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Abstract

In a region prone to violence and political corruption, Costa Rica has been touted as an ecological paradise, a stable democracy, and an egalitarian society. However, Costa Rican fiction from the late twentieth century contests this idyllic image and presents instead a world of intrigue, violence, and criminality. *El año del laberinto* (2000) by Tatiana Lobo and *Cruz de olvido* (1999) by Carlos Cortés are two novels that serve as an excellent introduction to developments in postwar fiction and scholarship from Central America. In my analysis, I first situate the novels in the context of Central American cultural and political developments in recent decades and then consider the linking of narrative, gender, and violence in the novels. My study centers on the authors' use of crime to challenge national myths and to deconstruct narratives that have been instrumental in constructing cherished national identities. Of particular importance is the depiction of gendered bodies and the violence practiced upon them, as well as the politics surrounding bodies and violence in national narratives and in the authors' contemporary stories.

Keywords

violence, gender, gendered violence, Costa Rica, *El año del laberinto*, Tatiana Lobo, *Cruz de olvido*, Carlos Cortés, postwar fiction, narrative

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For many audiences, Central America is a peripheral place, relevant for its revolutions in the 1970s and 1980s and for the free trade debates of globalization. In discussions outside the isthmus, Central America is most famous for its political unrest, natural disasters, and perhaps for the culture wars surrounding Rigoberta Menchú's testimony.¹ Few are aware that in recent decades, Central America has faced dramatic changes, including debt crises, social turmoil, and mass migration to the United States and other countries. Fewer still are aware of the wealth of literature from Central America or of the energetic debates about cultural studies and politics among scholars and authors from the region. Two recent novels from Costa Rica serve as an excellent introduction to developments in fiction and scholarship from the isthmus. They also make important contributions on the topic of gender politics and offer a new understanding of the relevance of Central American fiction in discussions of contemporary literature.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, Central America faced the chaotic aftermath of several decades of civil war.² The isthmus also experienced economic globalization driven by the neoliberal policies governments adopted in the post-war years. Costa Rica did not suffer the same debilitating civil conflicts as its neighbors, and the nation was one of the first to capitalize on the opportunities neoliberal policies seemed to offer. With no military, no revolutions, and no gun-toting opposition featured on international media outlets, the country drew the first Intel plant in Latin America. It also

lured increasing numbers of developers and tourists to the country during the 1990s, when bloody conflicts still ravaged other countries in the region. United States government aid petered out, but private money came into the country in its stead. These decades of relative stability, followed by increasing private investment, led politicians and many casual observers in Costa Rica and abroad to promote the idea that Costa Rica was fundamentally different from its neighbors and would therefore be immune to problems endemic in the rest of Central America.

During the war years, Central American narrative was associated with the production of testimonial works, including testimonies like Omar Cabezas' account of the Nicaraguan revolution in *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde* (1982), as well as testimonial novels like Manlio Argueta's *Un día en la vida* (1980). In Costa Rica, which was not convulsed by civil war, testimonies never figured prominently in literary production during the 1970s and 1980s, and this is an important difference between Costa Rican literature and other Central American literature from that time. In Costa Rica, fictional works by authors such as Carmen Naranjo, Joaquín Gutiérrez, and Quince Duncan critiqued bureaucracy, economic dependency, and U.S. imperialism, and also pointed to the diverse constituencies of the nation, including women and Afro-Costa Ricans.

In the 1990s and early twenty-first century, however, Central American literature changed, and Costa Rican literature changed with it, as texts captured the dramatic social consequences related to globalization in the region. Despite a different political history during the twentieth century, and despite the prevalence of a nationalist rhetoric eager to maintain distinctions, Costa Rica found itself with much in common with its neighbors in the post-war years. Without exception, countries in the isthmus have faced the challenges of political corruption, changing patterns of migration, the dismantling of state industries and social programs, and the growth of the drug trade and organized crime over the course of the last decade. The literature of Costa Rica, like that of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, has registered these changes. Instead of presenting the compelling ethical choices of the revolutionary years, authors now present an underworld of criminality, intrigue,

and violence. Misha Kokotovic argues that while these postwar novels “do not articulate an alternative to the neoliberal present, they nonetheless constitute a forceful critique of it from the perspective of the foundational figure of neoliberal theory: the sovereign individual” (24). The revolutionary aesthetic is gone, replaced by a new, more disillusioned worldview.

