

THE OCTOPUS'S TENTACLES: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES IN  
CONTEMPORARY CENTRAL AMERICAN NARRATIVE (1996-2012)

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department  
of Romance Studies (Hispanic Literature).

Chapel Hill  
2017

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## ABSTRACT

Greg C. Severyn: *The Octopus's Tentacles: Representations of the United States in Contemporary Central American Narrative (1996-2012)*  
(Under the direction of Emilio del Valle Escalante)

This dissertation project critically examines how contemporary fictional authors like Arturo Arias, María Lourdes Pallais, and Gloria Guardia, among others, represent the United States' cultural, political and economic influences in Central America during the post-war period. In doing so, I identify three literary tendencies in the late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup> centuries. On the one hand, I argue that U.S. neoliberal foreign policy representations by some authors of crime novels are not only less critical than they have historically been, but that they are rather sympathetic with U.S. political and economic interests in Central America, at times even celebrating U.S. characters and influence. On the other hand, I show how disdain for the U.S.'s foreign policies has, in part, become radicalized into dystopian literature. Writers like Fernando Contreras Castro, I argue, thus seek cultural decolonization and the breakdown of Eurocentric social hierarchies by targeting U.S.-supported global capitalism in the region. This "polarization" of Central American writers shows how some authors are now more complicit in global capitalism, while the resistance desires change through culture and intellect as opposed to physical or violent means. Lastly, this dissertation project also considers how U.S. foreign policy also imposes identities upon the Central American-American population as read in novels of immigration by Mario Bencastro and Roberto Quesada. The same Eurocentric hierarchies are called into question in these works as we find that repressive attitudes and policies ensure the marginalization and invisibility of the diasporic population's personal narratives.

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## INTRODUCTION

In January of 2009, after having applied to the Hispanic Literatures doctoral program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I moved to San José, Costa Rica to teach English. The succeeding seven months of my life in Costa Rica would confirm that, indeed, I did want to dedicate my life to teaching language, literature, and culture. The experience of instructing part-time also allowed for extensive travel and cultural exploration within the country, as well as plenty of time to become familiar with Costa Rican literature, including authors like Joaquín García Monge (1881-1958), Carlos Luis Fallas (1909-1966), Yolanda Oreamuno (1916-1956), Fabián Dobles (1918-1997), and Joaquín Gutiérrez (1918-2000). Brief literary excursions at the time also led me to read works from neighboring countries like Panama and Nicaragua, yet save for the biggest names like Rubén Darío and Ernesto Cardenal, the Central American writers I read during my time in Costa Rica would not (possibly ever) be taught or even mentioned during my doctoral program. By the end of my first two years of graduate studies, it had become abundantly clear that – as we all know – Central American literature remains quite marginalized when compared with neighbors like Mexico and Colombia, and certainly within the field of Hispanic or Latin American Literatures in general. Additionally, as the canonical Costa Rican authors I mention above indicate, there are also evident problems with the male- and Euro-centric literary canon that has largely excluded women and minority writers alike from being as widely read or recognized within the region as significant cultural contributors. For these reasons, my decision to continue working with Central American narratives for this project due to familiarity, both literarily and on a more personal and cultural

level, was not a difficult choice, especially considering the large research gap that comparatively few literary and cultural critics, like Arturo Arias and Ana Patricia Rodríguez to name only two, have been working to fill in recent years.

My dissertation project critically examines how contemporary fictional authors like Arturo Arias (Guatemala), María Lourdes Pallais (Nicaragua), Fernando Contreras Castro (Costa Rica), and Gloria Guardia (Panama), among others, interpret and represent the United States' cultural, political and economic influences in Central America, particularly during the post-war period. In doing so, I identify three distinct literary tendencies in the late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup> centuries. On the one hand, I argue that U.S. foreign neoliberal policy representations in spy and detective fiction by some authors are not only less critical than they have historically been, but that they are, in many cases, *sympathetic* with U.S. political and economic interests in Central America, at times even celebrating U.S. characters and influence. On the other hand, I show how negative criticism and disdain for the U.S.'s foreign policies has, in part, become radicalized into dystopian literature. Writers like Contreras Castro and Franz Galich, I argue, thus seek cultural decolonization and the breakdown of Eurocentric social hierarchies by targeting U.S.-supported global capitalism in the region. This "polarization" of Central American writers shows how some leftist authors are now more complicit in global capitalism, while the resistance desires change through culture and intellect as opposed to physical or violent means. Lastly, my project also considers how U.S. foreign policy circumnavigates back to the domestic sphere in order to impose identities upon the Central American-American population as read in works of immigration by Mario Bencastro and Roberto Quesada. The same dominant Eurocentric social hierarchies are called into question in these works as we find that stereotypes, discrimination, and xenophobic laws intend to overwrite the diasporic population's personal narratives.

This study, then, explores how U.S. foreign policy has been written into post-war Central American narratives from 1996 to 2012. As a result, it marks a clear departure from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century fictional narratives that I absorbed during my time in Costa Rica. These more contemporary works, to be sure, have received much less critical attention than writers like Dobles, Gutiérrez, and Cardenal. To that end, most of the novels that I treat in this project have one, or perhaps two, academic publications written about them, with the notable exception of Mario Bencastro's *Odisea del Norte* (1999) that has enjoyed attention from a handful of literary critics. In addition to having lived in (and returned multiple times to) Central America, the more recent post-war literary production from the region also speaks to me on another personal level, one that has to do generally with the concepts of war, armed struggles, post-war periods, and the subsequent diasporas reaching the United States. I suppose that it has taken me a few years to realize the connection, but I can't help but see certain parallels between my family's history and the Isthmus's post-war literary production that I have chosen to study. What I am referring to here is the fact that three of my four grandparents were directly involved in World War II: my maternal grandfather fought as part of the French Air Force, my paternal grandfather was a Polish soldier (who managed to escape from a concentration camp in Siberia), and my paternal grandmother was a Ukrainian citizen who was forced into a work camp where one of my uncles was born. My grandparents all eventually fled Europe and resettled in various parts of the United States, all meeting their spouses once they had established their lives here. Language and cultural barriers made it challenging to get to know my grandparents, yet as a second-generation U.S. citizen, it is clear how much of my success and stability is owed to their struggles and the violence they endured. Although admittedly somewhat loose, I do find similarities in the connections between the respective struggles against right-wing dictators during the 20<sup>th</sup> century



(both in Central America and in Europe), the mass killings and ethnocide that both continents faced, and the consequent post-war challenges to either rebuild at home or to resettle elsewhere.

Primarily for the personal and professional reasons briefly summarized here I have chosen to explore Central America's post-revolutionary, post-armed struggle fictional narratives, events that undoubtedly affected the entire Isthmus in varying ways and to differing degrees. My interdisciplinary critical approach will serve to elucidate just how the eight representative Central American authors that I have selected for this project respond to the United States within such proximity to the Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, and Salvadoran revolutions (1960s-1990s), a time when the North unmistakably continued its long legacy of military interventions, political meddling, and economic tactics in the region. Of significant interest, then, is how critical – or not – the writers considered here are of U.S. foreign influence throughout Central America.

Generally speaking, U.S. foreign policies have most often been quite criticized and rarely praised in fictional narratives from Guatemala down to Panama for the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if not much longer. To that end, widely read writers like Miguel Ángel Asturias, Roque Dalton, Claribel Alegría, Gioconda Belli, and Jacinta Escudos immediately come to mind. This project, then, intends to consider the social criticism voiced by more recent narratives that, to date, has largely gone unnoticed or, at the very least, not frequently written about to any noteworthy extent by other literary critics despite the recognition and success that the writers considered here have enjoyed throughout their literary careers.

I explore the above critical considerations by analyzing eight novels that stretch both forwards and backwards in time and place, not entirely unlike the individual tentacles of an eight-armed octopus, a recurring metaphorical image of the United States that I discuss below. When interpreting such a wide array of literary representations, I explore the United States more

so as a collection of interrelated economic, political, social, and cultural processes as opposed to a singular entity. In most cases, we will find that “United States” in recent literature frequently corresponds more so to U.S. foreign policies and U.S.-based transnational corporations, or to be more specific, capitalist economic and social values (like individualism, privatization, the free market, and the devaluation of non-Western thought), than it does to the entirety of the U.S. public or society in general, for instance. Chapter one, “The Elusive Tentacle: Implicit Forgiveness for U.S. Participation in the Guatemalan and Nicaraguan Revolutions,” explores Guatemalan Arturo Arias’s *Cascabel* (1998) and Nicaraguan María Lourdes Pallais’s *La carta* (1996). In this chapter, I argue that as the novels criticize the national – the guerrillas, the nation-states, the militaries –, U.S. characters escape the critical gaze and ultimately become heroes while U.S. foreign policies also simultaneously appear to be relatively insignificant in relation to the social and political atmospheres of the fictional works. This particular portrayal of the North as less influential, paired with the “self-critical” reflections against national entities in these texts, ultimately points to what I consider to be an implicit forgiveness for the United States’ involvement in recent Central American revolutionary politics. The spy narrative genre that these works share allows for the deeper exploration of international politics as represented fictionally, while cultural critic John Beverley’s concept of the “paradigm of disillusion” (a belief from the Central American left that the armed struggles were a mistake) and literary critic Beatriz Cortez’s “aesthetics of cynicism” (a literary position contrasting the hopeful utopian aesthetics of the revolutions) also figure prominently in the theoretical framework of this chapter. Critically, then, I examine just how the left has begun to look for possibilities for equality and advancement within neoliberal economic policies instead of continuing their opposition to them.

Chapter two, “The Relentless Tentacle: Perpetuating Desire for the North in Panama and Nicaragua,” explores the contradiction that arises between superficially condemning political U.S. imperialistic tendencies while supporting the United States’ economic and cultural influences. I find this dynamic ironic (and problematic), for one major manifestation of political imperialism, I argue, is a strong economic and cultural presence in Panama and Nicaragua. As a result, I show that the Central American characters in the novels greatly depend on the United States and perpetuate the North’s regional influence in Panamanian Gloria Guardia’s *Lobos al anochecer* (2006) and Nicaraguan Sergio Ramírez’s *El cielo llora por mí* (2008) despite their occasional criticism of the U.S. presence in their respective countries. This chapter also explores just how literary representations of the United States and its foreign policies have continued to develop and change during the first decade after the revolutionary war period officially concluded in Central America since the two narratives in this chapter were published approximately a decade after those in chapter one. Chapter two’s critical base pulls, in large part, from the detective genre that both novels employ, which establishes a question-and-answer-based investigation of the works’ social criticism. Additionally, I rely on William I. Robinson’s thoughts on Central America and how economic globalization has been affecting the region in the late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup> centuries, along with Hayden White’s contributions on literary form and how the authors considered here may “moralize” us as readers, that is, convince us that their critical ideological perspectives are best (ultimately asking us to side with their detectives’ thoughts and actions).

Chapter three, titled “The Monolithic Tentacle: Desires for Decolonization in Costa Rican and Guatemalan Fiction,” interprets Costa Rican Fernando Contreras Castro’s *Cantos de las guerras preventivas* (2006) and Nicaraguan-Guatemalan Franz Galich’s *Tikal Futura:*

*Memorias para un futuro incierto (novelita futurista)* (2012) as futuristic dystopian novels that take U.S. economic and social foreign policy criticism to an extreme. These novels engage in criticism that targets the logic of U.S.-supported global capitalism, as well as the ill effects of some of the practices associated with its realization, such as environmental destruction, military repression, exploitation, and the loss of human rights, acts that inevitably implicate the United States as the major antagonist in the works. These texts, unlike the more complicit narratives in chapters one and two, call for a complete breakdown of Eurocentric hierarchies in Central America and much more radically oppose U.S. presence in the region. In this chapter, I rely on decolonial and postcolonial thinkers like Edward W. Said, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and Frantz Fanon, to name just a few critical contributors that all point out just how neocolonialism and imperialism successfully continue even after direct rule and control over another territory or peoples has officially ended. Once again, the literary genre that both works utilize, that of futuristic dystopian fiction, lends itself to the consideration of the negative economic and social criticism contained within the novels while simultaneously signaling the existence and possibility of alternative social structures that Central America urgently needs to consider.

Finally, in chapter four, “The Constricting Tentacle: Imposing Identities on Central American-Americans,” I read Salvadoran(-American) Mario Bencastro’s *Odisea del Norte* (1999) and Honduran(-American) Roberto Quesada’s *Nunca entres por Miami* (2002) to explore how U.S. foreign policies, as represented fictionally in these works, have not only forced the migration of countless Isthmian citizens to the United States, but also imposed identities and hardships upon them after arrival in the North. This chapter consequently concentrates on issues such as discrimination, racism, cultural misunderstandings, and stereotypes. As with the previous chapters, Eurocentric and traditionally Western values are considered in depth in order to

determine just how U.S. political, economic, social, and cultural policies and attitudes force identities upon the Central American-American immigrant population. The critical framework for this chapter is supported by literary and cultural critics such as Ana Patricia Rodríguez, Claudia Milian, Ariana E. Vigil, and Arturo Arias, among others. These particular critics tend to focus on the invisibility and marginality of Central American-Americans, while other relevant cultural critics like Stuart Hall and Edward W. Said offer thoughts on diaspora and postcolonial challenges that the recent immigrants face in the novels.

Although not yet as critically or academically popular as the poetry of the revolutionary period or the politically committed novels of the Cold War era, contemporary Central American narrative production like the novels read in this project treats monumental shifts in economic, social, and political thinking thanks to the neoliberal policies implemented after the armed struggles, as well as a paradigm shift in mentalities regarding possibilities (or the lack thereof) for greater social and political equality in the more globalized economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As stated above, we will come to see in the following chapters that many Central American writers have become less resistant and more complicit when it comes to U.S.-sponsored neoliberal and global capitalist values like free trade, privatization, and a support for the free market, values from which the armed struggles intended, in large part, to distance themselves. Nevertheless, we will also observe that those authors who do reject such economic and social values do not promote physical violence to upset the hegemony via protests or *coups*, or even by way of labor organizations or social activism, but rather through a change in mentality and knowledge production that intends to upset and dismantle underlying Eurocentric social hierarchies in the region; that is to say, they seek cultural and mental decolonization. This dissertation project, in large part, questions why the selected fictional post-war narratives here have seemingly diverged

from previous literary representations of the United States, essentially leaving behind traditional social criticism that expresses sharp disdain towards a multi-faceted U.S. foreign influence to instead adopt positionalities that are either quite in line, I argue, economically, politically, socially, and even morally with systems and values that have oftentimes been the target of criticism, or, alternatively, to take on the much broader goal on the opposite extreme that effectively calls for radical change via a complete breakdown of the social and economic structures of the region.

