the female body. As certain feminists like Simone de Beauvoir have asserted in the past, women's biology and reproductive ability have served as a patriarchal justification for keeping women confined to a domestic sphere of influence. The monthly cycle of the moon draws sharp parallels with women's monthly menstrual cycle, which the protagonist notes as she explains her hatred for the moon: "Lo que más odio es su puntualidad, una vez al mes, siempre. Como la menstruación, y como ella no me trae más que la rabia" (93). Also in a separate moment, the narrator describes how the moon appeared "luminosa y roja, como la sangre que ese día tenía mi ropa interior" (93). Menstruation alludes to an underlining sexual difference that has been used to defend separation between the sexes into binary oppositions that

are especially limiting for women. For example, Woman is relegated to the domestic sphere due to her reproductive capabilities, which effectively isolates her from participating in the politics for power in the public sphere. Therefore, the moon serves as yet another reminder of an imposed justification for women's passivity within a patriarchal society, one that obliges women to take on a domestic and subordinate role.

In light of this social pressure, it is the culmination of the protagonist's emotions and feelings that empower her, allowing her to sexually climax when she finally engages in an active role. Provoked on the day of their anniversary when her husband presents her with twelve red roses, the protagonist reacts to this hollow and stereotypical present with hypnotic rage. She explains: "No lo sorporté y sin pensarlo le metí el cuchillo con el que picaba la cebolla" (95). In a highly symbolic fashion, the protagonist uses a kitchen knife to kill her husband enacting the sexually "active" role of the male who penetrates the female during intercourse. By wielding a kitchen knife to enter her husband, the narrator turns her domestic tool into a weapon against her husband who, through his blind acceptance of patriarchal ideology, has obligated her to take on a traditional feminine identity.

Keeping in mind Guatemala's high rates of femicide and the State's history of systemic sexual abuse against women, the act of "raping" (discussed below) and killing her husband is an especially emotive and symbolic act. The protagonist demonstrates a violent declaration of independence, revenge, and autonomy by emphasizing her dramatic transformation from a passive, traditional feminine role (as a victim of the patriarchy) into a traditional male active role (as a perpetrator of the patriarchy). In particular, this reversal of gender roles and an inversion of the active/passive binary are also highlighted by the "virginal blood" that comes from the stabbed husband. The narrator implies the idea of sexually deflowering her husband: "El tiempo

se hizo más lento, sentí la camisa rasgarse, luego la piel, tuve que hacer más fuerza, pero el cuchillo entró hasta el fondo... Sentí como si lo hubiera desvirgado de un solo golpe, hasta el fondo, con fuerza y sin piedad” (95). The protagonist actively takes her husband’s “virginity” by taking his life and the profuse bleeding from the wound parallels that of hymen blood. The presence of menstrual and virginal blood are made abject in part due to the danger they signify in terms of sexual or social identity: in short, these transgressions threaten the social relationships or borders between the sexes (Kristeva 71). The repressed terror and fear of these abject elements surface within Escobar’s short story, opening a space to critically examine that which is usually suppressed. Both menstrual and virginal blood serve as a strong reminder of sexual difference in Escobar’s story. However, by subversively associating virginal blood with Man (rather than Woman), Escobar transgresses the traditional sexual binary that separates Man from Woman, causing the sensation of abjection.

Most significantly, by highlighting this reversal in gender roles and sexual difference marked by the hymen, the protagonist for the first time in her life experiences the power that is associated with being an active agent within a patriarchal system, especially so by representationally raping her husband. Octavio Paz describes the sexual verb “chingar” as a penetrating violence against another, stating: “[e]s un verbo masculino, activo, cruel: pica, hierre, desgarrar, manchar” (70). However, “chingar” can also be understood as the act of “screwing over” or duping another person: it is an action that undercuts the power of the person being “screwed.” In this sense, the protagonist doubly “screws” her husband in a figurative and literal sense, reinforcing her subversive and transgressive active identity.

The scene where the protagonist “penetrates” her husband shows the strong connection between power and the erotic through the act of killing. Once the narrator finally takes on an

unrepressed active role that is tapped into the erotic, she experiences the sensation of power, which allows her to experience the intensity of feeling in the form of her first orgasm. She describes: “Y ahí en la cocina con su cuerpo doblándose hacia mí, tuve mi primer y único orgasmo” (95). By releasing herself from her passivity, the narrator finds herself empowered by the erotic. This release is highlighted by her disregard for the moon’s representational presence as an evasive and controlling ideology. She asserts: “Por supuesto, su muerte duró exactamente el tiempo en que la luna llena apareció por una esquina de la ventana y desapareció por la otra. No me importó, era tan bello tener el poder de la muerte en las manos. Fue hermoso” (95). The full moon’s power—which represents the power of the patriarchy—becomes irrelevant as she is finally able to experience an autonomous power, which she characterizes as beautiful.

The protagonist encounters this autonomous power not only through the erotic, but also by embracing the abject. By taking on the abject role of a murderess, the protagonist becomes the physical incarnation of corruption and transgression within society. The protagonist is rendered especially abject as her violent behavior represents suppressed desires that surface “abruptly”—at least so for her husband who never suspected her true feelings. As she stabs her husband, she notes the surprise and disbelief in his eyes: “Y él viéndome a los ojos sin poder creerlo, pensando que había un error, que era un accidente. Estoy segura que murió pensando que yo no quería hacerlo, que era un sueño” (95). This disbelief is caused by the unexpected incongruities within the protagonist that make her abject: her vicious and “monstrous” act against her husband destabilizes the outward identity that she has already established as a “normal” wife, which is like any other—one who fakes orgasms, represses emotions, and attends to domestic chores.

The transgression of binaries works to destabilize commonly held notions of good and evil, producing an abject subject whose identity is volatile and, thus, threatening. As Catherine

Heard notes, a relatively new fear of the “hidden” Other has recently appeared in the last century or so. So while freak shows have almost all disappeared, a new obsession with the monster within has arisen. Heard writes: “Perhaps in response to the disappearance of the visibly monstrous from the public sphere, we imagined the presence of monsters that looked like us but harbored dangerous, concealed differences” (33). Despite that the protagonist outwardly performed and complied with her role as the passive, acceptable wife for many years (with only the one exception of her secret affair in the alley), she inwardly carried a concealed monstrous-self that defiantly opposed those cultural expectations that she externally followed. It is precisely the tension between her outward and inward selves that ultimately make her into a dangerous, abject being who threatens meaning and identity.

In Escobar’s story, the release of these internally suppressed differences helps the protagonist to erotically “climax,” allowing her to finally step outside of an internalized ideological system that compels feminine passivity and dependence. By taking on the role of murderess and rapist (two identities that clash with a naturalized traditional feminine identity), she finds a momentary autonomy and independence that lies in the embrace of abjection and in the celebration of an erotic release that is only possible through an acceptance of herself as Other. Evocative of a national climate of frustration and rage, Escobar’s story can be interpreted as an expression of disillusionment with patriarchal structures of power that work to limit women’s participation as individuals in society and as capable actors within politics as well.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of her argument, Kristeva asks: “who, I ask you, would agree to call himself abject, subject of or subject to abjection?” (209). Although the French theorist doubts that anyone would willingly assent to this position, this chapter demonstrates how these three

protagonists that emerge from Cuban, Nicaraguan, and Guatemalan literature affirm their abject identities as expressions of and the growing desire for feminine autonomy in all three countries. Vega, Belli, and Escobar explore new possibilities of feminine autonomy within their stories that point to a radical, symbolic manner in which to escape or reject limiting ideological systems. As a result, these works represent expressions of a dissident and emergent cultural form from each country.

The short stories examined in this chapter demonstrate that an acceptance of abjection and eroticism can lead to a defiant bid for feminine autonomy—not only from the restrictive cultural norms that limit feminine identity—but also from an ideological system of power that inadvertently marginalizes and ignores women's power and independence. Vega, Belli, and Escobar's stories depict how the abject and the erotic become the basis from which women can defiantly embrace an alternative, empowering feminine Otherness. As a result, these stories paradoxically subvert the position of Other that has traditionally been imposed upon them. In this way, the protagonists are able to transcend an essentialist status and transform themselves into empowered subjects, capable of standing independent of a patriarchal system that insists on their compliance.

With such violent images of castration or murder perpetuated by the familiar Other, these short stories provoke strong emotional and visceral reactions. By exploring cultural norms and the related taboos that go in hand with them, salient insights into personal expectations for gender roles and relations of power between the genders become evident. By addressing and subverting normative gendered expectations, the three female writers express a longing for autonomy from an ideological system that calls for an unquestioning compliance with preconceived, conventional identities. By offering up these new, subversive identities of

embraced abjection and eroticism, each story points to a truly revolutionary change that is needed to bring about actual equality for the women in all three respective countries.