Though this post-war literature is of great relevance to contemporary theoretical debates in literary, gender, and cultural studies, Central American literature in general and Costa Rican literature in particular remain at the margins of study of Latin American literature. This is in large part because of “extra-literary” factors linked precisely to the globalized, profit-driven publishing industry that privileges Latin American authors from larger internal markets like Mexico and Argentina.³ Additionally, even within the dynamic field of Central American letters, there are still relatively few studies of gender in literary scholarship from the post-war years.

Two novels from Costa Rica, *El año del laberinto* (2000) by Chilean-born Tatiana Lobo and *Cruz de olvido* (1999) by Carlos Cortés, make for a provocative introduction to post-war literature in Central America and create a significant opportunity for dialogue about nations, bodies, and narratives in a globalized world. My analysis here centers on the authors’ use of crime to challenge national myths and to deconstruct the narratives that have been instrumental in deploying identities based on those myths. Of particular importance to my study is the depiction of gendered bodies, the violence practiced upon them, and the politics surrounding bodies and violence in both national narratives and in the authors’ contemporary stories.

Like other post-war narratives from Central America, the novels of Lobo and Cortés probe the fissures in society. Indeed, as Nicasio Urbina has noted, they join a growing corpus of works from Costa Rica that challenge long-cherished national myths of decency and democracy (5). That these critiques have come from an immigrant woman in the case of Tatiana Lobo, has been difficult for some in the country to accept, though her narratives have received both national awards and international recognition. The work of Carlos Cortés has also been recognized with national prizes and international attention, but given his long career with the newspaper *La Nación*, neither

his critiques of the nation nor his success provoked the nationalist reaction that some of the public had to Lobo's books.

Through a deft manipulation of discourses, the novels of both Lobo and Cortés lay bare the inconsistencies and hypocrisies in Costa Rican society, which prides itself on a distinctive democratic tradition and peaceful national life, often by drawing a sharp contrast with neighboring Nicaragua.⁴ In terms of style and content, *Cruz de olvido* and *El año del laberinto* are very different works, but each dismantles “foundational fictions,” and each challenges the gender politics of Costa Rican society. Furthermore, both feature unsolved crimes, a mechanism by which authors may explore significant historical moments and the political uses of narrative. The authors have crafted stories in which a corpse lies at the center of each narrative, and the characters struggle to account for its presence. In Cortés' and Lobo's novels, the contest over the representation of violence—by the characters of each novel—reveals the struggle for interpretative power in society. The protagonists uncover conflicts over sexual politics and national power, but the clues do not lead to a tidy resolution of the mystery. Rather, the clues lead only to more questions and doubts about interpretive and political power in history and in the present.

Cortés' *Cruz de olvido* opens just after the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, a touchstone in Central American history and the history of the Latin American Left. War-weary mercenary and journalist Martín, a Costa Rican native, tosses his possessions into his jeep and leaves Managua. He has just received a phone call alerting him to the brutal murder in the Costa Rican capital of his estranged teenage son, and he arrives hours later in the oneiric, urban world of San José. The novel proceeds to unravel Martín's memories as he attempts to unravel the crime, reiterating the refrain, “En Costa Rica no pasa nada desde el Big Bang” ‘In Costa Rica nothing has happened since the Big Bang,’ as its chorus throughout the text. Nothing is what it seems: the president is drunk at funerals, the victims turn out not really to be dead, and the crime is part of an official cover-up of sloppy arms trafficking. The novel concludes with the same notion with which it began, that is, “que no pasa nada,” not because nothing ever happens in Costa Rica but because people have willfully forgotten that it has.

El año del laberinto is set approximately one century earlier, on the eve of Costa Rican elections and the Cuban war for independence. The novel presents two narratives: a retrospective vision through the eyes of Sofía, a wealthy Cuban exile found murdered at home in her bed, and a third-person narrative that centers on the journalist who tries to make sense of the crime. Lobo adds a healthy dose of national and regional politics: Minor Keith's railroad construction, disputed presidential elections, plotting by Cuban expatriates, and so on. She contrasts this narrative about "public" concerns with the woman-centered, private world of Sofía. Sofía's story (inspired by a real crime Lobo discovered in newspaper archives) allows Lobo simultaneously to deconstruct the nation and to expose the worst of patriarchy: an incestuous arranged marriage, domestic abuse, and murder at the hands of one's spouse.