The fictional representation of the United States is of particular interest in recent Central American works given the region's dependency on the North (economically speaking, at least), the fact that the United States was a major antagonist to the revolutions during the armed struggle era, and because the North has been a significant protagonist regarding the implementation of global capitalism in the Isthmus. Additionally, there have been many historical interventions carried out by the United States that have fundamentally shaped the political, cultural, and social experiences throughout the Isthmus. Just a handful of phenomenally far-reaching events during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries are sufficient to support my point: the signing and implementation of the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) by 2009, U.S. control of the Canal Zone in Panama until 1999, the CIA-orchestrated ousting of the democratically-elected Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz in 1954, and the military and economic support lent to the right-wing dictators during the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan revolutions during the 1980s. Furthermore, the 2009 military *coup* in Honduras that removed president Manuel Zelaya from office, of which the U.S. government was complicit, shows that such intervening affairs are still continuing today. The United States, then, has consistently impacted Central American identities for a very long period of time and to a

significant extent, oftentimes by way of economic or cultural imperialism (if not true military and political imperialism), along with other forms of neocolonial repression, such as through the perpetuation of Western, Eurocentric values and the imposition of neoliberal economic policies. This dissertation considers, as a result, if and how Central America, through its literature, is eroding the dependency dynamics so deeply embedded in the region in order to seek increased autonomy on the individual, national, and regional levels. After all, as literary critic Arturo Arias points out, U.S. dominance of Central America is best explored through literature (*Taking Their Word* xii). Likewise, of great interest here is just how the Central American writers in each of the four chapters of this project rely on the United States to determine such personal qualities as identity and ideology, whether in comparison or in contrast to the North.

To be sure, when I speak of Central America throughout this study, I am referring specifically to the six countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, as well as to the corresponding diasporic and immigrant populations residing outside of the Isthmus's physical space. Despite Belize's geographic location, as an officially English-speaking nation, its literary production will not be studied in this project. I do recognize, however, that some important Spanish-language literary production has originated in Belize, such as David N. Ruiz Puga's *Got seif de Cuin!* (1995); still, I will likely consider Belize's literatures in depth in subsequent studies, as the nation is an integral part to the entirety of the Isthmus. Keeping these thoughts in mind, I largely coincide with literary critic Ana Patricia Rodríguez's framing of "Central America" and her concept of the *transisthmus*, meaning that she reads Central American texts as "cultural, temporal spaces linked by social and economic flows that transcend geopolitical borders," aiming to "draw connections between them while producing other transisthmian and transnational cultural and literary spaces" (*Dividing the Isthmus* 2). As

we can see here, Rodríguez carefully words her definition in such a way as to purposefully include Panama and the external, diasporic communities of the Isthmus as well. This conceptual approach is one that I have also taken for this project. As with most determinations and classifications (as with Central America here), not all will agree with my inclusion of Panama, yet its disposition as part of the geographic land bridge linking North and South America is unmistakable. Still, my intent is to be more inclusive than exclusive, and not to impose identities or labels upon others from my position as a literary critic and scholar. Likewise, I understand that there is also an implied homogenization with the use of the term “Central America” in this context, for it obscures the dozens of distinct peoples, cultures, and societies present throughout the Isthmus, and it seemingly unites the region into one cohesive and collective body. I recognize these pitfalls, and I do make an effort to utilize more specific wording and references throughout this study when possible, though in some cases broader, more regional generalizations are either necessary or appropriate at times for the given context. One other affirmation by Rodríguez worth mentioning with which I also coincide is in regard to the transnational nature of Central American literary production as it relates to both the local and the global: “critically reading Central American texts in various forms as signs of local realities and global tendencies remains a vital endeavor” (*Dividing the Isthmus* 4). For this reason, reading the region’s post-war literary production is a useful task for the broader exploration of Central America and the United States; we are not only limited literarily or critically to the three countries that directly experienced armed struggles, but instead can make connections, whether social, political, cultural, or economic, between each of the nation-states considered here.

This brings us to the next point: why refer to the United States as an octopus with “tentacular,” far-reaching influence in this dissertation? The imagery of the United States as a



predacious octopus is certainly not new, and it has been most frequently employed for criticizing U.S. foreign policies and transnational corporations, a line of criticism that dates back to at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century that oftentimes condemns such imperialist strategies as the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, the invasion of Nicaragua by William Walker, and the Mexican-American War. Udo J. Keppler's 1904 rendering of the Standard Oil Company in "Next!," for example, captures the clout of the oil trust as it overpowers other industries as well as the government of the United

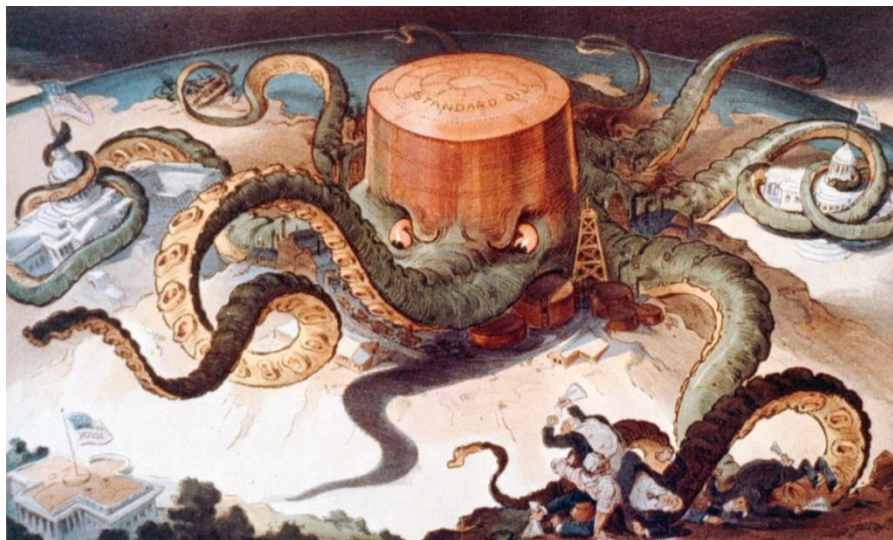


Figure 1: Standard Oil as drawn in the work "Next!" by Udo J. Keppler, originally appearing in *Puck* magazine on 7 September 1904

States (Figure 1).

Just a few decades later, Standard Oil (representing, to an extent, the United States) would side with Bolivia in the violent struggle for control over the Gran Chaco region,

a war against Paraguay aptly named the Chaco War (1932-35). Yet when it comes to Central America, it is the connection between the United Fruit Company (UFCO), which was officially established in 1899, and the eight-armed creature that tends to stand out most in Isthmian literature. In their notable critical study *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (1982), Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer call attention to the fact that the UFCO was known to many as "el pulpo," and it was no coincidence that references to the transnational corporation as a "colonial exploiter" abounded (81). In Miguel Ángel Asturias's 1950 novel *Viento fuerte*, for instance, the American protagonist Lester Mead is criticized for

being a “pulpo voraz” (197) when he is perceived as a bored millionaire who meddles in both the UFCO’s business and Guatemalan labor organizations.<sup>1</sup>

Another literary representation comes from the 1930 edition cover artwork of Colombian writer José María Vargas Vila’s essay *Ante los bárbaros: El yanki; he ahí el enemigo* (Figure 2). Here we find an octopus with the American flag draped over its head as it strongly grasps Cuba, slowly encircles Mexico, and extends its tentacles down towards the Southern Cone, enclosing all of South America and the Caribbean. However, the large, bright eyes give the octopus an almost innocent demeanor, and most of the tentacles have not latched on to anything just yet. This is the very



Figure 2: 1930 edition cover artwork of Colombian writer José María Vargas Vila’s essay *Ante los bárbaros: El yanki; he ahí el enemigo*

ambiguity that leads us to ask: Where are the octopus’s tentacles today? To that end, how have Central American writers been representing the United States in their works in the post-war period since 1996? To what extent have these representations been affected by U.S. foreign policies and dealings towards the six nations of the Isthmus treated in this project? And, of course, what are the social and cultural consequences of these portrayals, both in Central America and in the United States?

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<sup>1</sup> For lack of a better term, I sometimes use “American” in this dissertation to refer to someone or something of United States origin.

The relationship between U.S. foreign policy in Latin America and the image of the octopus has, in fact, continued since the close of the revolutionary war period in Central America. Gore Vidal, in a 1995 article titled “In the Lair of the Octopus,” connects this animal imagery with a generalized notion of U.S. imperialism: “Now, of course, everyone knows to what extent our subsequent empire, with its militarized economy, controls business. The end result is much the same for the rest of the world, only the killing fields are more vast than before and we make mischief not just with weak neighbors but on every continent” (792). This idea becomes even more concerning when we consider the selected logo on the National



Figure 3: National Reconnaissance Office spy rocket (NROL-39) logo

Reconnaissance Office spy rocket NROL-39, launched on December 5, 2013. The logo, which depicts an octopus wrapping its tentacles around the entire globe – not just slyly around Latin America – also boasts the caption “Nothing is beyond our reach” (Figure 3).

Unlike Vargas Vila’s octopus, this one does not have innocent eyes or a tranquil demeanor. Imperialism and unchecked power are – quite problematically so –

sources of significant *pride* in this case. The perpetuity of what the octopus has historically stood for gives good reason to study recent Central American narratives with these metaphoric representations in mind because U.S. foreign policies in the region, as do the literary manifestations in response to these policies, continue to evolve, change shape, and squeeze in different ways.

The four chapters of this study will ultimately allow us to ask and respond to critical questions insufficiently explored in contemporary Central American literature, like what role

does the United States maintain with Central America today politically, culturally, economically, and socially as understood through the region's most recent literary production? How can we expect U.S.-Central American relations and fictional representations to continue to develop over the next decade? How likely is positive change across the region in the next few decades, and are the cultural decolonization projects explored in some of the literary works here actually viable? How probable is it that future literary and social criticism towards the United States will be predominantly positive as read here in a number of narratives from the Isthmus? And, returning to the central question I pose above, just where are the octopus's tentacles today?

## CHAPTER 1: THE ELUSIVE TENTACLE: IMPLICIT FORGIVENESS FOR U.S. PARTICIPATION IN THE GUATEMALAN AND NICARAGUAN REVOLUTIONS

This chapter explores how U.S. political involvement in the Guatemalan and Nicaraguan revolutions is represented in the immediate post-war period in two Central American spy novels: *Cascabel* (1998) by Guatemalan Arturo Arias and *La carta* (1996) by Nicaraguan María Lourdes Pallais.<sup>1</sup> I will show that these novels portray U.S. foreign policy, manifested in part through fictional characters like CIA agent Tom Wright in *Cascabel* and Claudette and her imprisonment in *La carta*, in a relatively benign manner. This portrayal, along with certain “self-critical” reflections concentrating on the respective guerrilla movements, States, and national militaries in these works, shifts the critical focus from the North to the Isthmus, ultimately pointing to what I consider to be an implicit forgiveness for the United States’ involvement in recent Central American politics. To be sure, this forgiveness of which I speak is not an absolute pardon for all past wrongdoings during the revolutionary period (1960-1996) in Central America.<sup>2</sup> It is, more so, a tacit lightening of the burden of U.S. responsibility for having provided military, economic, and political backing that indirectly resulted in the deaths and disappearances of countless individuals. This partial relief of responsibility, I argue, is effectively granted by the self-criticism and disillusion that call into question the efficacy and value of the armed struggles in Guatemala and Nicaragua. Thus, through no fault or effort of its own, the United States eludes

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<sup>1</sup> The post-war period for the purposes of this project will refer generally to the temporal period that begins with the official end of the civil wars in El Salvador (1992), Guatemala (1996), and the Sandinista defeat through democratic elections in Nicaragua in 1990.

<sup>2</sup> These dates mark the generally accepted revolutionary and civil war period for Central America, which include the Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996), the Salvadoran Civil War (1979-1992), and the Nicaraguan Revolution and the subsequent Contras (1978-1990).

serious accountability in these novels, feels a loosening of the squeeze of moral culpability, and enjoys a minimizing of its political role in the narratives. When considered in conjunction, these critical literary aspects allow the foreign policy decisions of the United States to seemingly slip away in a reduced state. This slick escape is what I have deemed, metaphorically, of course, an elusive tentacle, an extension of the United States that retracts from the scrutiny of Central America during a window of opportunity.

To elucidate and support my argument, I will first consider why these two texts are representative of post-war Central American fiction, along with one of their strong uniting factors – the utilization of the spy narrative genre. This novelistic form, as I discuss below, permits the authors to question and consider such varied (yet intrinsically related) aspects as his or her nation's "international standing, cultural values, governmental system, and so on" (Seed 131).<sup>3</sup> The discussion of genre and espionage will lead us to problematize the novels' cultural and political content, that is, the presence, extent, and implications of the self-criticism within the works, a criticism predominantly directed towards Guatemalan and Nicaraguan actors. The cultural implications that most influence the literary representations of U.S. foreign policy will, of course, be the focal point of this discussion. I evoke concepts such as Beatriz Cortez's "aesthetics of cynicism" and John Beverley's "paradigm of disillusion," among others, to contextualize the works historically and politically, as well as within a larger Central American literary framework. Lastly, political representations within the novels will drive us to analyze the traditional patriarchal gender dynamics identifiable in the works. I maintain that gender inequality in the narratives ultimately complements the expressed disenchantment towards the

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<sup>3</sup> Although David Seed specifically refers to British and U.S. spy fiction, the literary components mentioned here are equally present in Central American spy novels as well.

guerrilla movements and that it also indicates an incomplete transition to democracy, which points toward egalitarian agendas that had not been fully realized by the post-war period.