Chapter Four: The Natural Cyborg: Visions of a Gynocentric Utopia in Salvadoran and Honduran Literature

“Hoy he conjurado
mi propio enigma.
Yo soy esa otra,
la hembra primitiva.”

- *Laura Fuentes (Costa Rica, 1978)*

The poem “Soy esa otra” (1999) by the Costa Rican author Laura Fuentes elaborates an intimate connection between nature and women. Drawing from traditional, Western ideas of feminine attributes, the first-person poetic voice blends traditional feminine characteristics with natural elements. The voice describes herself as the “[c]ostilla ineludible” (9), a reference to the Judeo-Christian belief that the first woman was made from the first man’s rib. But the very next line of the poem undermines the Genesis story by suggesting that women came not from men, but rather, “de la lluvia” (10). The generative and essential role of rain (within nature) is linked to the life-giving capacity of the female body. As a symbol of new life—but also of mortality—the poetic voice names her body as a place of discordant identity: “Soy campana / y tumba de la vida” (25-26). Further enmeshing the feminine and the natural, the poetic voice also emphasizes her connection to emotion and passion, especially as it symbolically takes shape in both nature and in humanity: “Soy terremoto, / guerra” (5-6). The power evidenced from both man-made violence and environmental forces reveals the poetic voice’s understanding of her own strength as an embodiment of both nature and humankind. Not only is the poem a declaration of strength but also a search for self-expression and personal identity. Rather than passively allowing others

to name, define, or mystify her,¹ the voice embraces an individualized pursuit for self-meaning: “Hoy he conjurado / mi propio enigma” (29-30). The poetic voice therefore becomes an active participant in her own naming as she concludes: “Yo soy esa otra / la hembra primitiva” (31-32). As the voice exalts her Otherness, the primitive and independent animal serves as an empowering symbol, representative of a complex identity that strategically undermines and engages with clear-cut Western definitions of what it means to be an animal or a woman.

Beginning as far back as Greek and Roman mythology, animalized humans and personified animals have existed throughout the ages in parables and allegories. While the blending of animal and humanistic characteristics is not a new phenomenon in literary history, its appearance in contemporary Central American literature is particularly striking as a rhetorical strategy that various women writers employ to celebrate certain traditional characteristics of femininity and to stress women’s value within Central American society and culture. Beginning with Simone de Beauvoir, Western feminists have pointed out that patriarchal societies tend to devalue traditionally associated feminine traits by positing them as subordinate to masculine traits: the primary, superior categories of masculinity, civilization, and reason take a supposed precedence over the secondary, inferior categories of femininity, nature, and emotion. In the Central American works explored in this chapter,² women writers strategically appropriate and

¹ Octavio Paz has famously stated that women stand as the ultimate “Enigma” in *Laberinto de la soledad* (1959): “La mujer... es figura enigmática. Mejor dicho, es el Enigma... Es la imagen de la fecundidad, pero asimismo de la muerte” (59).

² In addition to the examples explored in this essay, see “Yo, Carroña” (2005) by Lety Elvir; *Mediodía de frontera* (2002) by Claudia Hernández; *Animalario* (2002) by Marta Susana Prieto.

pair certain “secondary” categories (in particular, femininity and nature) to inscribe new gendered meanings, while, at the same time, disrupting other traits that have traditionally linked women to an inherent weakness or powerlessness.

Within a social context of disenchantment (especially so for women), I explore one symbolic alternative that various Central American women writers employ by strategically appropriating and celebrating normative Western feminine characteristics (such as compassion, intuition, and a connectedness to life via reproduction) as part of a utopic project to re-envision the traditional feminine role in society as uniquely powerful and crucial to the region’s future and wellbeing. The post-revolutionary or postwar narratives that I explore emphasize feminine difference by utilizing cyborgs—entities that Donna Haraway has famously characterized as *genderless* and posthuman. Haraway defines the cyborg as a “creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (117). While the term “cyborg” originated with Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline to mean a man-machine hybrid, the posthuman cyborg described by Haraway is created by fusing one of three fundamental boundaries: between animals and humans, humans/animals and machines, and the physical and non-physical (120). Haraway’s cyborg embodies muddled borders and crossed identities, which leads Haraway to insist that the cyborg is a “creature in the post-gender world,” or a genderless world (118). This kind of blending seemingly contradicts the post-revolutionary narratives examined in this chapter, which are narratives that, at times, celebrate an intentional masculine/feminine difference in Central American literature. Still, various theorists of Gender Studies have argued that the cyborg embodies many gendered characteristics that complicate the possibility for a post-gender society. Rather than examine the erasure of gendered difference, I follow the ways in which Central American literature employs cyborgs to draw attention to normative notions of masculine or

feminine difference while also inscribing new meanings of power into traditional concepts of femininity and nature.

Most scholars and theorists have focused on the way in which Haraway's cyborg conjures images of human beings crossed with machines and technology, almost completely ignoring the second kind of cyborg, which fuses animal and human characteristics. This kind of cyborg, which I call a "natural" cyborg,³ recurrently appears in Central American postwar literature and oftentimes serves as a recurrent discursive device for challenging and envisioning alternatives to a phallogentric, technologically advanced, and male-dominated order. In particular, I examine natural cyborgs found in various contemporary Honduran and Salvadoran works, including the novel *Baile con serpientes* (2003) by the Salvadoran-Honduran writer Horacio Castellanos Moya, the poem "Perro Podenco" (*Mujer entre perro y lobo*, 2001) by Honduran Lety Elvir, and the three short stories, "Hereje" (*Contra-corriente*, 1993) by Salvadoran Jacinta Escudos, "Vocación de serpiente" (*Guardarropa*, 2001) by Honduran Rocío Tábora, and "Animalario" (*Animalario*, 2002) by Honduran Marta Susana Prieto. While none of these primary sources explicitly refer to characters as cyborgs, viewing them through the lens of cyborg theory reveals and emphasizes two aspects: firstly, natural cyborg stories depict and

³ In "Envisioning Cyborg Bodies" (2000), Jennifer González mentions one of three cyborg bodies, which she calls an "organic cyborg:" a creature made up of multiple species (58). With the term "natural cyborg," I seek to emphasize that organic and natural are not interchangeable cultural concepts. I argue that "natural cyborg" is a more nuanced designation for the animal/human cyborg, because it points out the cyborg's specific connection with nature, not just the organic.

critique the exploitation and abuse of marginalized beings; and secondly, these stories strategically employ the cyborg figure to either critique a masculine appropriation of nature or to celebrate an intimate feminine connection to nature, instinct, emotion, and life.

Written at the turn of the 21st century, the five texts examined in this chapter accordingly reveal a deep-seated disillusionment with the endless cycles of violence depicted in both Honduran and Salvadoran societies. Haraway describes her cyborg myth as “a rhetorical strategy and a political method,” meaning that the myth is a symbolic, discursive tactic that aims to either make a social critique or envision new social possibilities (117-118). Both Castellanos Moya’s novel *Baile con serpientes* and Prieto’s short story “Animalario” depict the first function of critiquing society; the natural cyborg is manipulated by a phallogentric, male-dominated tradition that privileges and reinforces gendered hierarchies of power. In Castellanos Moya’s novel, the cyborg myth is enacted with the violent, masculine appropriation of female-snakes, which conjures scenes that harken back to the days of civil war in El Salvador. In Prieto’s short story, the natural cyborg takes on a hyper-masculine form as a menacing creature that has cornered a woman in her home. While both texts make a sharp critique of the current problematic structures of power within Central American society (especially as they relate to gender dynamics and discrimination), neither one offers an exit strategy from the social and cultural dilemmas that they portray.

The second function of the cyborg myth (of imagining utopic possibilities) is depicted in Elvir’s poem “Perro Podenco” and in the short stories “Hereje” by Escudos and “Vocación de serpiente” by Tábora. These three texts not only make a gendered critique of society, but they also propose a discursive, symbolic solution to gendered hierarchies: each “myth” requires that the female protagonists metaphorically exit the conventional structures of patriarchal power.

More specifically, female protagonists selectively appropriate traits traditionally associated with the feminine (i.e. instinct and emotion) and use them as tools to escape into a gynocentric future, or, in other words, a woman-focused future that re-inscribes the feminine as valuable. While this future is only a symbolic “myth,” it inspires readers to reimagine feminine characteristics in untraditional ways, as powerful, valuable, and self-sufficient. The tactic of selectively appropriating to excess Western notions that conflate women with nature ultimately undermines established patriarchal structures of power that perpetuate derogative stereotypes of the feminine. In other words, the Salvadoran and Honduran women writers in question use the natural cyborg to raise the value of women’s and nature’s secondary status, thereby challenging gender and sexual hierarchies that exist in Central America.