That each author chooses a crime as the central event in the story is significant. Nothing demands explanation more than violent crimes and the discovery of corpses, and both texts toy with the tradition of detective novels. Each gives centrality to a crime, and each manipulates the reader's desire to find a narrative to explain it. However, unlike traditional detective novels, both fictions deny supremacy to the explanations they offer. In each novel, the words and voices multiply, creating and unraveling explanations instead of offering resolutions. Lobo's novel invites the reader to participate in the construction of a master narrative, but she undermines its power by making its creation transparent. Cortés, for his part, multiplies scenarios until the dazed reader is no longer sure what is reality and what is illusion. As a consequence, the veneer of nicety in Costa Rica peels away, and what remains is a troubling vision not just of the country but also of the narratives societies construct to make sense of their history.

What is certain in both novels is that Costa Rica is strikingly different from the stereotypes conjured up by nationalist rhetoric. It is not particularly democratic, nor is it an ecological paradise, a tranquil republic, or a nation of peaceful prosperity. However, there is more to both novels than the debunking of cherished national myths. The texts give a new perspective on national identity, gender, and narrative in an age of dramatic social change.

In the novels of Cortés and Lobo, there are no authoritative ver-

sions of events. Both novels point out what Hayden White calls the “emplotment” of history, that is, the rendering of events according to particular generic or interpretive frameworks (9). Lobo and Cortés intimate that accepted renderings of past events are dependent upon the goals of the interested individuals and parties. Furthermore, the authors reveal the proscriptive tendency of nationalist narrative, and they expose the cracks in the narrative façade that covers a diverse society racked by corruption and abuse.

Consider, for example, Cortés novel. *Cruz de olvido* deconstructs the notion of an accurate national history by multiplying possible interpretations of a crime in which the state has a vested interest. Ultimately, the novel leads the reader to suspect as credible the only explanation not endorsed by the authorities, that is, that the massacre of innocent civilians occurred as a result of illegal arms trading involving the upper levels of the government. By pointing out the incongruencies of rhetoric and reality, and also by counting the corpses left in the wake of government actions, the novel makes a stinging indictment of official history in Costa Rica.

The corpses that populate *Cruz* are the mutilated remains of visitors to the religious site at Alajuelita, bodies crushed in a landslide in the municipal dump, and the corpse of the Maestro, who was journalist, professor, and keeper of the nation’s secrets. The dead are young people, the urban poor, and an elderly man from an earlier era. Their bodies lie at the center of an international political intrigue involving the aftermath of the Sandinista revolution and the party’s 1990 electoral defeat, the influx of arms into Central America, and the presence of mercenaries after civil wars. When Martín returns to San José, he quickly hears suggestions that the supposed murder of the pilgrims (among whom was his son) was a smokescreen to cover up botched arms trafficking. Investigations into the homicides reveal another side of San José, in a geography Cortés constructs to highlight the suppressed narrative of violence in the capital. According to Uriel Quesada, in Cortés’ reading of space in the novel, “San José alcanza un nuevo nivel simbólico que la transforma en una metáfora de la condición humana” ‘San José reaches a new symbolic level that transforms it into a metaphor for the human condition’ (1). By means of this ludic representation of San José, Cortés brings to the foreground two sites of violence in

the nation: a literal underground landscape beneath the city and a socio-cultural landscape that prominently features a gay “underground” in the capital.

In *Cruz* the body that is most often the object of violence is that of the homosexual male. That homosexual bodies are the objects of aggression, violence, and mutilation is significant. Cortés links such violence to the maintenance of a patriarchal order established and defended according to the interests of persons heavily invested in the creation and definition of the nation.

In the novel, homophobic authorities perceive the destabilization of gendered identities performed by the transvestite community in San Jose as a threat to the social order in which the authorities occupy privileged positions. The violent interactions of authorities with the gay community is Cortés’ vehicle for a critique of the heterosexual, hyper-masculinity of president, who literally likes to “cazar maricones” ‘hunt fags’ and sodomize his mistress. The novel also reveals the silenced status in Costa Rican society of other expressions of masculinity, particularly homosexual and bisexual relations. Male homosexual relations are socially condoned as long as they are not made public, as Cortés shows in the character of Ricardo Blanco, a prominent television personality. So long as Blanco maintains a façade of marriage to a well-connected woman, he is socially acceptable. However, his sexual preference makes him vulnerable to manipulation and blackmail, and he is ultimately driven into exile. The preferred method of repression in the Costa Rica of *Cruz de olvido* is the affirmation of a machista norm, ultimately the affirmation of the nation as one big family, the members of which keep each other’s secrets out of fear and self interest.