Both of the novels discussed here may be considered post-war narratives. The post-war Central American novel has been defined by literary critic José Luis Escamilla as “aquella producción novelesca que surgió después de finalizados los conflictos armados (1990) en la región, en cuyos espacios se generaron *condiciones de posibilidad* propias de los países que protagonizan la guerra” (18, emphasis in the original).<sup>4</sup> Escamilla, like other critics, is careful to avoid placing definitive temporal limits on the term “post-war.”<sup>5</sup> As such, and given the publication dates of *Cascabel* and *La carta* (1998 and 1996, respectively), I will categorize them in a chronological sense as post-war narratives; additionally, these are novels that now thematically reflect on the legacies of the armed struggles in Central America. To borrow a few words describing 1990s Central American literary production from Arturo Arias’s cultural study *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America* (2007), the “study of narratives from this period should enable critics to explore the aftermath of the region’s cataclysmic wars, as well as those transitions taking place in the symbolic, unconscious sediment of their cultures” (19). In that regard, this potential for textual exploration forms the basic premise of this chapter, and, in my view, coincides with Escamilla’s notion of *condiciones de posibilidad*, or an opportunity to reconsider “la concepción de lo nacional, de los proyectos nacionales, la reterritorialización cultural y la totalidad, cuando se piensa en la región” (Escamilla 18).

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<sup>4</sup> Though Escamilla explicitly signals 1990 as the end of the *armed conflicts* in Central America, his definition of the post-war novel still coincides temporally – “después de finalizados los conflictos armados” (18) – with my previous indication that the official conclusion of the *revolutions* was in 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Alexandra Ortiz Wallner states that the “*término de posguerra* se ha visto así marcado y definido por lo político, social y cultural de un momento específico de la región, es decir, tiene un significado ligado a una geografía determinada: Centroamérica, y es allí donde cobra sentido su redefinición e instrumentalización” (140, emphasis in the original). Similarly, Beatriz Cortez, when speaking of a “sensibilidad de posguerra,” does not refer to “un periodo definido de forma rígida, sino a uno maleable” (23).

Situating *Cascabel* and *La carta* as Central American post-war narratives in terms of publication and content still leads us to ask: why are these two works in particular representative of such a wide-ranging body of fiction?

To begin with, these novels display post-war disillusion, critical inward reflections concentrating on their national spheres, an involvement of the CIA as representing U.S. political interests abroad, and a questioning and uncertainty surrounding the aftermath of the armed struggles. Yet it is the way in which each author fictionally explores and develops the complexity not only of post-revolutionary Guatemalan or Nicaraguan society, but also the redefined relationship with the United States in the neoliberal era that makes these narratives particularly worthy of critical literary attention. *Cascabel* calls into question traditional, stereotypical styles of representing Guatemalan-U.S. relations that are no longer adequate, ultimately avoiding essentialist tendencies through a much rounder, more humanizing character development process. For example, CIA agent Tom Wright is, at times, moved by compassion and desires to avoid “trabajos sucios” (5), a dramatic contrast to someone like canonical writer Miguel Ángel Asturias who oftentimes writes North Americans into his novels as unfeeling, merciless, and profit-driven beings. We may recall Geo Maker Thompson, for instance, in *El Papa Verde* (1954) who thinks of love only as “amor-business” (148, emphasis in the original), an emotionless business agreement of sorts.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Asturias tends to categorically divide the Guatemalans from the North Americans, suggesting that every North American shares in the responsibility for U.S. foreign policy exploitations and transnational business ventures abroad (*Viento fuerte* 48). Lastly, we also find broad accusations against North Americans as being

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<sup>6</sup> It seems to me that Arias maintains, in many regards, a dialogue with Asturias, such as with the vividly colorful and exotic landscape descriptions, the references to some people as machine-like beings, the metaphor of a strong wind, and so on. Asturias, though, has been criticized for utilizing (flat) North American characters simply to illustrate ideas. For a more detailed criticism of this aspect of his works, see Giuseppe Bellini’s chapter “El Imperio de la Bananera: *Viento fuerte* y *El Papa Verde*” (1999).



“bartolitos”: “Nada menos que los Bartolomé de las Casas norteamericanos” (Asturias, *El Papa Verde* 194), indicating that the characters from the United States, whether intentionally or not, are in direct opposition to Guatemalan autonomy interests.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to Asturias’s characters, which serve to develop a binary narrative that reads U.S.-Guatemalan relations in a sort of ‘black-white’ or ‘bad-good’ opposites, where the North Americans – “gente de por allá” (*Viento fuerte*, 54) – are contrasted with the Guatemalans – “pobre gente de por aquí” (*Viento fuerte*, 54) –, Arias effectively avoids what others have described as a Manichean aesthetic in his narrative.<sup>8</sup> That is, despite the indirectly colonizing nature of U.S. imperialism in Asturias’s Guatemala, we still identify the Manichean binaries that Frantz Fanon describes in *The Wretched of the Earth* when treating colonial situations: “On the logical plane, the Manichaeism of the colonist produces a Manichaeism of the colonized. The theory of the ‘absolute evil of the colonist’ is in response to the theory of the ‘absolute evil of the native’” (50). As such, literature rooted in this type of thinking problematically perpetuates colonialist dichotomies. The colonial (or imperialist) mentality will thus remain “dominated by a manichean allegory of white and black, good and evil, salvation and damnation, civilization and savagery, superiority and inferiority, intelligence and emotion, self and other, subject and object” (JanMohamed 4). Arias, however, proposes a vision that expresses a breakdown of such radical divisions, such as when Wright has difficulty coping with how to even begin to understand the

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<sup>7</sup> The evident “us” versus “them” binary in much of Asturias’s literature comes from a long literary tradition largely stemming from William Walker’s filibuster in Nicaragua (1856-1857) and the coincident U.S. doctrine of Manifest Destiny at the time, which together ultimately led to “the discrediting of the United States” (Woodward 146). These binary distinctions continued in Spanish American literature throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, including writers like Martí, Rodó, and Darío, among others (Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus* 34-35). Asturias, who witnessed the CIA intervention and the overthrow of democratically elected president Jacobo Árbenz in 1954, reflects the stylistic tendencies of his influential predecessors in this regard.

<sup>8</sup> By pointing out the literary connections between two representative Guatemalan authors, we can see how fictional representations of U.S. foreign policy have evolved, allowing for the writing of a text like *Cascabel*. To be sure, I do recognize that Asturias’s historical and political time period (predominantly the 1930s-1960s), the purposes for creating his texts, the social context, and so on are not considered here at any length. I do not assume them to be equivalent by any means with those of the 1990s.

intricacies of Guatemala: “¿Dónde estaba ese cuadro simple que había aprendido? Le estaban rompiendo todos los esquemas” (156). The contrasting of these two ideological perspectives and the subsequent problematizing of stereotypical literary representations really finds its vitality in the *direct* dialogue that Arias sustains with Asturias.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the narrative representations of U.S. foreign policy are not necessarily exclusive to *Cascabel*, but the clear textual parallels that emphasize the need to reconsider how the United States is generally written into Central American fiction are accentuated. As such, the novel *Cascabel* may be read as one considered to be representative of changing ideologies and identities as reflected in immediate post-war Central American narratives as it takes into consideration the political, economic, historical, social, and cultural domains at once.

In a similar vein, María Lourdes Pallais treats post-war Central American identity even more explicitly than does Arias in *Cascabel* by focusing on the power of narrative voice. Pallais has written *La carta* “from” the United States, or, more specifically, a women’s detention center in South Carolina. This limited physical space not only imposes on the narrator protagonist Claudette’s freedom within the novel, but it is also largely responsible for the epistolary form that the work assumes. The letter-like structure of the novel simply makes logical sense because the intended purpose is clearly to communicate with and confront Antonio, her former Sandinista contact, from her jail cell. The very nature of an epistolary novel, or most any letter for that matter, seeks a response from the addressee (Field 120). We know that Antonio is oftentimes spoken to in the second person throughout the narrative: “Preso estoy aún de un amor que tú, camarada Antonio, me inspiraste” (11). However, with no response ever elicited from Antonio,

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly enough, a quote from Eduardo Galeano on the back cover of the 1998 Artemis & Edinter edition of *Cascabel* supports my perspective: “En mi modesta opinión, Arturo Arias es uno de los escritores jóvenes más interesantes de América Latina. El no habla por hablar: dice por decir. Por sus ensayos y sus relatos, por sus artículos y sus novelas, se expresa Guatemala, atormentado país, con voz que continúa a Miguel Angel Asturias *sin repetirlo nunca*” (emphasis mine).

we as readers may feel implicated, or at least spoken to, through the use of the second person. The epistolary novel, as Godfrey Frank Singer points out, “places the reader in the position of a confidential friend, thus creating a connecting contact between writer and reader” (84). In other words, the narrative voice directly challenges us to respond, oftentimes in a sympathetic manner.

Claudette’s exhaustion, surrender, and disillusion noticeably saturate her writing, especially when she refers to herself as “Nadie,” emphasizing her status as a “nobody,” on a number of occasions throughout the novel. By adopting such a name, Claudette seriously questions the post-war fragmentation between self and collectivity, between anonymity and identity: “Cuando algo, cuando alguien te espera, es porque algo, porque alguien te quiere. Nadie espera lo que no quiere. Nadie...qué bonito sería llamarse Nadie, es un lindo nombre, dice tanto de lo que somos. Somos eso, Nadie” (18). The plural form “somos” signals that “Nadie” extends beyond Claudette’s isolated and imprisoned self. The indicated marginalization could subsequently be expanded to encompass Nicaragua and, more specifically, those most affected by the democratic electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990, for Claudette’s prisoner number is 505, the country’s telephonic calling code and thus a representation of the nation. Likewise, Claudette still simultaneously feels an immense love for the Sandinista cause as well as a deep sadness for its loss of momentum, emotions also purportedly felt by the collective “Nadie.” The resignation that Claudette emanates, however, leads literary critics like Werner Mackenbach to conclude that both the national struggle and the individual have become marginalized: “La protagonista no es la encarnación sinecdótica del pueblo que lucha por su liberación, sino una ‘Nadie’” (211). Additionally, the marked disenchantment implied by such a name becomes a powerful reflection on the post-war and the guerrilla movement, a criticism of the armed struggle and its failure to bring about social and gender equality. Thus Pallais, like Arias, offers a deeply

reflective, inclusive space from which we, too, may question the social, political, and other consequences of the Guatemalan and Nicaraguan post-war periods.

It is also interesting to note that Pallais, a niece of Anastasio Somoza García (1896-1956), was actually accused in 1988 of being a Sandinista spy who infiltrated the CIA, an autobiographical experience that closely parallels the novel's plot. A May 1988 article from the Associated Press states that "[o]n Thursday, [the newspaper] Barricada, which belongs to the ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front, quoted interior minister Tomas Borge as saying Ms. Pallais was 'a counterintelligence agent who worked in enemy ranks.' 'She carried out missions in the heart of the CIA'" (Aleman n.p.). However, the reality of the circumstances was revealed a month after the accusations against Pallais surfaced in the United States: "De regreso a Managua, María [Lourdes Pallais] acudió en busca de consejo al despacho de su amigo el comandante Borge, quien le prometió hacer algo. Y lo hizo. Con el afán de proteger su vida, decidió que lo mejor era aumentar la dimensión del asunto y darle a María relieve de heroína nacional. 'Agente sale ilesa de filas enemigas', publicó el diario Barricada al día siguiente del discurso de Borge en Yulu" (Caño n.p.). Although the autobiographical elements of *La carta* debatably add authority to the novel, they undoubtedly contribute to the power of the narrative voice due to the perceptible split within the literary work itself that contrasts the uncertainty of not truly knowing oneself (Claudette, Pallais) versus the certainty of (the act of) writing (Field 153).<sup>10</sup> The novel itself is, significantly, a testament to that certainty/uncertainty binary that feeds the post-war identity crisis and disillusion.

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<sup>10</sup> Trevor Field specifically discusses this certainty/uncertainty concept in the context of a diary writer as he studies the diary novel. Considering Claudette's letters as diary entries given the recognized likelihood that her letters may never be published (thus converting her letters into a diary) is not inconceivable. As such, I find Field's thoughts relevant to Pallais's novel.

This split that affects identity clearly has much to do with knowledge, a fundamental ingredient to espionage and, it follows, any spy narrative. The spy, as is the case with Tom Wright and Claudette, is “endowed with a desire to know,” someone who “extends innate human curiosity to realms of political intrigue” (Hepburn xiii). By examining the genre, or at least one possible genre, for *Cascabel* and *La carta* – that of spy fiction – we find that this authorial decision complements the self-critical reflections and problematizing of the guerrilla struggles and, ultimately, impacts how the United States manages to elude significant accountability in these novels for politically participating in the respective revolutions. To define spy narrative as it will be utilized here, I borrow from Dave McTiernan: “The spy story is a particularly obvious juncture where the codes of ideology and fiction run together. It provides a forum for a politics that dare not, in every case, speak its name – a public voice for furtive histories, an apologetic or damning script for nationalism and imperialism and clandestine meddling in international affairs” (3). Adding to this definition, and perhaps more readily apparent, international politics, social tensions, and, especially, covert activity by state organizations intrinsically enter into espionage fiction (Bloom 1).<sup>11</sup> Let these brief introductory comments on the spy genre suffice for now, as I will touch more on this topic in each of the novel-specific sections below.