In order to understand how the natural cyborg can promote gender difference (and, consequently, promote a gynocentric way of looking at society), it is necessary to examine the ways in which theorists have complicated Haraway’s cyborg figure. In her famous “Cyborg Manifesto” (1991), Haraway proposes a post-gender feminist utopia that serves as an alternative to traditional, patriarchal society. Within Haraway’s utopic vision, the cyborg body theoretically eliminates all dualisms and binaries that establish essentialist notions of gender and sexual identity by erasing their boundaries. Haraway states: “Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (147). As a new entity is created via the cyborg, conventional identities and stereotypes are destroyed thanks to the cyborg’s fragmented and blended characteristics. Haraway’s post-gender society is therefore based on the mixing of genders so that neither the male or female gender exists or dominates as the norm. Various critics like Jennifer González and Sara Cohen Shabot, however, point out that the technological cyborg actually reinforces the gendered binaries that are

supposedly eliminated. By emphasizing two traditional binaries that have been historically associated with the masculine (technology) and with the feminine (nature), Haraway's theory inevitably reinforces gendered dualisms by creating two dualistic categories of cyborgs: the organic/machine kind and the animal/human kind. In the case of the machine/human cyborg, masculinity is emphasized, thanks in large part to its relationship with a pop-culture militaristic legacy. In terms of the animal/human cyborg, women in many Western cultures have been closely associated with animals because of their supposed mental inferiority to men and due to their reproductive ability.⁴ As a result of these persistent stereotypes, neither the technological nor natural cyborg elides gender binaries, but rather, exacerbates them.

In Central America, many feminists articulate the need to combat disparaging attitudes toward traditional notions and characteristics of femininity. The Costa Rican theorist Yadira Calvo writes: "La historia de las mujeres ha transitado a través de ortigas: el agravio a nuestra inteligencia, la limitación a nuestra sexualidad, el desprecio a nuestras obras, el irrespeto a nuestras personas; en fin, la tendencia sistemática del patriarcado a dualizar la realidad colocándonos en el lado malo o en la parte peor" (7). As women are relegated to a secondary status within a simplistic hierarchy of good vs. bad, masculine vs. feminine, strong vs. weak, etc., feminists from the region have noted how reductive categorizing has justified male-domination in politics and society. Theorist Breny Mendoza describes how various Honduran feminists and activists struggle with the widely held belief that women lack objectivity, which, according to Mendoza, is a tactic that male Honduran politicians have employed to render

⁴ See Linda Schiebinger's essay "Taxonomy for Human Beings" and Nancy Leys Stepan's essay "Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science" in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader* (2000).

women invisible in politics (178-79). In response to this common association between women and women's supposed natural traits, the Honduran writer and feminist Rocío Tábora cites the North American theorist Robert Stein, noting that it is not necessarily the oppression of *women*, but the oppression of “lo femenino” that has been most debilitating in Central American cultures (*Masculinidad* 32-33). By not assuming that “lo masculino” is the standard to which everything else must be measured, a gynocentric (woman-centered) response to disparaging notions of femininity serves Central American writers in the process of reconceiving deeply held cultural beliefs about gender. In an effort to reclaim and re-inscribe these characteristics, various women writers make a preliminary move toward rethinking dominant gender hierarchies in society.

Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Baile con serpientes*

As a form of social and political commentary, Horacio Castellanos Moya's novel *Baile con serpientes* reveals the first cyborg perspective of critique by framing the existing patriarchal order as a propagator of violence and war within Central American society. As one of El Salvador's most popular contemporary writers, Castellanos Moya is well known for his gritty narratives and critical examinations of Central American politics and culture. As noted by critics like Luis Pérez Simón, Rafael Lara-Martínez, and Leonor Abujatum, Castellanos Moya's work is marked by the violence and chaos perpetrated during the Salvadoran civil war. But in addition to the war's clear legacy of violence and conflict, I argue that the novel reveals ways in which gender hierarchies are linked to a circular and socialized violence that is perpetuated by fears of masculine inadequacy and of Salvadoran women's growing advancement and self-sufficiency in a globalized, postwar economy.

In *Baile con serpientes*, gendered animalization (embodied by four deadly and sexualized female snakes) creates a cyborg myth that is based on the male appropriation of the female to

perpetuate senseless violence and chaos. Within the hostile urban center located in an unnamed Central American country, a young and unemployed sociologist named Eduardo Sosa murders and then takes on the identity of an unemployed alcoholic named Don Jacinto, a man who was living with four venomous female snakes in an old yellow Chevrolet parked near Sosa's home. By assuming Don Jacinto's identity, Sosa inadvertently becomes *amo* of both the car and the snakes, which he uses to wreak havoc and chaos throughout the city, killing for vengeance, but also indiscriminately, with the lethal and sensual bite of his new companions. With his newly found power, Sosa's appropriation of these feminine anthropomorphic snakes reiterates the cyborg's pop-cultural legacy as a propagator of violence by way of a phallogentric, male-dominated project of destruction. Sosa's control over the snakes is representative of the persistent male-dominated power in Central American society.

The formal structure of the novel contributes to the chaotic atmosphere that Castellanos Moya depicts. The repeating and endless patterns of violence are highlighted by Sosa's overarching story: after a meaningless killing spree, the protagonist returns to his sister's home and no one is the wiser of his discarded, temporary metamorphosis into Don Jacinto. His anonymous identity speaks to an increasingly impersonal social reality found within a neoliberal Salvadoran context; as well, Sosa's unquestioned return to his sister's home emphasizes a similar reality within the indifferent, disengaged family unit that is divided not only physically (with one sister in the US sending remittances), but spiritually, as well. The narrative structure also emphasizes distance between characters and subjectivities. While Sosa's first-person narration is foregrounded, the novel also provides first-person perspectives from the police sub commissioner Lito Handal and a reporter, Rita Mena. The first-person narrations highlight the

encased, disconnected subjectivities of each individual as they each wonder how the other characters are motivated.

The novel's storyline is propelled by the male protagonists' fears, anxieties, and frustrations surrounding traditional masculine identities. In particular, both Sosa, and the man he emulates—Don Jacinto—have failed to measure up to a Western standard of masculinity that dictates that a man be self-sufficient, powerful, and productive. With limited agency, both Sosa and Don Jacinto are unemployed and insignificant members of a society that privileges scheming, backstabbing, and getting ahead at whatever cost. As unproductive and impotent men, the novel stresses the tensions and anxieties that are produced when they are unable to embody traditional Western gender identities that promote a masculine strength, assertiveness, and self-determination. Furthermore, the economically self-sufficient women in each of the men's lives exacerbate these feelings of inadequacy as unproductive heads of the household. Sosa, an unemployed, recently graduated sociologist, lives in the home of his younger sister and depends on the remittances sent from another sister in the United States. Don Jacinto's former life was undone after his lover was murdered in a fit of jealousy by her husband. When Jacinto's wife subsequently divorces him, the former accountant and middle class citizen becomes a drunkard and vagrant living out of a Chevrolet. His wife and daughter, however, continue to live comfortably in his former home. As a result, impotency and frustration characterize a subtle justification or rationale for their volatile and violent states.

Not surprisingly, Sosa defends and empathizes with the sordid and powerless Don Jacinto, whose present reality (as an unemployed and homeless bum) is Sosa's potential and likely future. Sosa muses over the connectedness of his and Don Jacinto's life: "...más bien como un presentimiento, una advertencia, la temida premonición, o lo que fuera, de que mi vida

algo tendría que ver con su vagabundeo” (Castellanos Moya 19). Sosa’s premonition marks the perpetual cycles of violence that are passed down from one generation to the next. Thus, the novel’s vicious circularity is marked by the way that Sosa reproduces Don Jacinto’s masculine persona. As a graduated sociologist and a young man who is adapting to his situation, Sosa decides to do a sociological “study”—one that he performs with professional detachment—so that he may eventually transform into Don Jacinto.