Taken as a whole, the novel is a mockery and parody of the holy trinity of nationalism: “home/nation/God.”²⁵ The homes featured in *Cruz* are literally or metaphorically broken or coming apart. For example, Blanco strikes his wife in a home that is becoming undone as his homosexual liaisons become visible to the public eye. Martín’s son and ex-wife are estranged from him, his father is long absent, and Martín’s mother lives with his aunts in a flooded home filled with rats and rotting food.

Figures associated with the divine make infrequent appearances in the novel, but one chapter is an extended parody of the role of

the patron saint of Costa Rica, the *Virgen de Los Angeles*, in national life and identity. According to Nancy Mullenax, the “marriage of religion and nationalism, of politics and faith, which the Virgin of Los Angeles represents . . . is upheld by the Catholic Church in Costa Rica” (7). In Cortés’ novel, thousands of people gather at the basilica after a television program airs, and they demand to see the Virgen, who supposedly is angry with the president of the country. Consider the following scene, in the voice of one of the president’s officials: “Mirá, presidente, la situación en la basílica es desesperada. Son miles de personas. . . . No sé qué es lo que quiere la Virgen, pero por qué no ponemos de nuevo al aire ese programa y vos te vas a la basílica, te rezás un par de padres nuestros, que la canalla te vea” ‘Look, Mr. President, the situation at the basilica is desperate. There are thousands of people. . . . I don’t know what it is that the Virgin wants, but why don’t we air that program again and you go to the basilica, pray a few Our Fathers, and let the riffraff watch you’ (368). This exchange appears in the same conversation in which all begins to unravel: the arms dealing, the United States’ bankrolling of Violeta Chamorro’s electoral campaign in Nicaragua, and the missing numbers of a Swiss bank account, the memory of which the Maestro apparently took to his grave.

Cortés multiplies voices, manipulates analepsis and prolepsis, contradicts, and negates, all in order to create uncertainty about the events that unfold. Macabre moments jump to the forefront of the narrative only to fade away or be discredited. For instance, Martín’s son reappears after his funeral, the Maestro goes for a night on the town the evening after his death, and according to official reports, the dump community never existed.

However, enough violence surfaces with enough frequency to problematize the refrain that “En Costa Rica no pasa nada desde el Big Bang” ‘In Costa Rica nothing has happened since the Big Bang.’ What happens is never acknowledged by society, though, and it is certainly never recognized as violence. Thus, the image of the nation remains unchanged. The last lines of the *Cruz de olvido* emphasize the willful forgetting and desensitizing, changing person to include “you,” the protagonist’s interlocutor. The lines vividly describe blood flowing from the site of the massacre, near San José:

Podrás ver cómo un hilillo de sange va bajando desde la boca de la montaña. . . . Y no sabrás por qué. Y le preguntarás a todos en el pueblo y ninguno se acordará. . . . Y vos también . . . te olvidarás de todo, hasta de tu nombre.

And you will see how a thin line of blood comes down from the mouth of the mountain. . . . And you won't know why. And you'll ask everyone in the town, and no one will remember . . . And you, too . . . you will forget everything, even your own name. (439)

At the end, the reader is assured of nothing but the power of “olvido,” or forgetting. The protagonist has no ability or desire to disentangle past. Events blur in the narrative; neither the protagonist nor the reader has any conception of what has and has not happened. Nothing happened because nothing ever happens. “No pasa nada,” is a prescription for knowledge, not a description of reality. Arms shipments are missing, people are dead, and the world has radically changed for revolutionaries like Martín, but “no pasa nada.” Official renderings of events, in the mouths of the novel's lawyers and politicians, have absolutely no credibility. Moreover, emplotments of events proliferate, making the truth claims of any one impossible to sustain. The only lingering image is of an inexplicable violence that people see and ignore, until they no longer know who they themselves are.