### ***Cascabel* and the CIA Agent Hero Tom Wright**

*Cascabel* begins with the arrival of Tom Wright to Guatemala City during the guerrilla period, presumably the 1980s. Wright, a CIA agent (although we as readers do not learn this with certainty until much later in the novel) receives information from Pacal, a Maya captain in the Guatemalan army, regarding his mission: to rescue Mister Gray, an Australian banker captured by the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres, or EGP, given the

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<sup>11</sup> Clive Bloom mentions these points as he describes the spy thriller. *Cascabel* could more readily be labeled as a spy thriller than *La carta*, yet this broad statement, in my view, is just as applicable to spy fiction generally as it is the spy thriller.

acronym in Spanish). Wright has not been well-informed about his task, and he confesses to having an agenda of his own – to rekindle a romance with Sandra, a Guatemalan with whom he attended Tulane University fifteen years prior. After leaving Tulane and New Orleans, Sandra married into the wealthy Herrera family and, despite her moneyed connections, she fantasizes about joining the EGP.

Meanwhile, in a dark and dilapidated house in the capital, three guerrilla leaders – Kukulkán (who we later find out to be Sandra's brother), Vallejo, and Ariadne – discuss the logistics of ransoming Gray. Wright, for his part, is becoming a bit skeptical by this point about the true purpose of his mission; Pacal and Sandra, working together, seem to purposely delay his progress. Even Behemoth, his CIA contact who works at the U.S. embassy, does not reveal additional information to Wright, who suspects close ties between the embassy and the Guatemalan military. Based on Behemoth's physical reactions and apparent discomfort during a brief conversation, Wright comes to the conclusion that Gray was sent as bait intended to be caught and that his kidnapping would permit the CIA an excuse to move directly against the EGP.

As Gray's ransom arrangements are finalized, we learn of Plan Cascabel concocted by Sandra's in-laws, the Herreras. The Plan makes clear their desire for the EGP to capture Wright so that the U.S. Department of State reacts heavy-handedly against the guerrillas. Unaware of this plan, Wright attends the ransom meeting in La Antigua with Pacal. But when Wright realizes that Guatemalan soldiers dressed as civilians are all over the agreed upon hotel meeting site, he warns Ariadne as soon as he can of the impending danger. The guerrilla leaders are thus able to evade capture, but the military takes Wright prisoner. The press claims the following day, however, that the EGP has kidnapped him. When the United States does not respond as

anticipated, some Guatemalan military officers begin to plan a *coup d'état*. At that point, Behemoth openly admits to Sandra (who also collaborates with the CIA) that Wright has also played the role of bait all along: he was sent in order to facilitate the capture of Kukulcán, not necessarily to save Gray.

Though Wright manages to escape from the military's custody, in part thanks to Kukulcán and the guerrilla leaders, the previously planned military *coup* is taking place. Pacal, for his part, subsequently moves to counter the *coup* with one of his own (and he does so successfully). Sandra, in an effort to convince Pacal to back down, is detained by the Ministry of Defense and is later tortured and killed by Pacal himself. The guerrillas, acting upon Sandra's earlier recommendation to her brother, release Gray in order to avoid additional repercussions for the kidnapping. Ariadne then warns Wright that his life is still in danger. Wright and Gray make it to the airport together in Guatemala City and both men leave without further incident. At home in Virginia, Wright observes on the news that Sandra's mutilated body was discovered and that the newly installed military leader, General Lagos Cerro, confirmed that the EGP was responsible for her death.

The spy missions, how they are conducted, and the success or failure of their objectives at the close of the novel all point to social and political critique. Where does *Cascabel* lead us, then, in regards to its criticism? I begin with Tom Wright, the main protagonist, who in some senses has failed and, in some ways, has been successful. I consider Wright's various missions: his personal quest to reunite with Sandra, his supposed primary mission to rescue Mister Gray, and his actual, yet undisclosed, mission to indirectly support the U.S.'s favored political ruler of Guatemala, in part via his intended capture by the EGP. His unofficial, personal mission, as I mention above, is to restore relations with Sandra after a 15-year absence since their university

days at Tulane: “Era lo único que lo movía hacia tan inhóspita tierra aunque la agencia no supiera nada de su existencia. Bueno. Casi lo único. Deseaba ser promovido para no volver a ese tipo de trabajos sucios” (5). Wright, upon seeing Sandra in person, forgets about all else: “Había venido por ella. Ahora lo sabía. Había venido por ella” (21). An imagined future with Sandra in the U.S. suburbs, growing old together amidst so much domesticity, brings Wright feelings of tranquility and happiness. Unfortunately, as we already know, this future is impossible due to Sandra’s premature death at the hands of Pacal and the Guatemalan military. Does this inevitable ending to Wright’s personal goal indicate failure, then? Not exactly.

The romantic relationship between Tom and Sandra does not work out even before her torture and execution. When the two find themselves alone in a hotel room, Tom becomes unsure and hesitant about making any intimate advances. Perhaps he suspects that Sandra’s interest is not genuine, since her motive does come in part from her collaboration with Pacal and the need to slow Wright’s progress towards rescuing Gray. Or perhaps, as Wright admits, things between them just aren’t the same. Sandra does not give up, and they end up making love: “Ella se paró y sin quitarle los ojos de encima lo abrazó y acomodó su cabeza contra su hombro, arrullándolo dulcemente para terminar de espantar los infinitos fragmentos de su incertidumbre. Con ese mismo gesto dulce y paralizador le apretó los brazos, comprimiendo sus costillas hasta que él sintió que se quedaba sin aliento, que la luz del cuarto había huido y lo pulverizaban unos tentáculos de color rosado” (81).<sup>12</sup> Given Wright’s reservations, it is doubtful as to whether we could consider this love-making scene a positive outcome for his personal desires. Yet it is through their intimate relationship that Arias not only humanizes Tom as a *gringo*, but we also find a demystification of stereotypical representations about the U.S. like those promoted by

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<sup>12</sup> An argument between Wright and Sandra shortly thereafter confirms that they indeed make love, as evident through Sandra’s insult: “Y en cuanto a coger, también dejan [los norteamericanos] mucho que desear” (93).



Asturias, inviting us as readers to also rethink how these identities have traditionally been (mis)represented.<sup>13</sup>

I would like to look back once more towards Asturias's "Banana Trilogy" novels as a means of comparing more traditionally stereotypical modes of fictionally representing U.S. characters and foreign policy in Central American narrative to Arias's text, specifically to Tom and Sandra's relationship.<sup>14</sup> One of the more iconic metaphors that Asturias concocts throughout *Viento fuerte* treats the portrayal of the U.S.-based, transnational banana corporation the United Fruit Company (UFCO) as a war machine: the physical labor is like a "lucha guerrera," carried out "a costa de muchos sacrificios, de heridos y de muertos, sin contar los mutilados" (14). Just prior to this affirmation, we learn that the Company has an insatiable appetite in order to seek profit: "el trabajo devoraba gente y más gente, herramientas y más herramientas" (13). The image of Asturias's war machine is fundamentally one of heartless violence, one that only sees in green (banana leaves and dollars) and gold (bananas and money). He even goes so far as to categorize the overwhelmingly Guatemalan lower-level UFCO employees (the "[p]eones, caporales, mandaderos, administradores") as part of the "organización humana" (28); beyond them, the UFCO's exclusively North American upper management is classified as a "maquinaria ciega, implacable, que todo lo convertía en cifras en sus libros, inalterable, cronométrica, precisa" (28). It is seemingly of no consequence even when U.S. UFCO employees realize what they are participating in: "Uno de estos otros hombres, mister John Pyle, [era] consciente de su rol de piececilla de un mecanismo sin corazón" (28). Pyle nonchalantly explains to his wife that

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<sup>13</sup> Notice, for example, how the image of "tentáculos" is associated with Sandra as she embraces Tom. The metaphor of the octopus's tentacles has almost exclusively been reserved to criticize the United States' political and economic foreign policies in Latin America, not as a descriptor for things related to Guatemala.

<sup>14</sup> Asturias's "Banana Trilogy" novels, treating the United Fruit Company in Guatemala, are *Viento fuerte* (1950), *El Papa Verde* (1954), and *Los ojos de los enterrados* (1960).

the Guatemalan people “vive, y si es buena, es buena y si es cruel, es cruel. Nosotros no somos ni buenos ni malos, simplemente máquinas...Somos autómatas...nosotros que no somos ni buenos ni malos, ni alegres ni tristes, simplemente máquinas” (28-29). Given the pervasiveness and exaggeratedly dichotomizing nature of Asturias’s imagery, it is difficult not to draw parallels between his novels and *Cascabel*, especially when Sandra Herrera echoes his sentiments almost word for word in a verbal attack against Tom’s person, calling him “una tuerquita vulgar en un aparato que ni controla ni entiende” (92).

Consequently, as we might read Guatemalans and North Americans in Asturias’s texts, we can interpret both Sandra and Tom, in the context of their romantic relationship, as allegorical representations of their respective nations. Although Fredric Jameson’s thoughts on “national allegories” have been shown to be somewhat problematic, some of the notions are still relevant here.<sup>15</sup> As Jameson indicates, the story of a private individual destiny (such as those of Sandra and Tom) can be read as “*an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” (69, emphasis in the original). We have already been thinking in terms of national relationships and international conflict given the political nature of spy novels. Now, the move to determine how characters ideologically represent their nation serves, as Jameson asserts, “to underscore certain structural differences” (78). Beginning with their sexual encounter, Sandra (Guatemala) clearly controls the situation; Tom (United States) assumes a more submissive role rooted in his personal feelings, whereas Sandra is primarily driven by the presumably unfeeling need to slow Tom down. We already start to find, then, what I read in the novel as a “role reversal” regarding Asturian stereotypes: an exchange of power so that Guatemala takes on the

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<sup>15</sup> The most significant criticism of Jameson’s “national allegories” is, of course, that *all* “third-world” texts be read as such. As Aijaz Ahmad points out, as do others, this extreme generalization serves, in large part, to homogenize and “Orientalize” literary works from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. See Ahmad’s article “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory’” (1987) for further insight.

position that the North has traditionally held, and the United States, therefore, trades places with Guatemala. Likewise, Sandra's self-critical reflections insert her into the category of "heartless machine," whereas Tom's sentimental nature allows him to avoid this label: "[Sandra no] podía dejar de temblar sin beber whisky. Tomaba píldoras al levantarse para tener la fuerza de salir de la cama. No amaba a nadie. No sentía orgasmos. Se aburría hasta masturbándose. Estaba sola. Todo era político, todo calculado, todo era trabajo, todo era rigor, todo era disciplina de hierro, todo era mantener las pasiones bajo control y la mente lúcida, todo era protegerse de sus enemigos. Ya ni sabía qué quería decir estar viva" (183). As a result of this exchange of power and stereotypical depictions at the personal level (read allegorically at the national level as well), we find that Tom enjoys a much more humanized position than Sandra, who, through her self-conversion into an automaton-like figure, becomes dehumanized.

This ideological shift, from a relatively structured dichotomy in Asturias to its inverse in Arias, is sustained throughout a large part of the novel, and it ultimately shines the representative of U.S. political foreign policy, CIA agent Tom Wright, in a more positive light. This is so because he generally comes off as a more caring and principled person than those around him, albeit with certain character flaws. Consequently, Sandra is reflected negatively when the truth about her devious reality is discovered. Arias's inversion of Asturias's established dichotomy is not done to create a mirrored version of the same, but rather to show that radically different, plural representations are possible and, frankly, necessary. This reversal of how fictional characters appear in the novels can be likened to the debunking of national myths, per Erick Aguirre in *Subversión de la memoria: Tendencias en la narrativa centroamericana de postguerra* (2005): "El intento por desmitificar símbolos y encarnaciones individuales del patriotismo postcolonial y la iconografía histórico-literaria hispanoamericana, así como por

reconsiderar, desde perspectivas novedosas y actuales, determinados períodos históricos, es una insistencia evidente” (49).<sup>16</sup> Aguirre moves on to point out that national identity myths can be broken down in the face of humanizing reanimations and the heterodox recreation of history, as we find in *Cascabel* (49). Thus, the humanizing of Wright, a representative of U.S. foreign policy as a CIA agent, and the stripping of Sandra’s integrity as a supposedly morally superior person, softens the critical gaze historically directed (as is evident in Asturias’s novels and many others) towards the United States’ foreign policy. Wright’s humanization, his compassion, and his morals subsequently set him apart from Sandra, Pacal, and Behemoth, elevating him above the other central characters in the novel. What we witness, then, is that Tom Wright – to a certain extent – becomes the *hero* of the work.

This is so, I argue, not only due to the allegorical reading of his character as it relates to his intimate relationship with Sandra, but also because of the perceivable solidarity he shares with part of the Guatemalan public and the guerrillas. It is, of course, interesting to note that Wright, in various instances, collaborates with the guerrilla leaders, his “political enemies,” and that he actively rejects the Guatemalan army (Pacal) and even the CIA (Behemoth), his supposed “allies.” This collaboration becomes painstakingly evident when Wright prevents the capture and possible death of the guerrillas when the ransom money for Mister Gray is going to be collected, and when the guerrilla leaders likewise facilitate Wright’s escape from the Guatemalan army in the capital city towards the end of the novel. This type of mutual trust is also reproduced in other unexpected spheres, such as when Wright, when fleeing from Pacal’s soldiers after his capture, boards a city bus and counts on the public to hide him. This experience of being in very close proximity to everyday Guatemalan people, it would seem, rejuvenates him, and he needs their

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<sup>16</sup> Aguirre comes to this conclusion after analyzing Germán Espinosa’s *Rubén Darío y la sacerdotista de Amón* (2003) and Arquímedes González’s *La muerte de Acuario* (2003), though the ideas fit quite well here, too, as we read *Cascabel*.

popular support in order to continue: “El calor del bus le devolvía la vida y le tranquilizaba el pulso aunque no le ofreciera mucho oxígeno. El calor de los cuerpos frotándose contra el suyo ayudaban a calmarle los nervios, a devolverle el control, a mantenerlo de pie hasta que pudiera volver a hacerlo por cuenta propia” (174). When Wright finally gets off the bus, the driver says goodbye with a “Suerte, compañero” (174), insinuating that he is now more of a guerrilla fighter than a CIA operative. Sandra, for her part, does not share in Wright’s desire to fight against corruption and violence, for she – despite her collaboration with the guerrillas, the CIA, and the Guatemalan army – adamantly proclaims her selfish motives: “Yo trabajo por *mis* intereses. Para *mí* misma” (191, emphasis in the original).