Initially an insignificant, passive member of society, much of the pleasure Sosa experiences is based on his rise to a dominant status. This status is tied to a symbolic and literal penetration as a form of masculine domination. Sosa’s knife serves as a powerful phallus, which symbolically and literally allows him to penetrate Don Jacinto. Moments before Don Jacinto’s death, Sosa observes as the old bum uses a broken bottle to kill a transvestite who has bitten Don Jacinto during fellatio (one explicit form of the bum’s emasculation). Imitating this brutal act, Sosa then pulls his own knife and kills Don Jacinto. Sosa notes that the knife “había abierto tremenda hendidura para penetrar al mundo en que quería vivir” (24). Thus, as the prevailing male, Sosa’s masculine “penetration” or dominance falls in line with a phallogocentric social system that rewards and merits physical authority and violence. Also construed as phallic tools, Don Jacinto’s snakes help Sosa assert his dominance over society. After one killing spree, Sosa is delighted that he and his snakes appear in the newspaper: “¡Somos importantes!” (45). No longer impotent, the newspaper’s headlines affirm Sosa’s sense of power and domination.

The four murderous beings that facilitate Sosa’s power are monstrous in their blending of human and animalistic traits, creating a blurred boundary that produces a new identity: a natural cyborg. Beti, Valentina, Loli, and Carmela (*las muchachas*, as Sosa calls them) defensively care and protect their new master from threats of violence or insults by brutally killing their victims.

While their motherly “instinct” toward Sosa could be understood in either animalistic or humanistic terms, it is their ability to speak and their marked sexual attraction and envy for Sosa that personifies the snakes as female. As intelligent, unpredictable, and untrustworthy creatures, *las muchachas* embody traditional Western stereotypes, especially as they relate to the serpent from the Garden of Eden, whose complicity with Eve caused mankind’s downfall.

Just as women have been posited as mysterious, enigmatic creatures (by writers like Octavio Paz), the snakes in *Baile con serpientes* are characterized as unstable animals that are influenced by their passion—especially when dealing with love and jealousy. The novel’s epigraph by Paul Bowles alludes to this difficulty for the protagonist in the novel: “Las serpientes son como las personas—declaró. Tienes que llegar a conocerlas. Entonces puedes hacerte amigo de ellas.” Near the end of the novel, Sosa begins to doubt his ability to completely control or understand the snakes and their wild nature. Sosa is only able to maintain his control by engaging *las muchachas* with a sensual “dance.” Sosa learns to dominate the snakes by manipulating a mutual, sexual attraction between them. Sosa describes his own desire toward the snake Valentina, noting how her skin “exhalaba sensualidad” (26). He also describes an erotic dream he has of the same snake after she was killed in one of Sosa’s killing sprees: “Valentina, con su cuerpo insinuante [...] me trenzaba en un abrazo orgásmico, de una lubricidad indescriptible” (44). This dream becomes reality by the end of the novel: while listening to a Maná song on the radio, Sosa distracts the restless *muchachas* with a final “dance,” during which he climaxes as the snakes wind and twist about his naked body. This scene marks Sosa’s apprehension surrounding his control of the snakes while it also alludes to a more general anxiety about maintaining a male-dominated status quo in a globalizing society where gender

roles are changing. Nevertheless, Sosa is able to maintain his control by engaging *las muchachas* with a sensual “dance.”

Thus for Sosa, “dancing” with snakes is both an erotic and dangerous act. This same mixture of death and sex is repeated throughout the novel. Starting with Sosa’s violent “penetration” into Don Jacinto’s life, Sosa also describes the chaos that the snakes inflict on a crowded street as an orgy: “Las *muchachas* estaban en una especie de orgía, picando a todo aquel que se les ponía enfrente” (Castellanos Moya 35). In Castellanos Moya’s cyborg world, we see female bodies symbolically used in what Haraway calls a “masculinist orgy of war” (154). This mixing of eroticism and death is also evident when Sosa enters a house with his snakes and comes upon a young woman, naked and recently bathed. Sosa reacts: “Era preciosa, como ninguna chica con la que yo hubiera estado. Pero Beti no me permitió fantasear: la mordió una y otra vez, en las pantorrillas, los muslos, el cuello. Me maravilló la rapidez con que ese cuerpo empezó a deformarse” (Castellanos Moya 49). The sexualized destruction in which Sosa indulges throughout the novel points not just to sexual desire, but to a desire of dominating, penetrating, and controlling—especially in a world where Sosa previously had little control.

Finally, the novel’s circularity is emphasized with the story’s conclusion when Sosa decides to abandon the snakes and return to his sister’s home. After Sosa loses sight of the snakes in a war-like attack against them by the government police and military, Sosa returns from the junkyard as if nothing had ever happened; in fact, he marvels at the coincidence of arriving home at the precise same hour that he had first come across Don Jacinto only three days prior. The full circle back to the place where Sosa started critiques the cycles of violence that allude not only to a continuing and intolerable subordination of women, animals, and other marginalized beings, but to its destructive impact on society in general.

Marta Susana Prieto's "Animalario"

Similar to *Baile con serpientes*, the short story "Animalario" (*Animalario*, 2002) by Honduran Marta Susana Prieto utilizes the natural cyborg myth to critique a phallogentric culture that perpetuates violence against women. But rather than focusing on the appropriation of the feminized animal, Prieto centers on an animalized man as the focus of her natural cyborg critique. By way of a first-person stream-of-conscious narration, the female protagonist describes how she is ambiguously caught between a domesticated and undomesticated space as she tries to escape an abusive spouse. Blending Man (not simply *human beings*) with an animal boundary, Prieto creates an allegorical story of domestic violence that highlights the animalistic brutality of abusive partners. In Prieto's story, the abusive husband is characterized as a wild, brutish beast, which blends together two seemingly distinct worlds of the civilized man with the wild animal, creating a masculinized and violent natural cyborg. In effect, Prieto's story undermines notions of men's supposed superior intellect and civilized evolution by underlining man's relationship to both the human and the non-human.

Although the Honduran writer Marta Susana Prieto is not well known outside of her country, within it she has been an active figure in literary circles, a member in la Academia Hondureña de la Lengua, and a contributor in the literary sections of various Honduran newspapers and magazines. She has published two other works, the novels *Melodías en silencios* (1999) and *Memoria de las sombras* (2005) and for the latter, she was accredited with an award of distinction from La Casa de las Américas in Cuba. Prieto employs a swirling and evocative narrative in the short story "Animalario" that reflects and critiques the systemic and cyclical abuse that exists in patriarchal societies in Central America. As Consuela Meza Márques notes, Prieto is one of many Central American women writers that use fragmentation as a mirror to

reflect upon the patriarchal culture that surrounds them. Meza states that Prieto's female protagonists "no logran construir una salida que las libere de esa mirada atrapada en el espejo por el aislamiento o por lo limitado de los recursos simbólicos y materiales a los que tienen acceso" ("Rupturas en el proceso de autorepresentación de cuentistas centroamericana" n.p.). To wit, Prieto's first-person narrator in "Animalario" is characterized as a woman who is trapped within a hostile power dynamic and is ultimately powerless in changing her reality.

Ambiguity is employed from the beginning of the text in order to establish a desperate tone that intimately reflects the emotions and fears of the female narrator/protagonist. A sense of urgency and desperation is immediately evoked as Prieto's story begins in *media res* with the narrator being stalked by her abusive husband, who is characterized as an unnamed, monstrous creature. Without much contextual explanation, the reader is thrust into a story that has apparently been going on for some time, as evidenced by the narrator's familiarity with the predictable actions and desires of this unnamed creature. Through a detailed, yet evasive description, the reader is left guessing at the animal's metaphoric identity as an abusive husband. As the story progresses, the marital relationship between the two characters becomes apparent along with the hierarchy of power that is established between them: "[m]ientras la cola del engendro serpentea, algo en su talante evoca en mí el enfado de los felinos en ese instante preciso de conmoción en el que, con el rabo ondulante y fijeza en la mirada, están a punto de saltar sobre su presa" (27). The narrative voice ambiguously describes the creature as a monster or deformed animal by utilizing the word "engendro" (monster or mutant), which depicts a deliberately indistinct portrait of what is stalking her. As a result, the semantic ambiguity intrigues the reader while also establishing the protagonist's desperation and fear.

The creature's identity, however, begins to take shape as the narrator utilizes suggestive verbs, such as "serpentear" to describe the movements of the monster's snake-like tail. The narrator goes on to characterize her predator as rat-like: "La extremidad culebrea su impaciencia en medio de las zancas que sostienen la masa ratonil [...]" (27). While the creature is physically described as an animal, it also has greedy and sadistic characteristics that are described in humanistic—almost cartoonish—terms: "[...] las manos de ardilla se enjuagan la una hacia la otra, sedientes de avaricia, anticipadas al goce" (Prieto 27). Rubbing its rodent hands together in anticipation of his assault, a humanistic characterization of the creature emerges. He also holds up in his hands what the narrator calls "el manuscrito" so as to remind the narrator of her contractual obligation to participate in the creature's game. Presumably a wedding certificate, the animal-human reminds her of the sacred commitment they made that only God can undo—a tactic to intimidate the narrator into binding submission.