Like *Cruz de olvido*, *El año del laberinto* also involves violence ignored, explained away, or dismissed. In Lobo's narrative, however, the body of Sofia and women's bodies in general are the central sites upon which violence is inscribed. Sofia's corpse lies at the center of a household in denial of domestic violence. Similarly, the bodies of poor women are the site upon which political wills are written as priests and conservatives join forces to sweep the capital of prostitutes in the midst of an election campaign. They first imprison the women and then ship them far away from the capital to provide sexual services to Minor Keith's railroad workers, who themselves are busy developing a new national infrastructure to serve foreign interests.

Lobo's novel reminds readers that in the male-dominated world of nineteenth-century money and politics, women's bodies

took on both physical and symbolic functions in nation-building and commerce. Historian Donna Guy has noted the emphasis upon women's hygiene and health in the early Argentine republic, when the state took an interest in women because of a concern that they be proper mothers.⁶ Public health, and most especially, the agenda of populating the nation with healthy citizens, fueled policies that sought to control bodies. At the same time in Latin America, popular narratives featured tragic stories of love thwarted or lost in the new republics. Victims most often were women; they dutifully died and assumed a place of symbolic prominence. According to Nira Yural-Davis, who has written generally about women and nationalism, "Women are often required to carry the 'burden of representation,' as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, both personally and collectively" (29). She sums up: boys live and die for the nation, but girls "need not act" but only "become the national embodiment" (29).

Two sacrifices of women form the center of the narrative in *El año*. There is the literal, physical death of Sofia, who is found murdered in her bedroom, and there is also the social death and banishment of the prostitutes, one of whom is María, a former maid to Sofia. Sofia's death is publicly significant because of the attention of the press, though the drama with the prostitutes also plays out in the newspapers. In featuring female characters, Lobo explores the position of women in distinct social classes and also signals the violence to which women are subjected because of both gender and class. Most importantly, though, she explores the stories constructed by different individuals to make sense of the violence, and in this, the death of Sofia is central.

While she is living, the men in her family see Sofia as an object that they must control so that they can maintain a social order favorable to themselves. Sofia's attempts at social agency represent a threat to patriarchal structures, mostly because her defiance of her husband and her recurrence to legal means to obtain a separation from him would mean social and economic ruin for her family. Furthermore, because of the society in which she lives, for Sofia, the choice to seek a legal separation from an abusive husband is not just a personal decision with personal repercussions. When Sofia inquires about a divorce, she threatens the image and integrity of her own, upper-

class family, itself symbolic of the nation as one big family. It is of little consequence that the family is given to incestuous relationships and violence to protect the privilege of its male members.

Sofía's transgression of familial norms is profoundly disturbing to Pío Víquez, a journalist and one of the central characters in the narrative. So disturbing is it, that Pío elaborates a moderately coherent, sentimental narrative with Sofía at the center in order to construct an image of society that suits him. The juxtaposition of his narrative about Sofía's murder and the political turmoil in the capital (of which the prostitute arrest is part), with Sofía's narrative in the first person, is the vehicle by which Lobo challenges notions of gender and memory in the politics of the nation.⁷

As in her other novels, Lobo in *El año* suggests that histories often blur, confuse, and obfuscate as they plot events according to the demands of political agendas. Like Cortés in *Cruz de olvido*, Lobo questions the veracity of accepted interpretations of history and identity in Costa Rica. Rather than multiply narratives, as Cortés does in his novel, Lobo juxtaposes one "authoritative" narrative with another that delegitimizes it. To do so, Lobo offers two narrative voices: that of Sofía in the first person and that of the third-person narrator, through which the reader also hears the voice of the journalist Pío Víquez, whose writings are quoted with frequency. By means of these narrative strategies, Lobo posits and probes different explanations of the murder, which she contextualizes against a backdrop of cultural and political change.

Is Sofía's murder a crime of "passion" or crime of international intrigue? The emplotment makes all the difference. In the popular imagination, the crime is the culmination of domestic violence, either because Sofía's husband was angered by the thought of divorce or because he had discovered a rival. These conclusions are not sufficient for Pío Víquez. He desires to form a narrative that is nationalist and Americanist, that offers some allegory for the struggle for progress by the Latin American republics. So Pío, the journalist with an active imagination, invents a tale of international conspiracy that explains Sofía's murder. Recall that Sofía is from an upper-class Cuban exile family whose members support the independence movement of the island. She is married to her own uncle, confined to her house by her jealous husband, and by all accounts, desperately

bored and tired of the abuse she suffers. But in Pío's reconstruction, Sofía comes metaphorically to rest at the center of the Cuban liberation struggle.