Sandra, read as a more marginalized figure simply for being female in a patriarchal society, does not speak out for anyone’s interests other than her own when she has the opportunities. When Pacal carries out his counter-*coup*, for instance, Sandra rushes to stop him, not for the benefit of the nation, but rather because she sees *her own* work and future being compromised because she knows Pacal will come after the illicit drug trafficking business that her in-laws run. However, Wright is apparently not of the same demeanor. When confronting Behemoth about becoming a whistleblower after the CIA’s devious intrigues have been discovered, Wright announces: “¡Diré lo que me dé la gana! ¡No me importa mi carrera!” (216). Though Wright seems to have been silenced by Behemoth at the end of the scene, the novel’s conclusion – in my interpretation of it – indicates otherwise. After he learns of Sandra’s execution, all he can think about is the rattlesnake image so closely associated with Pacal (for it appears as a sticker on his vehicle) and, to a significant extent as well, with Sandra (who is frequently described in snake-like terms). The revitalization of the rattlesnake insignia is a sign that Wright cannot simply forget what occurred in Guatemala and that he will ultimately make

good on his promise to speak out against the CIA, the Guatemalan army, and the newly-installed Guatemalan military regime, even if it implies self-sacrifice. To this end, I also read the image's motto, "Sólo los que vencen tienen derecho a vivir," as ironic, for although Pacal has been "venciendo," it is now Wright's turn to make an effort to defeat Pacal's corruption and violence (225). Sandra's death also helps to place more emphasis on the need for Wright and the United States to act responsibly against the violent Guatemalan military regime, for the guerrillas and the wealthier class have not been successful in preventing Pacal's political repression. Sandra's demise thus leaves us as readers longing for Wright to take action and to speak out, leaving open an invitation to lend political and social support to the Guatemalan people, notably the middle and lower classes. Lastly, Sandra's allegorical representation as the more ruthless, profit-driven "American" type (as Asturias would have it) demonstrates that this older and dualistic image of the North should also meet with death, and that these binary notions must be put to rest.

To be sure, although Wright is predominantly portrayed in a positive manner and as one of the more principled characters in the novel (hence my conclusion that he is the work's hero), he does have character flaws that somewhat mar his persona; thus, he is not a perfect model. I refer here to the fact that, at the end of the novel, we discover that Wright has a wife and children at home, an element of his life story that met with disregard during his amorous tryst with Sandra. Speaking of Sandra, another character flaw of Wright's also becomes accentuated during a heated argument with her when Wright angrily makes sweeping, vulgar condemnations against her, Guatemala, and all Latin Americans as a reaction to her insulting attacks on his person. Lastly, it is evident that Wright's naïveté cost him time when trying to rescue Mister Gray and that it also provoked a misplaced trust in his enemies. While Wright does overcome his

ingenuousness, the neglect for his marriage and the resultant mistreatment of his wife when he cheats on her, as well as the vulgar statements he makes, however, are largely unjustifiable.

Wright's "official" mission, to rescue Mister Gray, is successful in a relatively superficial way and a major failure in another very important way. I begin with what I refer to as the superficial aspect of this mission: to actually rescue Mister Gray. As far as we the readers are concerned, Wright is the only person who believes that this mission truly exists. Yet everyone is in on it due to their individual ulterior motives. Pacal manipulates Wright by instilling feelings of hostility in him towards the EGP leader Kukulkán, tentatively convincing him that the guerrillas must be eliminated to support the "cruzada anti-comunista" (60). However, we know even from the start that Wright does not inherently trust Pacal: "Toda mi relación con él será una larga y aburrida serie de lugares comunes y carcajadas nerviosas" (16). This fundamental difference between the two men is illustrated when, ignoring the information he has been fed, Wright warns Ariadne and the guerrilla leaders that they are in danger of capture at the ransom meeting, allowing them to flee. Behemoth, Wright's CIA contact who is also connected to Pacal, offers no clarification regarding Gray, but he does insinuate that Wright is naïve for believing that he participates in a righteous anti-Communist crusade (69). The CIA itself is also implicated, not only through Behemoth's representation as a superior agent, but simply because we know that Wright was at least partially briefed (and misled) before his departure from the United States. Sandra, for her part, collaborates with Pacal and Behemoth to further Wright's deceit, and it isn't until his imprisonment by the Guatemalan military that he realizes that she has been covertly involved all along: "Shit. I've been had from start to finish..." (156).

*Cascabel* therefore criticizes the Guatemalan army and the corrupt, unethical CIA agents like Behemoth who further the military's violent interests. Historically, we know that during the

1970s and 1980s, tens of millions of U.S. dollars flowed to Guatemala as military aid, along with many millions more in CIA assistance (Schirmer 169). This economic support, though, is not specifically written into the narrative nor does it receive any critical attention otherwise throughout the novel. Accordingly, U.S. involvement such as support for a military dictatorship, even when having potentially significant unintended consequences in Guatemala, is not criticized here either; we do find, however, a continuation of the fictional strain of Central American-directed self-criticism that I discuss above.

Nevertheless, when Wright finally does connect all of the dots, he understands that Pacal desires military and political power, Behemoth and the CIA have sent Wright as bait for the EGP, and Sandra secretly promotes her interests by aiding the EGP as best she can. Tom's last-ditch efforts to stop the machinations already moving steadily forward are unsuccessful: Behemoth remains inflexible, Pacal's counter-*coup* brings his hand-picked leader General Lagos Cerro to power, and Sandra is swallowed up by the Ministry of Defense. Essentially fleeing Guatemala to escape the lingering dangers, Wright meets up with Gray to accompany him to Washington, D.C. Gray feels relieved to know that Wright is with him: "Yo estoy tranquilo. Con usted aquí no tengo nada que temer" (221). Both men arrive safely to the United States and Wright's pretense mission enjoys success.

However, his actual mission, of which he was unaware for some time, was to play the role of pawn in international politics. Behemoth, who speaks with a lisp, confides at one point in Sandra that "la idea original era usarlo [a Wright] como febo para capturar a...Kukulcán" (146). This original idea centers on two key components. The first, maintaining U.S. influence with the Guatemalan army: "Behemoth se perdió en una confusa explicación sobre la importancia de mantener un margen de influencia en un ejército [el guatemalteco] que cada vez más se



consideraba autónomo de ellos y se inclinaba peligrosamente hacia otras fuentes de aprovisionamiento” (187). The second, maintaining U.S. influence in Guatemalan politics: “Lo que queríamos era influenciar al presidente [guatemalteco] para que escogiera como sucesor a nuestro hombre...” (143-44). Nevertheless, *none of these objectives is met*; the mission is a failure. This is not to minimize the value of escorting Gray to safety, but it should be immediately clear that a U.S.-sponsored assault on the EGP and direct, concurrent backing of the Guatemalan ruler would most likely have resulted in considerably more casualties.

The critical and cultural implications of such a failure are significant because, as I have been arguing, the power structure is altered such that the United States appears uninfluential compared to the Guatemalan State or military, who hold political sway over the country at the novel's close. In other words, the political criticism is “internalized” and it does not really peg the United States as a serious participant changing Guatemala's course during the revolutionary struggle. The CIA, intimately related to the U.S. government as one of the top (inter)national intelligence organizations, may be understood as representing U.S. political foreign policy abroad and, by extension, a part of the U.S. government itself in *Cascabel*. Within the fictional construction of the CIA in the novel, there are both “good” agents like Wright who seek justice and democracy, and “bad,” manipulative agents like Behemoth who show no regard for others and who relish corruption and power. Given the U.S. military and economic aid foreign policies supporting the Guatemalan government at the time, as well as certain covert CIA operations, there is an obvious clash between Wright and the U.S. government's interests when he is not captured by the EGP. Instead, he sympathizes with the guerrilla leaders, aids them in avoiding capture, and depends on them at times for his own safety, effectively undermining the end goal of so much foreign aid to Guatemala. This split from the official political position of the CIA

(and United States foreign policy) creates, in essence, a fragmented reality within the novel: Wright, as a representative of the United States overseas, is not acting in an appropriately “representative” manner. Wright’s actions, for instance, help break the imperialist intentions expressed through the desired capture of Kukulcán and the sought after decimation of the EGP. Yet, at the same time, the apparent disjointed structure and miscommunication between the ranks within the CIA signals institutional weakness and inefficiency. This inefficiency manifests in the inability to act even when the moment presents itself. For example, when Wright is taken captive by the Guatemalan army during the ransom meeting, his kidnapping was surely publicized as an act of terror committed by the EGP, and if not, it would have been an easy sell. In any case, the U.S. Department of State does not react as expected; the opportunity yields no political or military action on their part. An inefficient system produces, as we witness here, ineffective inaction. As a result, the narrative depiction of the CIA in the novel is not wholeheartedly evil, for the “good” ultimately wins out over the “bad,” creating a more positive image of the agency.

The other two ideas stemming from Wright’s involvement – maintaining the Guatemalan military and politics within the U.S. sphere of influence – do not come to fruition either. A brief exchange between Sandra and Behemoth elucidates this loss of political power. Behemoth specifies, “Lo que queríamos era influenciar al presidente para que escogiera como fuesor a nuestro hombre...”, to which Sandra replies: “Pero no lo escogió. Y no sólo eso. Escogió a un posible traficante, lo que equivalía a darles un sopapo en la cara a ustedes” (143-44). We learn later in the novel that the Guatemalan armed forces have been distancing themselves from the United States anyway. As mentioned earlier, the army is becoming more autonomous and tends to seek allies elsewhere (187). Behemoth’s dread as well when he fears that Wright will be

assassinated by the Guatemalan military betrays their seemingly cordial relationship: “Pero, ¿y si le mataban a su agente? No aguantaba el ardor del estómago” (176).

Lastly, there are clear parallels between the fictional General Lagos Cerro and the real General Efraín Ríos Montt.<sup>17</sup> Besides the obvious geographical correlations that their names provoke (“Lakes Hill” and “Rivers Mountain,” respectively), both figures are generals in the Guatemalan armed forces, both came to power during a military *coup*, and both men supported an “anti-Communist” agenda. What really ties this historical inference to my interpretation of the novel is the fact that the United States was not a participant in the political activities that *initially* brought either Lagos Cerro or Ríos Montt to power. Virginia Garrard-Burnett, in *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit: Guatemala under General Efraín Ríos Montt, 1982-1983* (2010) reminds us that “[w]hen the Lucas [García] cabal was overthrown in the March 23 *golpe de estado*, the United States was not involved and, in fact, had not even seen the coup coming” (152). Later economic and political backing under the administration of then-President Ronald Reagan did ensue Ríos Montt’s overthrow of Lucas García, but that issue is not alluded to within the novel.

In *Cascabel*, then, the United States via the literary representations of the CIA and its agent Tom Wright does not really maintain much political or military influence in Guatemala. As a result of the essentially powerless position in which U.S. foreign policy finds itself in the narrative, an implicit forgiveness towards U.S. political participation is understood within the confines of the text. Additionally, it is the inward-directed self-criticism, that is, the critical disapproval of Guatemalan actors, such as Captain Pacal and his violent tendencies, or the EGP’s release of Gray, signaling a loss of guerrilla leverage and thus political power, that far outweighs

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<sup>17</sup> General Efraín Ríos Montt served as president (that is, military dictator) of Guatemala from 1982-83. He came to power as a result of a March 23, 1982 military *coup*, and is well-known for his anti-guerrilla program *Frijoles y Fusiles*, which aimed to win over those he considered subversives by enacting a widespread scorched earth policy.

any negative impression we as readers get when imagining Tom Wright and reflecting upon his missions as we consider the armed struggle era and the post-war period.

### ***La carta* and the Outspoken, Imprisoned Claudette**

María Lourdes Pallais's novel *La carta*, unlike *Cascabel*, is written "from" the United States. The narrator protagonist Claudette's fictional account and reflections as a Sandinista revolutionary and CIA collaborator are mostly told from a jail cell in the J. Reuben Long Detention Center in South Carolina, a correctional facility that indeed does exist outside of the novel. Throughout the text, we accompany Claudette from 1990 to 1992, sharing the experience of her incarceration, her release, and her untimely death; these years, to be sure, align with the first years of Violeta Chamorro's "democracy" immediately following the Sandinista electoral defeat. Broken and exhausted, the narrator Claudette first refers to herself as "Nadie" as she pens a letter to Antonio, a former Sandinista comrade, expressing her personal and political defeat. Without the revolutionary cause, Nadie's life has become devoid of meaning, and even with her pending release (of which she remains suspicious), she is unsure of what to do with her life. Her lawyer, Bernie, makes clear the fact that her imprisonment for being an influential agent of an enemy nation (that is, a spy) no longer matters, politically speaking, to the United States, hence her freedom. Although uncertain of who betrayed her as a double agent, she suspects that it may have been Antonio, the very person with whom she fell in love and who convinced her to dedicate her life to the revolutionary struggle.

Through her open letter to Antonio, Claudette wishes to separate herself from the past and to move forward while simultaneously betraying Antonio by speaking out against his lies and deception that led to her political participation and, quite possibly, her subsequent conviction. She recalls the seriousness with which she resolved to dedicate her life to the cause

years ago, and the personal difficulties of having to choose between Nicaragua and the United States due to her Nicaraguan origin and her status as a legal resident in the United States for two decades. Claudette also recounts how, in the United States and already actively supporting the Sandinistas, a man named Steven offers her employment with his investment company that ostensibly promotes democracy in Latin America. With Antonio's encouragement, Claudette accepts the job. However, she essentially becomes an informant, asked to gather and share information about the Nicaraguan revolutionaries. Nonetheless, Antonio explains that she can act as a two-way filter, also providing the Sandinistas with relevant data. This process, though, eventually draws suspicion from Lisette, a U.S. intelligence agent. Things finally come to a head when Lisette subjects Claudette to an interrogation in which she admits to her subversive activity – sharing information with Antonio – which ultimately puts her behind bars.