In a sense, the narrator is obliged by the creature to play the part of a trapped, hunted animal. The narrator responds in an animalistic way to her predator—cowering in the corner with her "ojos lacrados," much like an animal petrified by fear; her only desire is to escape from the confines of her home "al aire fresco de la libertad," a free space apart from domestic abuse (29). Living in fear of finally escaping her house, the narrator questions her ability to physically leave her abusive husband/creature: "[a]lgún día habrá el momento oportuno, huiré. Pero... ¿y si no logro escapar?" (28). She imagines a scene where the animal/husband chases after her, throwing chairs and tables, until he captures her. Once caught, however, the narrator explains that he won't kill her: "no me come, cuando me alcanza me lame cómo si fuera un confite de los que llaman *eternos* porque nunca se terminan y es que, en verada no quiere que termine" (28). The

narrator highlights how this act between predator and prey is an endless performance and game—one that establishes and reiterates the structures of power within their relationship.

Reflecting on their marital contract, the narrator explains that the creature wasn't always beastly, but when he did in fact change, his transformation seemed commonplace to everyone else: "A nadie le importa que un día hayan comenzado a salirle gruesos pelos en el cuerpo, y el abdomen se fuera abultando, hasta convertirse en una masa pegajosa cubierta de gris que produce un olor nauseabundo" (28). The lack of surprise with the animal's allegorical metamorphosis reveals a general social acceptance of the "natural" order of things, which justifies and dictates men's instinctive dominance over women. The creature's contradictory and duplicitous character is also posited as "natural" and inherent. The narrator describes the animal's mouth as "un agujero hermoso y brutal al mismo tiempo, como sexo, del que pueden salir besos y poemas; escupitajos y vómito por igual" (28-29). Housing both good and evil, sweetness and hostility, the creature is an embodiment of contradictions and opposites, a blending of the human and the non-human. Serving as a strong social critique, the narrator's first-person perspective reveals how an unquestioning acceptance of men's "instinctive behavior" has dire and alienating consequences for individuals who experience domestic abuse.

The narrator goes on to imagine (rather than enact) the perfect moment for her escape. She fantasizes of taking advantage of the "descuido del animal" as she is able to finally reach the fresh air of freedom beyond her home: "Tras loca carrera, vislumbro el temple, la estación de policía, la zona militar, ¡la autonomía...! Lejos quedan los regidos inútiles del fenómeno" (29). Envisioning this new utopia of autonomy, she describes how everything will be different when she lives among others who will help her lose her lonely solitude. Only then will she finally be "lo que uno en verdad quiere ser" (29). This fantasy, however, is suddenly broken by a change in

the narrator's tone within the same paragraph. All hope for a better life fades away as she somberly concludes that "las palabras iglesia" would eventually turn hollow for her. She reasons that, after all, the church is made of walls, the military zone is nothing without uniforms, and the police station is made up of the same kind of men that exist in her present reality: "ahí están los mismos que están aquí" (29). The narrator realizes how these places of "sanctuary" are constructed within the same culture that has produced her current situation as an abused, marginalized individual. Thus, the narrator's hope for a radical change in her life is thwarted by the realization that, within the current institutional systems of power, she can never truly escape or be free.

All these thoughts of elated fantasy and somber reality ran through the narrator's head "antes de abrir la puerta y volver a escuchar, de nuevo, el reconfortante rugido del animal" (29). This last, concluding statement by the narrator alludes to a bleak fate. Opening the house door signals an attempt to escape from her repressed situation, but it is not clear if she is able to in fact open it. The story's ambiguous ending offers a small sliver of hope, but for the most part, hope for her escape to freedom is significantly diminished not only by the animal's close proximity to the door, but also by how the narrator describes the animal's bellow as "comforting." The narrator's comfort in the familiar roar of the animal might in fact outweigh the discomfort and challenge of foraging a new life—one that she believes will surely have the same limits and discrimination in it. Thus, Prieto's short story ultimately highlights the extreme difficulty to generate meaningful social change as well as alter traditional understandings of culturally entrenched dualisms that unfavorably structure her current reality. Knowing full well that if she does escape her creature/husband, she cannot evade the phallogocentric culture that privileges a male-dominated system of power. Similar to *Baile con serpientes*, Prieto's story demonstrates

how, in the end, a masculinized appropriation of violence and abuse against women will repeat without end, which points to a dire need for a substantial, radical change in the gendered power dynamics that currently exist in Honduran society.

In both Castellanos Moya's and Prieto's works, the first perspective of the cyborg myth paints a self-destructive portrait of a domineering patriarchal order that utilizes the natural cyborg figure to propagate violence and war within Central American society. In this section, the masculine animal lies in stark contrast to a feminized animal, whose traits serve to liberate the cyborg rather than perpetuate domination. This second perspective therefore makes a social critique, but it also moves a step further by symbolically liberating the cyborg figure from masculine domination and thereby providing a discursive, figurative way to identify and reimagine traditional gender dynamics in society. Lety Elvir's poem "Perro podenco," Jacinta Escudos's short story "Hereje," and Rocío Tábora's short story "Epílogo: Vocación de serpiente," are three texts that envision new political work by promoting a cyborg world that fosters a complete departure from the cyclical, male-dominated violence that governs in Central America. Subversively, the natural cyborg inspires alternative ways of seeing femininity and gender dynamics within Salvadoran and Honduran societies.

Jacinta Escudos' "Hereje"

The Salvadoran author Jacinta Escudos is well known for her portrayal of allegory-like short stories that incorporate personified animals and zoomorphic humans. Often dark and cynical stories, critics like Yajaira Padilla, Beatriz Cortez, and Linda Craft have associated her work with a disenchanting, post-war mentality. Similar to Castellanos Moya, Escudos's collection of stories in *Contra-corriente* (1993) are, as Craft asserts, "rooted in the very real context of post-war El Salvador and, at the same time, speak to the pain of woman's experience and the

existential angst of a more general human condition” (“Stories of the *Pos-guerra*” n.p.). The short story “Hereje,” which is found in *Contra-corriente*, portrays a culture where violence is a natural and integral part of traditional society. Escudo’s story surveys the fixed boundary between civilized and beastly behavior with the ruminative first-person perspective of a female scorpion who decides to avoid the “natural order” in which she lives by refusing to participate in its established rituals. The natural cyborg explored in Escudo’s short story is one expression of frustration toward women’s imposed relegation to the private sphere of domesticity and maternity: Escudo’s story manipulates cultural expectations and stereotypes in order to deliver a sharp critique of restrictive gendered categories, while also cynically pointing out the difficulty and the personal costs that come along with rejecting deeply-engrained, cultural ideologies.

The cyborg figure in “Hereje”—a personified scorpion—subverts cultural understandings of what it means to be human as well as an animal. In a first person narrative, “Hereje” begins with a nameless scorpion reflecting on her first meal: her mother. She describes: “Mi primer alimento fue el acre sabor de veneno. Sentí tronar entre mis mandíbulas los negros cascarones del cuerpo de mi madre, en un ritual que estaba predeterminado en mis genes y mis células” (35). The narrator describes the cannibalistic process of devouring her mother with a detached, scientific tone of voice as she further describes how she and her many other siblings feasted on that “banquete” that the mother scorpion’s body provided. To be human and to eat one’s mother is terrible and unthinkable—but perhaps less so for an animal or insect. Typically, expectations for animals are markedly different from expectations for humans: many times, animals are considered wild, crude, and without remorse. In Escudo’s text, the personification of the scorpion (who, just like a human, speaks, feels, and desires) illustrates a disturbing conflict of cultural expectations. Thus, when the narrator describes eating her mother, this mixing of the

dualistic categories of the human and the non-human is especially unsettling as it points to humanity's decline into an increasingly cannibalistic and savage world.

The narrator develops the link between human beings and animals a step further when she describes Man as a beast: "Caminé oculta de animales inmensos, especialmente de una bestia a la que según escuché, llaman Hombre" (35). With a simple change in perspective, it is the scorpion who calls "Man" an animal, which works as another example of how the story destabilizes the fixed boundary between animal and human characteristics. But even more specifically, the scorpion emphasizes how the masculine human being is associated with beasts by stating "Hombre" in place of "Ser humano." This specific emphasis of equating *men* with the *inhuman* (i.e. primitive and emotionless) acts of animals suggests that the masculine human is in fact more "primitive" than the female. This assertion is further illustrated by the scorpion's desire to abandon the barbaric rituals that she has been taught are "natural" for her kind.