Pío's narrative goes something like this: Sofía's husband financially supported the Cuban independence movement, and the Spanish residents of Costa Rica are wildly opposed to the movement. Therefore, the Spanish have orchestrated the murder of Sofía to frame her husband and thereby to freeze his assets. In Pío's narrative, Sofía as cloistered and abused wife disappears, so does Sofía as a human being. For Pío, the liberty-loving idealist, the dead woman takes on importance as a silent and innocent victim of the Cuban independence movement. Pío's complex narrative is juxtaposed to the recollections of Sofía herself, through which Lobo communicates the hopes, fears, and desperation that push her to seek a divorce.

The narratives about Sofía present two different ways of approaching history and memory, ones very much conditioned by the gender and class of the person doing the plotting. According to Elizabeth Bronfen in her study *Over Her Dead Body*, the "disruption that death incites must be resolved in a semiotic as well as a physical sense; the deceased and her story must receive a stable meaning even as the grave is closed to assure that the process of mourning is complete" (292). Pío manages a semiotic resolution; Sofía does not, and maybe cannot. The event in each narrative is very much the same; it is murder. In Sofía's narrative, the murder prompts a retrospective look, an interrogation of a past filled with injustices. Sofía's version, like much of women's history, asks how she got in the fix she is in (literally, some sort of spiritual limbo).

Pío's male-centered version is cast in political terms and becomes a metaphor for the price of liberty, for Latin American pride in the face of a brutal Spanish oppressor. It is a forward-looking narrative that reaches for the future. Sofía's death is the starting point for a romantic political fantasy, a narrative of political desire, in this case, for Cuban independence and an end to Spanish meddling in Costa Rican affairs. Rick Wilford notes that in Latin American nationalism "female images are invariably 'racialized'; white Creole, urban women and those from influential families, often linked to male national heroes, tend to predominate as role-models" (12). Sofía is the figure Pío Viquez seizes upon to become the center of

his narrative. She is the perfect choice; white, Creole, urban, from an influential family, connected to freedom-fighter Antonio Maceo, and dead. In fact, she is venerated by Pío precisely because she is beautiful and dead. And because she is dead, she possesses no power in the public sphere other than the power of myth, and Pío is free to do with her story what he likes.

Pío's narrative privileges a Cuban-nationalist, Americanist, anti-Spanish, anti-clerical reading of events. The other, much more plausible reading of events, hinted at but never stated explicitly by Sofia's narrative, is that Sofia has been murdered in an act of domestic violence intended to protect her husband's control of wealth, power, and prestige. When Sofia resisted and began to act on her own, she was killed. Pío's nationalist narrative erases that violence against women and replaces it with a reading of the violence as a political act. He never perceives Sofia as an agent in her own right; she is a victim and a body, a beautiful, sacrificed body upon which a better future may be built. In Pío's narrative, well-financed political machinations by competing groups result in the death of Sofia. With this story, Pío transforms Sofia from a victim of domestic violence to a political casualty, a role which obviously has more resonance for him.

Lobo thus confronts the reader with two narrative possibilities. One protagonist formulates a master narrative to satisfy his own intellectual misapprehensions. The other tries to make sense of her life and death in order to free herself from limbo. Even in death, the woman's body is the site upon which different actors compete for interpretive authority. Bronfen asserts that "over [the woman's] dead body, cultural norms are reconfirmed or secured, whether because the sacrifice of the virtuous, innocent woman serves as social critique and transformation or because of a sacrifice of the dangerous woman reestablishes an order that was momentarily suspended due to her presence" (181). Is Sofia the "virtuous, innocent victim" whose sacrifice is a condemnation of Spanish tyranny? Or was she a dangerous woman who challenged the patriarchal order sanctified by family and nation? Either way, she is dead, unable to participate in the life of the nation.