Having spent 25 months in jail, Claudette begins to reestablish her life upon release. She acquires employment and starts to date Peter, an economics student. One day, though, she spots Antonio in the street and he is not alone; he is with Lisette's colleague who interrogated her about her political involvement with the Sandinistas, and it is quite apparent that he and Antonio are good friends. Claudette chooses not to confront them, and they soon disappear. As the novel concludes, we learn that Claudette unexpectedly drowns while her boyfriend Peter was teaching her how to swim. This last bit of information is presented to us, significantly, in an epilogue inserted by a fictional editor, indicating that her letter to Antonio (the novel in our hands) was published and thus her story made known.

According to Brett F. Woods, there are generally three ways of exposing a conspiracy in a spy novel. First, a participant may elect to break with the intrigue, uncovering the secret plot. Second, an investigator or small group may actively pursue the discovery of the conspiracy.

Lastly, as we see with both Tom Wright in *Cascabel* and Claudette in *La carta*, there may be “individuals who have unknowingly participated in the conspiratorial planning of an event but who did not realize it until later” (81-82).<sup>18</sup> David Seed specifies that, unlike the detective novel, the spy novel is all about “a covert action...[that] transgresses conventional, moral, or legal boundaries” (115). Claudette’s duality as a Sandinista informer and CIA collaborator, as well as her subsequent incarceration, points to such transgressions. Seed continues: “The action is self-evidently political since it involves national rivalries and constantly veers towards a paranoid vision of ‘violation by *outside* agencies’ and ‘violation of individual autonomy by *internal* agencies’” (115, emphasis in the original).<sup>19</sup> It is without a doubt that Claudette has faced this double violation. The outside agency, the CIA, has interrogated and jailed her; the internal agency, the Sandinista network, has betrayed and abandoned her. As such, this very novel is essentially Claudette’s way of speaking out, or, as Maureen T. Reddy puts it, “fighting back, not only against violence but against all attempts at external, particularly patriarchal, control” (199). Claudette’s jail cell, then, may be read as a parodic interpretation of Virginia Woolf’s concept of a room of one’s own, a personal space that allows women writers to create on their own time, to challenge the male-dominated literary tradition, and to be free of worry from financial burden. I will return to and further develop these gender-related thoughts below.

It is within this conspiracy-driven, international politics arena that *La carta* unfolds. The jail cell in which Claudette ultimately concludes her espionage permits both time and a private space for her to reflect and record her thoughts in writing. As I will show, her views and

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<sup>18</sup> A footnote following Woods’s description of how a conspiracy may be exposed ambiguously indicates that some, if not all, of these ideas come from A. Ralph Epperson’s *The Unseen Hand: An Introduction to the Conspiratorial View of History* (1985).

<sup>19</sup> David Seed borrows some wording from Clive Bloom’s “Introduction” (page 2) in his edited volume *Spy Thrillers: From Buchan to le Carré* (1990). However, I find Seed’s wording more descriptive and, thus, more relevant here.

observations regarding U.S. foreign policy in the post-war period coincide ideologically with those found in *Cascabel*. An exploration of her imprisonment is relatively significant because, at first glance, it may seem that the United States correctional system fully restricts her liberties and maintains both physical and political control over her; it may also appear as if the South Carolina detention center has simply swallowed her up, making her an invisible presence. However, this is not the case.

Even amidst such a controlling and at times abusive atmosphere, Claudette does not perceive the jail as a wholly negative experience given the collective and communal aspects of her time at the detention center, possibly due to the socially-reforming nature of the correctional institution, a Foucaultian idea which I will explore more in depth below (82). Toward the beginning of the novel, she expresses her feelings of solidarity with the other incarcerated women: “aquí las cosas son lo que son las de Nadie, una rata es una rata es una rata porque aquí no hay rosas ni existe el individuo, sólo se permite el colectivo estreñado por las reglas del sistema” (19). The effort to unite the body of imprisoned women with her self-titled status of “Nadie” points toward their shared loss of individual freedoms and identities. There is also a show of solidarity from a number of women in the United States with Claudette who have learned of her case through media outlets like newspapers. These sympathizers mostly send her anonymous gifts to improve her comfort while in jail. Similarly, Bernie, when engaged in a political discussion with Claudette, insinuates that he is of the same ideology as she, stimulating the connection between Antonio and Bernie: “A veces dos personas – Bernie y tú, camarada Antonio, en este caso – se vuelven, de pronto, una sola” (40). The demonstrations of solidarity on the part of U.S. citizens with Claudette point to the schism that sometimes separates the desires of the North American public from U.S. foreign policy choices and consequences. In the

novel, this has the effect of poisoning the people of the broader United States in a compassionate manner. Possibly with the aid of so much public support, Claudette more easily accepts the systematic control over the prisoners' lives in order to make the jail her home: "Aquí eché raíces, camarada Antonio, las mías propias" (26). As time passes within the jail, Claudette's roots become more firmly planted as a result of her constant reflections on Antonio and the Sandinistas and the self-blame with which she burdens herself for her circumstances. Eventually, the detention center comes to symbolize freedom for Claudette, perhaps due to the assured physical protection from the outside world or the emotional isolation that allows for critical thinking. When Bernie, her lawyer, announces that she will be released, her internal reaction reveals these sentiments: "Y yo Nadie, también la misma, ¿cómo libre? si sólo aquí he sido libre, si el mundo es una gran cárcel" (41). Claudette is unsure if freedom really even exists outside of the jail's walls, or if it is merely an illusion (22).

What's more, Claudette basically condemned herself to incarceration via the interrogation carried out by the U.S. intelligence agents, as Bernie points out through a line of somewhat sarcastic questioning: "[¿]estás aquí por terca, por necia, por aventurera, no por convicción, y mucho menos por principios?" (43, emphasis in the original), to which Claudette recognizes that his interrogatory assertion is correct. As a result, her open admissions and self-condemnation has led to her disenchantment towards the revolutionary project by way of her realizations while imprisoned. It is important to note that the admission of guilt leading to her own undoing comes from Claudette herself. In other words, U.S. political foreign policy, purportedly seeking to weed out enemy spies, is not truly responsible for her imprisonment; it was avoidable. The United States government, upon her release from the J. Reuben Long



Detention Center, awards her with U.S. citizenship, another indication that the United States, spoken of in a general sense, has not been unreasonable or ill-willed towards Claudette.

Through her open letter to Antonio, Claudette's tension eases and she begins to recuperate her self-esteem by lightening the emotional burden she carries within. The catharsis produced through the writing (and denunciation) process has much more to do with a rupture that detaches past from present than it does with comprehension or justifications for her situation: "con *esta carta* pretendo que mi pasado se vuelva simplemente eso: mi pasado, que pase al rincón de los álbumes de recuerdo, que deje de entrometerse en el ahora, que sus fantasmas difusos ya no detengan el tic-tac de mi reloj interno, que sus sombras color ratón se desvanezcan poco a poco entre las líneas de *esta carta*" (49, emphasis in the original). Thus, the jail becomes a transitional site, a necessary space that allows Claudette to synthesize her experiences and to begin anew once she walks out of the jail a free woman. The detention center, then, is not associated with loss, but with gain. Claudette's time in a U.S. jail has arguably been a very positive experience, one that yields this very novel that serves as her conduit through which she voices her story. Her words, reaching a broader audience either fictionally or in reality, imply that the political control intended to restrain Claudette has ultimately failed. The end of the Cold War means that her case no longer bears political interest on the part of the U.S. government, and, as Bernie explains, capitalism triumphed and now even the revolutionary leaders are figuring out how to integrate and take advantage of the new capitalist system (37). Caught amongst these realities, Claudette ultimately concludes that everything – her dreams, her fantasies, the revolution, the idea of a collective multitude – was a "tremenda tontería" (13). According to Werner Mackenbach, throughout *La carta*, Pallais has actively been struggling to make sense of revolutionary ideals in the post-war: "Sin la necesidad de referirse a lugares o

eventos precisos, la autora deconstruye las certezas políticas de la izquierda armada en la América Latina de los años setenta y ochenta, sus aparentes sólidas convicciones ideológicas, en la medida en que penetra en los profundos abismos políticos y humanos que se encuentran detrás de consignas bien intencionadas. Así, el texto puede ser comprendido como una parábola de la revolución en Nicaragua” (227-28).

The prolific disenchantment readily identified in the novels in this chapter may best be explained by pairing literary criticism with political history, economic paradigm shifts, and gender differences. This approach intends to explore the socio-political context in which the works in question were written. Cultural critics like Carlos Monsiváis have already suggested that certain lived realities in Latin America have generated particular affinities for specific literary genres. He points to issues like corruption, drug trafficking, and inefficient justice systems as concerns that translate quite easily into film noir or the even more abundant thriller category, for example (75). I propose that the post-war spy narratives treated here, reflecting social pessimism, political unease, and international strife, also fit into Monsiváis’s description of the thriller as a “nuevo depositario del realismo social” (46). The social realist aspects most closely corresponding with *Cascabel* and *La carta* would be, of course, the largely unsuccessful revolutionary agendas and the implementation of neoliberalism.

Although it may be easy to associate neoliberal economic policy, or the broader concept of globalization, with the post-war 1990s in Central America, its origins date back to at least the 1970s (Robinson 10).<sup>20</sup> Coinciding with the emergence of global capitalism and the revolutionary struggles of the Isthmus was the appearance of the detective novel, or crime fiction, in Central America (Kokotovic 15). Misha Kokotovic explains that these fictional

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<sup>20</sup> Neoliberalism and globalization are, though not identical, intrinsically related. Per William I. Robinson, neoliberal ideas allow for the conditions that make globalization possible (50).

narratives continued to develop, and by the 1990s, “most of the continent [had] experienced something of a boom in narratives that use elements of detective or crime fiction to criticize the effects of the neoliberal, free market capitalism imposed on Latin American societies over the past two decades,” literature he collectively calls “*neoliberal noir*” (15, emphasis in the original). What notably ties Kokotovic’s concept of neoliberal noir with the spy novels explored thus far is the fact that, unlike many works of *Latin American neoliberal noir*, *Central American noir* “generally expresses a deep disillusionment with the outcome of the revolutionary struggles and marks its distance from the Left more categorically” (16). Ironically, this political distancing from the guerrilla organizations and the Central American Left brings the ideologies of the novels closer to neoliberalism and U.S. foreign interests. This estrangement from the Left, primarily visible through the self-critical attitudes toward the national within the works, may explain the more sympathetic stance, or as I have termed it, the implicit forgiveness, towards the United States. This disillusion seems, then, to be the driving force behind the forgiveness granted to U.S. political participation in the revolutionary struggles.

Many other critics also identify the post-war period as one of discernible disappointment. John Charles Chasteen describes the end of the revolutionary struggles as one of absolute exhaustion:

Because the FMLN refused to participate in elections, wary of fraudulent ‘management,’ the anticommunists invariably won, assuring US aid for the elected government. As the war dragged on and the death toll mounted – forty, fifty, sixty thousand – anticommunist electoral strength grew. The country was sick of war, and by 1990, the war was a stalemate. The stubborn optimism that had sustained the revolutionary vision now drained away day by day. The Nicaraguan election of 1990 ended the Sandinista revolution. In Europe, the dramatically rapid crumbling of the Soviet bloc had begun. An FMLN victory seemed further away than ever. And, even if achieved, an FMLN victory would not bring peace; the Nicaraguan experience showed that. So, in 1992, the FMLN signed a peace treaty and laid down its arms. Meanwhile, the Guatemala insurgents, too, were running out of steam. A peace born of exhaustion settled over Central America. (304-05)

The descriptive vocabulary that Chasteen employs with words like “wary,” “dragged on,” “sick of war,” and so on seems to indicate that the violence and fighting were continuing in vain. It is not difficult to imagine exhaustion turning into regret, or at least an analytical (if not cynical) self-criticism that identifies where things went wrong. But what if the very process of criticizing the national, of pointing out errors committed by the guerrillas and the failures of the nation-states and militaries, necessarily means that another important actor – U.S. political and economic foreign policy – is not confronted, but rather portrayed as benign and uninfluential as a result? Perhaps the weariness associated with the end of the struggles that gave way to peace accords and the deepening of neoliberalism also made this very transition easier to welcome due to the expectation of a significant reduction of overall violence and instability.

Even in Arturo Arias’s own words, “a certain past intoxication with revolutionary utopias has given way to a heavy hangover” (*Taking Their Word* 22). Thus, the political and economic policies pushed by U.S. foreign policy came to represent a space of new possibilities for many; the hope for societal changes that was greatly lost by the end of the revolutions seemingly found a context in which to be revised, a place to “sober up.” *Cascabel* and *La carta*, however, are still nursing hangovers; these texts only implicitly lean towards an acceptance of the U.S. foreign agenda, for the criticism remains somewhat veiled. Caught between revolutionary struggles fictionally represented in the novels and a real life post-war in which the texts were published, the literary works are really trapped in a paradoxical situation: if peace meant economic recovery by permitting “the conditions that make it possible for neoliberal economies to take hold and thrive in the region” (Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus* 201), then by *not* fictionally supporting the guerrilla movements, the novels – it would seem, unconsciously – promote peace and, therefore, the neoliberal agenda. Claudette’s denunciation of Antonio and the Sandinistas is

tantamount to a withdrawal of support for their cause. Likewise, Sandra's violent death, the release of Mister Gray by the EGP, and Kukulkán's likely reaction to Pacal's rise to power – going into hiding, at least temporarily, with Ariadne and Vallejo – all point towards a predicted failure for the guerrillas. Each novel also ends “peacefully.” For Claudette, the war has ended and her drowning seems to refer back to the last line of text that she wrote: “Y Nadie se dio cuenta” (158); the uninterested public, called to mind with this collective use of Nadie as she screams in the streets, has already returned to a state of normality. Similarly, at the end of *Cascabel*, Wright returns home to Virginia safe and sound and enjoys the comforts of life in suburbia, far away from the nasty violence he endured in Guatemala.