Thus, the scorpion's predetermined or "natural" impulse to eat her mother is subverted by her "humanistic" conscious decision to finally part ways with those "customs," which, within the short story, are synonymous with nature. The narrator describes the loneliness and solitary existence of adult scorpions that must strike out on their own. On the day of their separation, the narrator describes her and her siblings' reluctance to live such a lonely life: "[y] si alguien nos hubiera enseñado a llorar, lo hubiéramos hecho, porque ése era el día exacto del comienzo de nuestra soledad" (35). Again, the short story manipulates cultural expectations: while crying is typically understood as a *natural* emotion, the scorpion's tale further subverts the nurture/nature dualism by suggesting that crying is a learned act.

The simplicity associated with animals is deconstructed further as the narrator describes the existential crisis that she endures due to her solitary life as a scorpion: "Supe gozar de mi

propia compañía [...] Alguna vez hasta creí ser feliz. Pero el hastío me abrumó con demasiada frecuencia y pensé que debía haber algo más en la vida que perseguir insectos para vaciar sus tripas y dormir mientras hacía la digestión” (36). The narrator also falls in love (typically understood as a human characteristic) when she silently meets a male scorpion: “Sin hablar porque nadie nos había enseñado nunca cuáles eran las palabras del amor” (37). Despite not having the words to describe it, the narrator intrinsically understands her desire toward the “macho” scorpion—so much so that she finally realizes: “Comprendí entonces el círculo de los rituales. Descubrí en un breve chispazo de lucidez, que el amor sería mi propia muerte” (37). The narrator understands that once they mate she will have to eat her lover, an occurrence among scorpions called “sexual cannibalism.” She also realizes that once her children are born, her offspring will likely eat her, too, which completes the scorpion’s natural “ritual” (37). The word “ritual” evokes a sacred meaning, a ceremony that has been established over time—a meaning that lies in tension with the notion of a natural or intrinsic act.

With this sudden insight, the narrator understands the circular structure of her existence, to which she and the male scorpion have been “condemned” by nature (37). In an attempt to share her insight with the macho scorpion, she tries to reason with him, asking him to share with her a different life where they might dance together, not for one night, but “para siempre” (37). Reacting violently, the male scorpion calls her a divergent law-breaker for her attempt to disturb the status quo: “Me acusó de débil, de romper las leyes. Furioso, me gritó que sabía cuál sería mi castigo y que lo que yo pretendía era un imposible, que ‘para siempre’ era demasiado tiempo. Sobre todo, me dijo tener miedo de quererme, de creer en mí” (38). Much like Castellanos Moya’s protagonists, the male scorpion’s anxieties and fears are linked to a hegemonic

masculinity under duress. The macho scorpion values strength and tradition while he disparages a feminized vulnerability, which takes the form of commitment and intimacy.

The narrator's proposal of separating from tradition suggests that the "natural state" of scorpions is not necessarily innate, but learned. The narrator decides: "No lo seguí, lo dejé ir. Preferí no amarlo a destruirlo" (38). As a kind of radical revolutionary, the narrator pities the macho scorpion as she knows that another *hembra* will not be as merciful. The macho's violent reaction reveals not only his fear of the unknown, but an unwillingness to imagine a new way of living, even if it means the difference between life and death. By the end of the short story, the narrator realizes that if she is to live, she must renounce love: "Supe desde entonces por qué andamos solos. Hay muchas maneras de morir y a todos nos toca una: a los alacranes, el amor nos mata" (38). The story's ending cynically responds to the limits of women's lives in Salvadoran society. Two options are presented in the story: either one must follow tradition or become an outcast for rebelling against the natural order. Rather than embody the self-sacrificing Madonna, the narrator chooses to preserve and save herself, even if it means that she must forego love, intimacy, tradition, and the perpetuation of her species. She makes the conscious choice to exit the "natural" cycle, despite the loneliness and solitude that she will have to endure.

Escudos's cyborg myth alludes to a process of breaking down rigid stereotypes by blending dualistic opposites of nature and culture—options that are supposedly "impossible," as the macho scorpion states. Understandings of rituals, nature, and customs are blended throughout the short story, leaving the reader with a decidedly unclear definition of nature and culture. This ambiguity also points to the plasticity of gender roles, alluding to the fact that these roles are not in fact innate, but something learned and passed down through generations. At the same time, however, Escudos emphasizes and raises the value of traditionally conceived feminine traits by

framing these traits (such as intuition, tenderness, and mercy) as essential to the creation of a better, productive world. Rather than follow a destructive, cannibalistic system shaped by traditional or naturalized gender dynamics, the female scorpion stoically and courageously decides to part ways with tradition and “nature.”

Lety Elvir’s “Perro podenco”

Similar to gender politics in El Salvador, the privileging of the masculine over the feminine has also indelibly marked gender dynamics in Honduran society, a tendency especially reinforced with the country’s long history of state militarization. Honduran political scientist and author Rocío Tábor analyzes the rigid patterns of socialization within Honduran culture that connects aggression to masculinity and passivity to femininity. Tábor notes that learning to value the feminine within Honduran society is an issue of national importance: “Recuperar la palabra femenina para construir un lenguaje de todos resulta ineludible no solo para la democratización política sino para la sobrevivencia humana y existencia mejor” (*Masculinidad* 34). Adding female voices (i.e. characteristics and perspectives) to a national discourse is essential not only to creating a truly democratic nation, but to creating a *liveable* world.

Within Honduras, Lety Elvir is a well-known feminist writer and academic from the nation’s largest city, San Pedro Sula, a city that has been named the murder capital of the world in 2012 and in 2013.⁵ Rivaling Juarez, Mexico for its high number of femicides and abuses against women, the gendered violence found in San Pedro Sula is indicative of sexual and

⁵ Resources, including the *Business Insider*, *CNN*, and the Mexican think tank, “Seguridad, Justicia y Paz,” have named San Pedro Sula as the #1 murder capital of the world.

domestic abuse that exists and goes largely unprosecuted or investigated in Honduras. Lety Elvir's work, "Perro podenco" (2001), is a short, allegorical poem that portrays domestic, gendered violence. Through the identity of a natural cyborg (via the personification of a female dog), the poetic voice declares her independence and freedom by exiting an abusive, domestic arrangement. The poem presents the marginalized perspective of a domesticated dog, which, along with the derogatory implications of being called a "*perra*" (potentially alluding to "bitch," "slut," or "prostitute" in Spanish) is linked to women's supposed secondary status to men. Within five stanzas of free verse, Elvir's poem proposes a symbolic future that is not predicated on the continuation of gendered hierarchies, but one that is gynocentric in scope.

Located in the feminized space of the home, Elvir's poem points to similarities that exist among certain parallel oppressions like subordination, domestication, and dependency. The domestic dog is typically professed to be Man's loyal and obedient companion. Deliberately offensive, the poem provocatively hints at similarities between a dog and a housewife: both are devoted and well trained in their subservient roles within a civilized world. Physically positioned between two rooms and in a state of uncertainty, the poetic voice is framed as emotionally dependent and powerless. Not knowing whether or not she will be fed, the voice states: "Estoy entre la sala y el comedor / esperando que lancés el próximo hueso / que Pavlov suene la campana" (1-3). While she is clearly dependent on her master for such basic needs like food, the poetic voice's inner monologue belies her lowly status as a destitute, hungry animal (via her reference to Pavlov). The natural cyborg challenges the stereotypical associations that are made between a brutish animal and a simple-minded woman. Yet, in devotion and in dependency, this "perro podenco" fully submits herself to the needs and wants of her master (as, supposedly, both a dog and as a wife). The voice describes herself: "Sentada en mi rabo / muevo inquietamente los

ojos / persigo cada movimiento de tus manos” (4-6). As an obedient creature, the poetic voice responds only in devotion and affection.

In the second stanza, another voice—presumably human—is differentiated by text that is italicized and indented: “*tirale un hueso / a ese sabueso / que flaco está*” (8-10). This supplication directed to the dog’s master is followed by a shift in tense: the poetic voice begins to predict the anticipated interaction between her and her master. Beginning in the third stanza, the poetic voice foresees her reaction to her master’s cruel withholding of food: “Lameré tu mano / me echaré a tus pies” (11-12). Still, she intuitively predicts that her *amo* desires to return her affection, but is unable to do so because of prescriptive gender roles: “querrás darme una caricia / vacilarás” (13-14). But, as the voice predicts, the *amo* responds in the next two lines (which are differentiated by italics) by rejecting her appeal and reifying patriarchal stereotypes: “*eso es cursi / es asunto de mujer*” (15-16). Rather than display effeminate qualities like affection and compassion, the poetic voice predicts that the *amo* will kick her instead, reinforcing a masculinized aggression that is the traditional dualistic opposite to a feminized submission. The masculine voice reasons: “*que así también se puede querer*” (18).