In both *El año del laberinto* and *Cruz de olvido*, corpses exist as the evidence of crimes committed. And as in detective novels, the

plots of both works ostensibly revolve around a search for “truth,” at the most basic level, the identification of the author and motives of a particular crime. Violent crime begs certain questions: Who did it? How did it happen? Why did it happen? *Cruz de olvido* features well-financed political machinations and numerous corpses—mostly the bodies of people postwar governments make efforts to erase in the aftermath of the revolutionary struggles in Central America. In *El año del laberinto*, the political intrigue and corruption involve competing interests that emerge at a crucial moment in Latin American nation formation. In both novels, the authors refuse the reader the neat conclusions drawn by detective novels, and instead confront readers with the untenability of sanitized renderings of the past and present, particularly as these relate to gender and violence.

The very frank references to the politics of gender in Central American societies, both contemporary and historical, represent significant contributions on the part of the novels. Post-war novels from Central America have delved into many overlooked and marginalized territories, from the culturally distinct black communities on the Atlantic coast to dismal, crime-ridden urban landscapes. Written during an era of globalization, many emphasize a long history of international connections in Central America. This is the case in *La flota negra* (1999) by Costa Rican Yazmín Ross, and *Limón Blues* (2002), by her compatriot Anacristina Rossi. Both books explore the landscape of the Atlantic coast, recovering the memory of black activist Marcus Garvey in the region. Other literary works, like Rodrigo Rey Rosa’s *Que me maten si . . .* or Horacio Castellanos Moya’s novels, feature mysteries, crimes, and an international cast of characters in contemporary Central America.

What is striking, though, is that the topic of gender has remained at the periphery of most new narratives from Central America and even in studies by dedicated scholars of Central American culture.⁸ Indeed, though many writers questioned traditional gender roles during the revolutionary years, the representation of gender in literary texts has not featured prominently in many texts currently circulating in the field. Kokotovic argues that most works of Central American postwar fiction “do not critique . . . the continued subordination of women in the postwar period,” perhaps because most are by male authors (40). He cites Salvadoran writer Jacinta Escudos

as a noticeable exception, and since Kokotovic's study excludes Costa Rican fiction, the contributions of Lobo and Cortés are overlooked. Queer studies are even more noticeably absent from discussions of gender in Central American studies, despite the widely-hailed work of Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (1992), that broached the topic over a decade ago. There have been historical considerations of masculinity in collections such as Eugenia Rodríguez Sáenz' *Entre Silencios y voces: Género e Historia en América Central, 1750–1990* (1997), but these stop short of many post-war developments and do not consider literary representations of the past.

The contribution of Tatiana Lobo in *El año del laberinto* and Carlos Cortés in *Cruz de olvido* has been to problematize Central American reality in the present through accomplished and innovative narratives about the past. Taking up their novels means entering into a postwar world fraught with violence, danger, and intrigue. Reading their novels critically also beckons audiences into a realm of important debates about gender, identity, and narrative in contemporary Central America.

Notes

1 For an introduction to the debate over Rigoberta Menchú's testimony, especially with regard to the reception and teaching of the testimony in the United States, see Arias, *Rigoberta*.

2 The Sandinista defeat in the Nicaraguan elections ended the U.S.-backed contra war in 1990. Peace treaties signed in 1992 in El Salvador and 1996 in Guatemala ended the civil wars in those countries.

3 For an extensive discussion of these extra-literary factors, see Grinberg Pla and Arias: "Objetos perdidos" and Mackenbach.

4 For a comprehensive study of Costa Rican national identity, as defined against that of Nicaragua, see Sandoval-García.

5 For Tanja Renner and Mirjana Ule, who have written about post-socialist societies in Europe, the home "signifies the illusion of a guarded and organ-

ic non-conflictual community; the ‘nation’ signifies a large family to which all individual action must be subservient; and God signifies the transcendental self-conception of one’s own life as unforeseeable fate” (122–23).

6 See Guy, *White Slavery and Sex*.

7 Lobo makes challenges to national histories in all of her novels set in Costa Rica. Her first novel, *Asalto al paraíso* (1992), takes on colonial history, and her second novel, *Calypso* (1996), does the same with the modern history of the Atlantic coast. For more extensive discussion of Lobo’s fictionalization of history, see Barbas Rhoden.

8 For example, the on-line journal *Istmo* dedicated to Central American recently featured a special edition on Central American cultural studies. Noticeably absent, however, was an in-depth or theoretical discussion of gender in Central American cultural studies. See *Istmo* 8 (enero–junio 2004).

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