So why might these novels tend to implicitly forgive the United States by recognizing at some level the validity of neoliberalism? Part of the response lies in John Beverley's distinction between pre-9/11 and post-9/11 Latinamericanism.<sup>21</sup> This particular date is the turning point around which Beverley believes U.S.-Latin American relations became more directly confrontational. The relative passivity he describes in the pre-9/11 time frame interests us here, for he points out that the neoliberal period served to strengthen the integration of Latin America with the United States (17-18). What's more, Beverley points out the possibilities that right- and left-wingers could both envision under the aegis of neoliberalism:

I think that the task that faces the Latinamericanist project today has to begin with the recognition that globalization and neoliberal political economy have done, more effectively than ourselves, the work of cultural democratization and dehierarchization. This explains in part why neoliberalism – in spite of its origins in extreme counterrevolutionary violence – became an ideology in which some sectors of subaltern classes or groups could also see possibilities for themselves. (*Latinamericanism* 21)

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<sup>21</sup> By 9/11 I am of course referring to the tragic events occurring on September 11, 2001 in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania. “Latinamericanism” as used in Beverley's study implies a usage similar to that of Edward W. Said's “Orientalism,” yet it includes area and cultural production from within (from Latin Americans) as well as from without (*Latinamericanism* 1, 4).

These ideas take us back to José Luis Escamilla's definition of the post-war Central American novel as one with *condiciones de posibilidad*. It is hardly surprising, then, when we encounter these same words when Beverley describes a deconstructionist approach to Latinamericanism: "It reveals itself instead as a form of melancholy that cannot detach itself from its *conditions of possibility*" (55, emphasis mine).

Although Beverley discusses how deconstruction represents both a critique and a new form of Latinamericanism, I will re-contextualize (and simplify) his ideas here in order to make them directly applicable to *Cascabel* and *La carta*. First, I would like to intrinsically connect the concept of deconstruction with one I have been utilizing all along, that of self-criticism. The reflections necessary to successfully carry out either process are, generally speaking, quite similar – breaking something down so as to scrutinize each element as it relates to the whole. In each case, there is a clear link to the defeat of the historical Left in Latin America and also to these practices as potential spaces for revitalization to occur (Beverley, *Latinamericanism* 55).<sup>22</sup> Second, the accompanying melancholy that Beverley mentions calls to mind Chasteen's exhaustion, Arias's hangover, and the generally dark aesthetics of the novels. The post-war narratives explored in this chapter are undeniably tied to the defeat of the Left, whether it is the EGP in Guatemala as Captain Pacal and General Lagos Cerro control the State, or the waning of Sandinista power after the 1990 elections for Claudette. The revitalizations that these texts seek, curiously enough, seem to look towards the North. Claudette writes her letters to Antonio as a means of distancing herself from the past in order to move forward, a welcome rupture that would permit her to live a new life *in the United States*. Tom Wright, too, as the hero of *Cascabel*, embodies new potential through his moral actions, which we could expand to his

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<sup>22</sup> In the *post-9/11* period, Beverley states that deconstruction has become inadequate in the face of a changing socio-political atmosphere. Given my focus on the *pre-9/11* time period, I will continue to reference its relevance.

political and economic views. Wright also returns home at the close of the novel to live *in the United States*. Fictionally speaking, there is simply no real hope left for the Sandinistas (represented as traitorous through Antonio), the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (who lose leverage and must withdraw), or the Guatemalan State (for Pacal is genocidal). Without these options for societal change in the future, few choices remain.

This brings us to Beverley's idea of a "paradigm of disillusion," or the belief from Leftist and/or revolutionary participants that the Central American armed struggles were a mistake (*Latinamericanism* 96). To be sure, Arias and Pallais have not created wholesale condemnations of the armed struggles with their narratives, but they do lean in that general direction, one that indicates uncertainty regarding the outcomes and futures of the conflicts. For Beverley, there are many reasons to criticize or even be skeptical of the armed struggles, but framing them as mistakes really sustains neoliberal hegemony in Latin America (*Latinamericanism* 98). As such, one can say that the two novels here *implicitly* forgive U.S. political participation because they do not really express disapproval of U.S. foreign policy decisions during the Central American revolutionary period; any criticism present remains quite subdued. Otherwise, the forgiveness would be much more *explicit*. One important consequence of the paradigm of disillusion, evident in the novels as well, is a certain ideological blinding that effectively eliminates the possibility for truly radical social change. This is so because social transformation will be sought only from within the constraints of the neoliberal system, for example, a system, it would seem, that has won out in these novels (*Latinamericanism* 109). This may explain, in part, why the various facets and extensions of the United States in the works receive minimal negative criticism and appear relatively harmless, whereas the more radical groups – like the guerrillas – lose their potential as viable vehicles for social change.

With all of these thoughts in mind, is there enough support to suggest that the novels and their political critiques bring the works ideologically closer to U.S. foreign interests? There is, given the criticism that we do find, such as the literary representations of U.S. foreign policy politics and economics through characters like Tom Wright and Claudette, though we must continue to question the novels' ideological stances. As Edward W. Said reminds us, "[i]n reading a text, one must open it out both to what went into it and to what its author excluded. Each cultural work is a vision of a moment, and we must juxtapose that vision with the various revisions it later provoked" (*Culture* 67). Naturally, the omission of disapproval in exchange for a relatively inconsequential representation of the power of the United States in the Isthmus tends to, as I have already suggested, place the texts into a more supportive than antagonistic realm of the North's foreign policies. Still, Said points out another very important aspect, that of the literary work as a vision of a moment. These visions have, of course, transformed over time. Beverley's distinction between pre-9/11 relations between the United States and Latin America versus the less submissive post-9/11 ones with the Pink Tide, for instance, is one indication of changes taking place.<sup>23</sup> What seems to provoke the disenchantment of the immediate post-war period, then, is an identity crisis: where do we turn after the revolutionary and utopian ideals did not materialize as desired?

Beatriz Cortez, for one, takes on the role of post-war Central American narrative as a body of literature that intends to "cuestionar las estructuras hegemónicas del poder" and "continuar el proceso de transformación de la identidad cultural de la nación" (88-89), a process, she claims, that picks up where *testimonio* left off. I do not intend to enter into the discussion surrounding *testimonio* at this time, but rather focus on the two broader aspects of post-war

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<sup>23</sup> The Pink Tide, or *marea rosada*, refers to the new governments of the Left in Latin America with roots stretching back to the emergence of Hugo Chávez as a political leader in Venezuela after an uprising in 1989. Electorally, however, "the first instance of the *marea rosada* is the Chávez government of 1998" (*Latinamericanism* 7).



fiction that Cortez mentions. *Cascabel* and *La carta* are good examples for this discussion because both novels coincide with her definition of post-war narrative as expressing a marked disenchantment and an “aesthetics of cynicism,” or “una posición que contrasta con la estética utópica de la esperanza que ha estado ligada con los procesos revolucionarios” (23-24).

The first component, the questioning of hegemonic power structures, does not occur as usual or as expected in Arias’s and Pallais’s novels. Various political, economic, and cultural hegemonic structures can be identified in each work, both from the United States and Guatemala or Nicaragua, respectively. Here, though, the most imposing hegemonic power structure common to each text is certainly the outside push for neoliberalism. This push, as we already know, had much to do with U.S. interests in the region. William I. Robinson specifies the principal functions of the neoliberal nation-state:

Neo-liberal states perform three essential functions for global capital accumulation: 1) they adopt fiscal and monetary policies which assure macroeconomic *stability* within each country; 2) they provide the basic social and physical *infrastructure* necessary for global economic activity (air and sea ports, communications networks, educational systems, etc.), and; 3) they provide *social order*, that is, stability, which requires sustaining instruments of direct coercion and ideological apparatuses. (219, emphasis mine)

The revolutionary wars, then, *had* to end: “Not only did the peace accords not threaten the established social and economic structures; they paved the way for the full implementation of the project of global capitalism in Central America” (Robinson 70). The questioning of this hegemonic structure within the novels does not have much to do with its legitimacy, but rather what new opportunities it offers for those politically disillusioned with their country’s current lot. The very exploration of the potential possibilities presented by this economic system implies a certain acceptance of it; otherwise, a rejection of it would necessitate ongoing support for the guerrilla movements and, of course, prolonged struggles. Given the organic connection between

neoliberalism and the U.S. foreign agenda during the 1990s, playing with possibilities from within neoliberal constraints by looking towards the North for cultural and social guidance would then indicate a tacit acceptance of U.S. foreign policy, another component of the implicit forgiveness already developed throughout this chapter.<sup>24</sup>

The second component of post-war narratives that Cortez calls attention to is the transformation of the nation's cultural identity. This piece, as far as this chapter is concerned, is related to and inseparable from the first; as the political, economic, social, and literary worlds shift, so, too, a nation's identity. A key part of identity – gender – is problematized in the post-war literary production, for Cortez acknowledges the urgency for women to publicly participate in the armed conflicts, yet she points out that they were expected to return to the domestic sphere once the wars ended (134). As a consequence, women novelists tend to challenge traditional gender roles and, especially, the patriarchal vision of a woman's place in post-war society (Cortez 135). Gender equality, like some other revolutionary ideals, was unfortunately not entirely realized by the end of the struggles.

By critically examining the gender relations in *Cascabel* in regards to Sandra Herrera and in *La carta* with Claudette, the novels strengthen their ideological departure from the radical Left rather than their embracing of it. This is so because the lack of gender equality within the narratives indicates not only a shortcoming of the revolutions as equality for all was not achieved, but also a broader failure of society to create true democracies in the post-war period. As a result, the texts nudge closer to U.S. foreign policy-sponsored neoliberalism because this new system seemingly offers possibilities for change that no longer appear feasible for Arias and

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<sup>24</sup> The global restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s meant to ease the transition to global capitalism is termed the "Washington consensus," or, neoliberalism (Robinson 50). As such, U.S. foreign interests are intrinsically related to the idea of neoliberal economics.

Pallais, at least as expressed in these two fictional texts, through guerrilla organizations or the official nation-states of Guatemala and Nicaragua.

As Karen Kampwirth points out in *Women and Guerrilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba* (2002), the vast majority of women joined revolutionary struggles in Latin America for the same stated reasons as men, such as the overthrow of a dictator; very few women directly participated in an effort to secure gender equality (6). However, uniting forces for a common cause meant that *many* of these causes, like gender, became subordinate (Molyneux 228-29). Even though the Sandinistas, for example, were moving to promote gender equality during the early 1980s after coming to power, Maxine Molyneux criticizes their efforts for not seeking true emancipation for women, but rather taking measures to eliminate only certain inequalities (239-40). Her ultimate conclusion is that, without a concrete revolutionary component that addresses women's emancipation, the chances of success are diminished, for there is "a unity of purpose between the goals of women's emancipation and the developmental and social goals of revolutionary states" (245). This same sentiment is also echoed by Margaret Randall: "If a revolution is unable or unwilling to address the needs of *all* people, it is doomed to failure" (171, emphasis mine). If we take Molyneux's and Randall's words to be prophetic, then not achieving gender equality in either Guatemala or Nicaragua would be reason to exacerbate the post-war disillusion and, therefore, a distancing from the Marxist-Leninist-based revolutionary armed struggles.

With these thoughts in mind, I would like to call attention to the fates of Sandra and Claudette in particular. These two women maintain important character roles in their respective novels: Sandra as an indispensable secondary character, and Claudette as the narrator protagonist. Other characters do present opportunities to explore gender inequality as well, such

as the female guerrilla leader Ariadne who works closely with her male counterparts Vallejo and Kukulkán. Despite their tight-knit relationship, it is made clear that only the men are the real leaders: “Las actividades estaban rigurosamente compartimentadas. Sólo Kukulkán y Vallejo participaban de todas las decisiones. Ni siquiera Ariadne podía hacerlo aunque todos sabían que estaba capacitada” (Arias, *Cascabel* 84). The recognition that Ariadne *could* participate does little to offset the fact that she is excluded from the decision-making processes. Nonetheless, I will be concentrating exclusively on Sandra and Claudette for my analysis here.

Both of these women act as spies in the novels. Sandra serves her own interests as she collaborates with the EGP, the CIA, and the Guatemalan military through Captain Pacal. Similarly, Claudette mutually works as an informer for the Sandinistas and the CIA. What sets their actions apart, however, is how each woman fails while the men “succeed.” In *Cascabel*, Tom Wright and Mister Gray fly to the United States unharmed, Behemoth (Wright’s CIA contact in the embassy) keeps his position, and Pacal, by way of his counter-*coup*, has gained control of the State. Even Kukulkán and the EGP, who have lost significant political leverage, presumably flee and remain out of harm’s way. And Sandra? First she is tied up and tortured: “Los escaldantes golpes ya era un alocado torrente. Caían en toda la parte media del cuerpo, abdomen, senos, riñones buscando evicerarla con un ritmo cruel e implacable. Parecían sumirse en una macilenta danza amoratada filmada en cámara rápida. Todos sus huesos crujían. Su cuerpo era un desafinado teclado de marimbas ante el intenso agitarse de las baquetas” (214). As we already know, Sandra is murdered after her torture, but not before being raped by Pacal. The radical difference in character outcomes is reflected through the severe punishment for Sandra, which has no parallels with the fate of any other character, not even for the genocidal-minded Pacal. Claudette, in *La carta*, experiences a similar destiny, although hers is much less dramatic

and violent. Though she must spend 25 months imprisoned, it becomes, as I have argued above, a transformative and enlightening experience for her. Still, she has lost some of her freedoms and human rights, and, upon release, she drowns – a death shrouded in suspicion that looks toward, but cannot accuse, the CIA as the designer of her premature demise. Nevertheless, none of the U.S. intelligence agents are harmed in any way, and Antonio, Claudette’s Sandinista contact, is doing well at the close of the novel even though he has apparently been collaborating with the CIA as well. The only other character who is punished, *per se*, is Steven, Claudette’s “employer” (and lover) who purportedly supports democracy in Latin America and to whom she provides information about the Sandinistas. Claudette suspects at one point that he, too, is involved in the U.S. intelligence circle, and that his untimely death falls back on Antonio, even though he officially died from a heart attack. These suspicions, however, cannot be confirmed with certainty.