While the first half of the poem describes a despotic power dynamic between men and women as well as human and non-humans, the fifth and final stanza marks a shift in power when the poetic voice proclaims:

Pero yo, podenco de buena caza
 clavaré mis dientes
 en tu talón de Aquiles
 hasta verte desangrar (19-22).

Still in future tense, the poetic voice describes turning on her *amo* by attacking his point of weakness: the Achilles's heel. A Greek symbol of virile masculinity and power, Achilles's vanity and pride are wholly undone as he is killed with an arrow through his heel. The poetic voice hints that no one is indestructible and, by attacking the man's weak spot, the voice plans to employ more strategy than force. After making this calculated and metaphorical move, the poetic voice describes breaking free from her *amo*'s control. In the last three lines of the poem, she declares: "subiré al bosque / aullaré en manada / jamás volveré a tu ciudad" (23-25). The text's future tense and verb choice contribute to a feeling of hope for change: the verb "subir" conjures a sensation of upward progress or a surge of independence and the verb "aullar," like a wild battle cry, evokes a release of inhibitions, quiet passivity, and submission.

As she defies her former captor, the ill-intentioned comparison between women and dogs is supplanted by another image in the form of an undomesticated wolf. The image of the wolf carries different connotations entirely: she is no longer subjugated, but brave, fierce, and independent. Unrestrained, the voice declares that she will never go back to that restrictive, abusive, and "civilized" space that sought to eliminate her self-expression and freedom. As she breaks from normative expectations of passive femininity, the poetic voice perpetuates and embraces traditional associations between women and nature through the course of the poem. As a cyborg, the poetic voice not only blurs the human and animal boundary, but she proposes a figurative separation from a patriarchal culture that encourages male dominance in the civilized, urban world where she once belonged. Thus the poetic cyborg voice symbolically flees to the woods in order to live within a feminized, natural space of gynocentric values.

Rocío Tábora's "Epílogo: Vocación de serpiente"

As both a writer and political scientist, Rocío Tábora has taken an active and public role in Honduran politics and scholarship. She has published texts that address gender and politics in Honduras such as *Masculinidad y violencia en la cultura política hondureña* (1995) and *Cultura desnuda: apuntes sobre género, subjetividad, y política* (1999). Among her literary publications, she has produced two collections of short stories *Guardarropa* (1999) and *Cosas que rozan* (2001). Pointing out the symbolic character of many of her short stories, Helen Umaña writes: “En forma sobria pero eficaz [los cuentos] constituyen un planteamiento de carácter feminista en donde, sin estridencias, aflora una profunda comprensión tanto de la problemática de la mujer como de una visión más general de la existencia” (444). In an anthology of short stories, Willy O. Muñoz similarly alludes to the postmodern and feminist nature of her work, which seeks to re-envision a more equitable life for women in Honduras (173-74). As Muñoz asserts, many of her female protagonists work to reclaim a sense of personal identity and value in a culture that privileges dominant masculine qualities and passive feminine traits.

The natural cyborg in Tábora’s micro short story “Epílogo: Vocación de serpiente” (*Guardarropa*, 1999) participates in this recuperation of identity as the story explores normative understandings of gender within a Honduran cultural context. An unnamed female protagonist describes herself as a snake that is indelibly marked by humanistic traits and experiences. Through a first-person narration, this animal-human narrator examines the cyborg’s transformative possibilities and adaptability. As the narrator constantly sheds her old skin for another, she undermines the fixity of restrictive cultural categories and stereotypes for both snakes and women by emphasizing her organic and ever-changing identity. Unlike Castellanos Moya’s novel, Tábora’s micro story is focalized through the eyes of the female snake, which permits an intimate, inner exploration of the natural cyborg. Desirous to shed limiting

stereotypes, Tábora's story is patently utopic in its hope for personal "regeneration." Alluding to restrictive ideas about the innate "nature" of different genders, Tábora's snake emphasizes the fallibility of these cultural notions and the need for social reform.

The story begins with a deceptively simple desire. The narrator states: "[q]uería ser tan nueva para ti hasta que mudé de piel" (58). At first glance, this desire to be new or untouched by life's experiences seems to be in line with a Western hegemonic masculine desire for women to be pure and virginal. But, as the story progresses, it becomes apparent that her desire to become new is not necessarily linked to acquiescing to a misogynist standard for women, but rather, it speaks to her desire to evolve as an organic individual and be accepted as such. The narrative voice describes this process of evolution and change in terms of shedding her skin: "capas de mí quedaban en las sábanas, en los sillones; se me caían al caminar, iba dejando un rastro de cáscaras al pasar" (58). In a visually arresting manner, the reader is provoked to imagine layers of thin transparent skin falling off of the narrator as she moves throughout her day. These skins, she describes, are old prints or remnants from her past: "huellas de noches, huellas de golpes, huellas dactilares, todas las huellas de todos los tiempos dejaron en mi cuerpo se fueron cayendo" (58). Pointing to the intimacy, abusiveness, and sensuality of past relationships, the narrator describes how the outside world has left its mark on her body and identity. But she also shows how those events, experiences, and abuses do not define her as she continuously adapts in a new skin.

So as to escape the cultural assumptions and stereotypes that are linked to her experiences and identity as a snake and woman, she strives to dispel the inaccuracies and generalizations associated with her "kind." She explains: "las serpientes podemos cambiar de piel, solo atacamos cuando tenemos miedo, el resto del tiempo nos deslizamos silenciosas entre las ramas por los

bosques, los campos, por los patios de las casas, entre matas silvestres sin tentar a nadie” (58-59). The narrative voice tries to dispel the negative belief that snakes are, by nature, vicious, cruel creatures. She also contests the classic trope of the sensual female temptress as well as the Biblical story that links women and snakes to humankind’s fall from grace. And, in a move to transcend monolithic identities for both women and snakes alike, she emphasizes her ability to “change skins,” which allows her to live between the borders of seemingly fixed categories.

In the last line of the story, the narrator concludes by asking her lover: “Ahora... ¿sientes esta piel nueva deslizando en la tuya? Es como una víscera tibia, una vena cortada, placenta recién expulsada, tallo, brote tierno, esta piel nueva te ama, y todas mis pieles antiguas también” (59). She asks her lover to recognize her newly regenerated skin as she also emphasizes how her skin is connected to organic embodiment (“víscera tibia”), sacrifice (“una vena cortada”), motherhood (“placenta recién expulsada”), and natural regeneration (“tallo, brote tierno”). Rather than limiting her identity to a single manifestation or metaphor, the narrative voice opens up various possibilities for self-expression, while at the same time reaffirming certain traditionally associated feminine characteristics that link women to their life-giving capabilities. More than just reproducers of life, however, the narrator points to a hopeful re-imagination of natural reproduction as also a form of regeneration. Rather than reproduce that which already exists, the narrator points to women’s potential to create new ways of living that before were thought to be impossible. Tábora’s story is a hopeful end in a cyborg discourse that points to a yearning desire for freedom to change oneself and be accepted. Unfettered by stereotypes, dualistic categories, or pre-ordained identities, Tábora’s female snake is in search of an identity that allows her to avoid hierarchal categories so that she may transcend cultural expectations and have the freedom to be constantly evolving as a complex individual.

Conclusion

In each of the stories explored in this chapter, the female protagonists all face injury from traditional dualistic thinking and also from the seemingly insurmountable task of resisting a fiercely normative environment that insists that women accept their natural, God-given roles as subservient mothers, wives, or lovers. In most of the texts explored in this chapter, there is a marked growing frustration and conflict between the act of perpetuating that which has always been and envisioning a new way of living that does not entail hierarchies of power that dominate marginalized beings. Rather than *asking* for or demanding gender equality from the dominant powers in society, women writers like Elvir and Escudos portray natural cyborg protagonists that simply take control by avoiding the patriarchal system altogether. The natural cyborg takes advantage of the Western patriarchy's weakness—its resistance to recognizing or understanding ambiguity—in order to achieve what seems utterly impossible. As a creature that is both human and animal, wild and civilized, the natural cyborg makes itself illegible to a system that currently dominates by creating precise hierarchical categories. In Central America, the natural cyborg undermines these restrictive categories, but at the same time, she paradoxically embodies the need to reassess what is valued in a phallogentric culture. The Central American cyborg therefore advocates for a gynocentric revaluation of the feminine and the non-human in order to give balance to an overtly macho, technological society.

In the texts by Prieto, Escudos, and Elvir, a total “pitching” of the phallogentric system is necessary for this reassessment of the feminine. In Tábora's micro-story, however, a slightly different tone hints at a continuing hope for reconciliation between these two different worlds of phallo- and gynocentrism, perhaps alluding more to what Donna Haraway would call a “monstrous world without gender” (147). But even so, Tábora's female protagonist emphasizes

her complexity as an individual and as a woman, which is exemplified by all the women writers explored in this chapter. They all point to a vision for a world that requires a departure from the patriarchal cycles that dominate and abuse marginalized beings, thus underlining the challenging, yet crucial need for reimagining our worlds.

Conclusion: Utopia Re-examined

In a speech delivered in 1931, Virginia Woolf stated: “It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality.” The phantom, she explains, is the “Angel of the House,” a Victorian notion that insists women be tender, maternal, and self-sacrificial by placing the needs and the wants of others above their own. Appearing in the 19th century in both Spanish and Latin American literature, this recurring trope of “el ángel del hogar” continues to be relevant today in Latin American cultural productions as we see contemporary women writers like Ena Lucia Portela, Jacinta Escudos, and Lucía Escobar critically engage with the gender ideology behind this Madonna-like figure. As traditional expectations for women’s “natural” place and behavior, this “phantom-like” belief has not yet been “killed,” not even by official laws or decrees. Rather, the intangible nature of internalized ideologies requires a different approach.

As a medium of critique, literature facilitates a creative exploration of emergent structures of feeling and ideological beliefs that other fields of study, like sociology or anthropology, do not capture as easily or as effectively. Literature has the powerful potential to examine collective, growing sentiments—like that of disenchantment—that are difficult to articulate or measure in any systematic, tangible way. Many of the narratives seen throughout this dissertation, tend to render visceral responses that communicate a general mood of frustration and disappointment as writers cope with dashed hopes and dreams of egalitarian societies. While many of the works explored are not widely read in the countries in which they are published, their narratives provide an important intellectual forum for rethinking traditional and internalized gender hierarchies and social structures. And, with the ability to transcend the constraints of reality, writers can explicitly or implicitly expose the incongruences and deficiencies in social systems that have been framed as the natural order.

Gritty and fantastic literary elements call attention to the emergent feeling of cynicism and disappointment found in Central American and Hispanic Caribbean literature at the turn of the century and these literary tendencies assist in deconstructing the disappointing realities from which they have been produced. As neoliberal and global markets undermine egalitarian ideals, the narratives explored in this dissertation specifically speak to the harmfulness of rigid, patriarchal ideologies that have given shape to a supposedly natural, male-dominated social order. By revising biased versions of national histories, by disturbing sacred domestic spaces, and by subverting essentialist ideas that dictate how women should and should not act—uncanny, ghostly, abject, and cyborgian elements in literature work to unbalance a naturalized status quo. As a larger social critique of Central American and Cuban society, each chapter has examined and deconstructed the status quo by exploring gender's intersection with different structures of power, including history, space, female Otherness, and essentialism.

While the fantastic elements that I explore in many Central American and Cuban narratives are, in part, an expression of cynicism, this is not to say that they represent resigned hopelessness or apathy. Rather, this dissertation has demonstrated how some writers—many of which are women—work to engender or inspire social change by revealing how certain patriarchal ideologies ultimately dismantle egalitarian principals. The grotesque, the bizarre, and the fantastic are unlikely sources of power that give female protagonists the opportunity to distance themselves and escape from an oppressive and normative patriarchal order. Far from trying to fully topple hegemonic systems of power, these narratives modestly seek to unsettle and provoke readers to reconsider questions of history, normative social or symbolic orders, eroticism, and essentialism—and they oftentimes do so by manipulating and subverting traditionally conceived feminine characteristics and spaces. As writers appropriate and use to

excess various traditional stereotypes for women, female protagonists defy many of those same stereotypes by making themselves non-normative. Therefore, more than simply looking at female agency, this dissertation has examined how naturalized, learned ideologies inform gender and racial discriminations, which, in turn, perpetuates a pernicious status quo that favors male-dominated politics and power.

The transareal and comparative nature of this dissertation has been invaluable to me through the course of my investigations, as it has allowed me to garner a more complete understanding and appreciation for the subtle political and cultural nuances that have given shape to the different women's movements and cultural productions in Central America and Cuba. Wary of generalizations or easy cataloguing, my pursuit in understanding these cultural nuances has richly informed and guided my scholarly approach throughout this dissertation. By examining complex social, political, and economic interconnections that exist between Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean, it is my hope that this investigation has facilitated a more profound understanding of the ways in which emerging feelings of hope and disenchantment transcend regional boundaries. And, as the start of a larger project, it is my hope that this investigation will open up new directions for future research, especially in terms of expanding my transareal scholarship to include not only Central America and Cuba, but also Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic.

While I have limited my focus to Central American and Cuban literature, contemporary Dominican and Puerto Rican literature share in a similar cultural disenchantment that is likewise rooted in a palpable sense of defeatism with social and economic inequalities. Against the backdrop of mounting social inequity and dissatisfaction in both Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean, I would argue in future, expanded investigations that many contemporary

literary works from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic have also developed out of a common culture of disillusionment. Thanks, in part, to the islands' proximity to Cuba and Central America, I would argue that Puerto Rican and Dominican contemporary literature share in the disappointment felt by their neighboring countries, which is likewise based in the loss of utopian ideals linked to truncated revolutionary projects (especially in regard to traditional gender and sexual ideologies) and also with the modernizing neoliberal project that has yielded more social problems and economic disparity. Moreover, while Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic did not experience revolutionary wars in the latter half of the 20th century (much like Honduras and Costa Rica), they have endured over a century of US political intervention and militarization that has profoundly impacted the nations' psyches and a sense of sovereign identity.

For future research, contemporary works published by Puerto Rican and Dominican writers (such as Mayra Santos Febres, Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, Rita Indiana Hernández, and Jeannette Miller) will afford more opportunities to strengthen and enhance a more expansive investigation of the regional interconnections of the Hispanic Caribbean and Central American literature. For example, Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's collection of short stories, *Animales de apariencia inofensiva* (2015) would compliment and expand the scope of this dissertation. Through the animalistic characterization of human protagonists, Arroyo explores the naturalization of racism, sexism, and violence in contemporary Puerto Rican culture. Also, as a supplement to my chapter on uncanny domestic spaces, the novel *La estratégica de Chochueca* (2003), written by Rita Indiana Hernández, would be an effective addition to an expanded trans-areal investigation, as it explores Santo Domingo's unsettling, violent subaltern spaces and the day-to-day lives of a disenchanting younger generation of Dominicans. Additional Hispanic

Caribbean voices from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic would contribute to a more inclusive understanding of the two regions' common literary sensibilities as well as call attention to lesser-known, younger voices that are currently appearing in print.

In addition to strengthening the transareal connection between the two regions, the inclusion of more diverse voices (in terms of race, sexuality, and class) is another critical element for expansion and exploration for further investigations of this project. While this dissertation highlights the works of women authors, the majority of writers examined in this study is white or mestizo and comes from a middle class background. Therefore, exploring the work of Afro-Caribbean writers like Mayra Santos Febres and Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, for example, would provide a better understanding of race and identity in the Hispanic Caribbean. Indeed, for future research, a more thorough examination and inclusion of indigenous voices and different socio-economic situations would provide an enhanced global and diverse sampling of writers from Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean.

As the new millennium continues to carry with it the disadvantages and complications of neoliberal, patriarchal policies, the necessity for social and political critique remains urgent in Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean. In addition to critique, the narratives explored in this dissertation evidence an urgent need to begin to imagine what life might look like if it were not formatted by divisive hierarchal gender relations. As a creative space to reimagine the ideological and normative structuring of society (based on gender, race, and sexuality), literary works like the ones examined in this dissertation encourage new ways of thinking, offering hypothetical, non-literal blueprints for social change. Utopic discourses such as these are oftentimes misunderstood as unrealistic dreams for a perfect world that cannot exist or is disconnected from political and social reality. Rather, the utopic fiction explored in this

dissertation responds to the physical, social, and/or political circumstances from which they are published. In other words, the utopic desire expressed in many of the texts reveals a critique and longing for realistic social change. As an unexpected form of utopic inspiration, cyborgs, the uncanny, the abject, and the fantastic all contribute to counternarratives that present new ideas for improving and restructuring society and they participate in a process of new meaning-making. As the texts explored in this dissertation critique and propose theoretical solutions to social and political issues, the hope for utopia is the hope for reform and, as such, remains a powerful political source for envisioning and encouraging new social realities in Central America and Cuba.

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