What becomes clear, then, is that the female characters are disproportionately subjected to punishment for their political and moral actions. This dynamic in the novels suggests that gender equality is still a significant, unresolved issue in the post-war period, for when Sandra and Claudette move into the “masculine” territory of espionage and international politics, they fall flat on their faces, whereas the men do not. This is not to say that Sandra’s and Claudette’s ambitions were fruitless or that they have not contributed to their respective causes, but it is impossible to ignore their abysmal fates within the narratives’ fictional contexts. The novels, though, do not really problematize traditional gender roles to any significant extent, for the males are able to either fight for the common good or perpetuate corruption and violence, or even manipulate others (as does Pacal with Sandra and Antonio with Claudette), yet they are not punished. Thus, it would seem that the novels do not reject the post-war push for women to

move back out of public and formal sector jobs; rather, it seems that they tend to indirectly support it. This type of conservative political climate certainly has some roots in neoliberalism itself, and an acceptance of this shift back to what will likely be the domestic sphere implies, at a minimum, partial acceptance of the neoliberal and patriarchal systems (Babb 57).

The post-war disenchantment evoked by the loss of political power of each revolutionary movement in the 1990s had many critics wondering if the armed struggles had been worth it, a fundamental question that the self-criticism in the novels explores. Florence E. Babb considers, in hindsight, the success of a socialist-oriented project like that of the Sandinistas in the 1980s to be “slight” (242). Ilja A. Luciak, in *After the Revolution: Gender and Democracy in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala* (2001), states that problems for ex-combatants in all three countries facing unmet expectations led to the questioning of “whether their sacrifice had been worth it” (238). Likewise, when the Sandinistas faced defeat at the polls in February of 1990, former Sandinista and author Gioconda Belli emphasized her personal disillusion during the post-war: “El pueblo nos rechazaba. Nunca creí que me tocara vivir ese día. La desolación también se me llenó de muertos pero esta vez fue terrible. Sentí que todos volvían a morir, y que ahora sus muertes eran vanas, inútiles. Vidas perdidas. Tantas vidas perdidas. Muchas más ahora” (395). The evident misgivings regarding the revolutionary struggles, the support for traditional gender roles, and the proof of gender inequality within the narratives discussed here points to U.S. foreign interests as a welcome opportunity that presents *condiciones de posibilidad*, or possibilities for change. This transformation almost comes natural, for the necessary reintegration of former combatants into society permits peace and democracy (Luciak xvii), yet this event is also a pre-requisite for stability and social order, key elements assured by the State that pave the way for neoliberalism, as Robinson indicates above.

Michel Foucault's contributions on punishment much more intrinsically connect the punishments that Sandra and Claudette endure to a support for U.S. political and economic foreign interests, for their punishments come about precisely because these women work against those interests. Foucault refers to punishment generally as an "economy of suspended rights" (11). The idea of suspended rights, or subordinated rights, returns us to Molyneux and Randall above since gender inequality is, effectively, an atmosphere of suspended rights. The innate punishment/gender inequality relationship is already apparent in these novels, so I will focus more on the "economy" aspect as opposed to the "suspended rights" portion of Foucault's description. Punishment, of course, serves multiple purposes. One end goal is that the offender may be rehabilitated so that s/he is "not only desirous, but also capable, of living within the law and of providing for his own needs" (18). In other words, the offender must be self-sufficient economically, thus able to contribute to the broader economy. Foucault goes on to say that "security measures" must be accounted for, which aim "to supervise the individual, to neutralize his dangerous state of mind, to alter his criminal tendencies, and to continue even when this change has been achieved" (18). We may refer to this aspect as the political, or ideological, part of punishment. The body is not deemed useful if it is not both productive (economically) and subjected (politically) (26). As such, the process of punishing means a transformation of the mind and body, a reworking and redefinition of the individual to make him or her fit for society. The transformations undergone by Sandra and Claudette are to root out their subversive nature, to make them docile and obedient before the State, which connotes certain political and economic concepts; their punishments prepare them to be participants in global capitalist societies.

Torture, as with other punishments, is meant to correlate with the gravity of the crime (Foucault 34). If we consider the absolute brutality that Sandra suffers, it follows that her “crime” must have been extreme. In fact, her crime must have been so severe in the eyes of the Guatemalan State (represented at the novel’s close by Pacal) that she could not face punishment as a way of becoming rehabilitated; death was the only way to neutralize her “dangerous state of mind.” Foucault also points out that, over time, punishment historically shifted from overt, physical pain like Sandra’s to an insertion of power meant to deeply penetrate the social body (82). This is the type of punishment that Claudette is subjected to, and it works. It would possibly not have functioned with Sandra, for example, but it meets with success after a 25-month-long reflection period for Claudette. The “omni-disciplinary” prison has assumed total responsibility for Claudette’s redefinition as an individual, from her work ethic and state of mind, to her moral attitudes and behaviors (Foucault 235-36). Her denunciations and the resignation evident in her writing coincide with the reformation of her personal identity.

One of the most crucial pieces of punishment, though, is that it is “directed above all at others, at all the potentially guilty” (Foucault 108). Thinking along these lines, Foucault claims that a “secret punishment is a punishment half wasted” (111). That is, a lesson must be learned by all who may commit the same crime; the offender, then, must be transformed, but s/he is not necessarily the central focus of the punishment. Sandra’s torture and execution do occur out of the public eye, but it is significant that at the end of the novel her mutilated body is discovered. What’s more, the Guerrilla Army of the Poor is held officially responsible. This twisted publicity stunt pulled by the Guatemalan military intends to lure supporters from the guerrilla movement to the State’s side. Claudette’s imprisonment is far from invisible as well, for many women from the U.S. public send her anonymous gifts while she is in jail. Likewise, her letters to Antonio, or



the novel *La carta* itself, become part of the public domain upon publication. In a similar manner, the fact that *Cascabel* is also a publicly accessible novel means that all of the instances of torture and punishment are, in part, directed at any potentially guilty *readers* of the text, for anyone thinking about acting against State-sponsored politics or economics. Are these narratives, then, an attempt to redefine us politically as readers?

I have argued that a (self-)critical reflection on the guerrillas, nation-states, and militaries of Nicaragua and Guatemala means that less critical attention is focused on the United States. This consideration, along with the relatively benign nature of U.S. foreign policy and its representatives, tends to suggest that U.S. political participation in the revolutionary armed struggles is less significant, or conceivably less worthy of criticism, than its national Central American counterparts. I termed this above an implicit forgiveness towards the United States' political participation in the revolutions. As the novels also reject guerrilla organizations and become more intimate with the neoliberal economic system, the representation of U.S. political and economic foreign policy in these fictional works has been, overall, problematic. To be sure, a questioning attitude and distancing from the radical or revolutionary Left does not necessarily imply a political alignment with U.S. interests. However, the novels view neoliberal space as one presenting possibilities for the future; they do not offer political or economic alternatives, which suggests an acceptance, even if it is with reluctance, of U.S. interests against which the revolutionaries fought for many years.

Without viable alternatives, it seems much less likely that drastic social or economic change in the region can occur. Margaret Randall believes socialism to be a superior option than capitalism (168), and, along similar lines, William I. Robinson points out that globalization is *resistible* (319, emphasis in the original), and promotes the idea of a “transnational democratic

socialism” as its replacement (314-15). Nevertheless, the post-war disillusion that emanates from Arturo Arias’s *Cascabel* and María Lourdes Pallais’s *La carta* does not inspire hope or encouragement for the future. The utter exhaustion only allows for a backwards perspective, that is, an assessment and critique of past mistakes and decisions. This is not to say that these two novels speak for *all* Central Americans or that these authors *always* promote the ideology interpreted in this chapter, for as Arturo Arias points out in a later publication, the Maya women of the Kumool Association (founded in 1999) “are evidence that subaltern subjects were not subsumed within the Washington neoliberal consensus, but sought alternative possibilities” (“Indigenous” 137). Nevertheless, we must still ask: how long will the literary post-war disillusion last? Will the disenchantment be shrugged off within a few years? These questions are particularly relevant, especially when we consider how the Left has in fact recently come to power in a number of Central American countries, yet the pronounced dissatisfaction with Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and the 2009 military *coup* against Manuel Zelaya in Honduras, for instance, show that political and social dynamics from the revolutionary period still echo and linger into the present. With this in mind, I ask: will more critical representations of U.S. foreign policy repopulate Central American narratives once the region has recovered from the decades-long struggles? I would like to consider these questions and others in chapter two as I analyze two novels that appear approximately ten years later: Panamanian Gloria Guardia’s *Lobos al anochecer* (2006) and Nicaraguan Sergio Ramírez’s *El cielo llora por mí* (2008).

## CHAPTER 2: THE RELENTLESS TENTACLE: PERPETUATING DESIRE FOR THE NORTH IN PANAMA AND NICARAGUA

I argue in this chapter that, unlike the works from chapter one, certain later post-war Central American novels and their contemporaries intend, to a much greater degree, to overtly criticize U.S. foreign policy interests perceived as imperialist, namely political intervention and economic programs such as free trade. To what extent the works in question are successful in their denunciations will be discussed in more detail below, but let it suffice here to say that the literary representations of U.S. foreign policy in these novels are quite contradictory in nature and that the support for the United States' economic and cultural influence ultimately outweighs the narratives' critical opposition to such imperialist tendencies. The novels I analyze here were published approximately a decade after those considered in chapter one: Nicaraguan Sergio Ramírez's *El cielo llora por mí* (2008) and Panamanian Gloria Guardia's *Lobos al anochecer* (2006).<sup>1</sup> This chapter serves, in part, to consider the lasting effects of the literary post-war disillusion by responding to the questions I pose at the end of the previous chapter, as well as to reconsider at a temporal distance the political and social dissatisfaction that figure so prominently in recent literary works of fiction such as Arturo Arias's *Cascabel* (1998) and María Lourdes Pallais's *La carta* (1996). I do recognize that, although Panama did not experience a revolutionary struggle in the same manner as Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the armed struggle era has certainly had enduring consequences throughout the

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<sup>1</sup> Although many literary critics, among other scholars, choose not to include Panama as part of Central America, I do for the purposes of this dissertation. Please see the Introduction for my reasons in doing so.

entire Isthmus that help to unite the current Central American literary corpus.<sup>2</sup> In the works discussed in this chapter, we find that the tone of resignation and the darker, self-destructive aesthetics of disenchantment that have been described by Beatriz Cortez have been reduced, yet the apparent dependency on the North for moral and cultural guidance still remains a critical part of each text. The continued exploration of post-war Central American narratives in this chapter, then, will show how representations of the United States have transformed critically and aesthetically over a short period of time. Each novel, for its part, centers on the historical legacy of North American meddling in the region, whether it be the political and military domination in Panama during the Canal era in Guardia's novel (here, the 1940s through 1955), or the simultaneous State and Sandinista collaboration with the United States found within Ramírez's work after the Nicaraguan Revolution officially concluded in 1990.

In order to explore the social criticism of each novel, I first consider the importance of writing *El cielo llora por mí* and *Lobos al anochecer* as detective fiction and, to a lesser extent further below, historical fiction as it is relevant to Guardia's work while continually focusing on the ideological implications of such genre selections. These formal insights will, in turn, lead us to an in-depth consideration of how these literary works represent the United States, particularly U.S. foreign policy and the preeminence attributed to U.S. educational institutions, products, and capitalist social values, among other aspects, through both the Isthmian and North American characters in these narratives. A discussion of these works as speaking out against or favoring a U.S. presence, whether it be a social, moral, political, cultural, or economic one, will show how these novels access historical memory to reconsider Central American identities and values in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as well as how Central America still seemingly depends on the North in many of

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<sup>2</sup> I also have in mind, for instance, the Costa Rican novels *Cruz de olvido* (1999) by Carlos Cortés and *Limón Reggae* (2007) by Anacristina Rossi, works that detail Costa Rican involvement in the Sandinista efforts during the Nicaraguan Revolution.

these regards. I argue that these novels ultimately want to suggest that U.S. presence in the region is both perpetual and ubiquitous, one that refuses to cede complete autonomy to Panama and Nicaragua. At the same time, this persistent desire to informally influence Central America is in part welcomed by the fictional characters presented by Ramírez and Guardia despite their ostensible rejections of certain repressive, or imperialist, political components of the U.S. foreign policy agenda. Thus, we may consider the literary representations of the United States here as a relentless tentacle, a presence – either physical or virtual – that does not ever fully withdraw or give up, but rather remains perpetually present wrapped around the Isthmus.

Both *El cielo llora por mí* and *Lobos al anochecer* may be considered representative works of this particular strand of Central American fiction from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century given their social reflections, and also for their crime novel aesthetics. These works seem to attempt – relatively unsuccessfully, as I demonstrate below – to re-stimulate a more typical, harsher criticism directed at the North that largely faded during the period of post-war disenchantment.<sup>3</sup> As such, the greatest value of each work is how the United States is fictionally portrayed in a clearly neoliberal, post-armed struggle era throughout the Isthmus. Of note is how each author relies upon some aspect of relationships with the North, whether it be education, cultural products, or religious affiliation, so that the characters may better define themselves and so that national identities may be more firmly established. More specifically, I refer here, for instance, to DEA agent Chuck Norris's interactions with the Nicaraguan police in Ramírez's work that spark emotional responses from Inspector Morales, necessitating his ideologically-oriented self-reflections. Likewise, the masked, yet suspected, participation of U.S. actors in the Remón Cantera presidential assassination, along with the sovereignty-restricting Canal negotiations for

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<sup>3</sup> We observed part of this tendency in chapter one of this dissertation. Additionally, in chapter three, I examine a concurrent literary trend to the one explored here that more successfully challenges U.S. economic and cultural hegemony in the region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Panama in Guardia's novel, serve as the catalyst that Ana Lorena needs to reconsider her role as a woman within a patriarchal system and, ultimately, the role of Panama within a U.S.-dominated game of politics. There are numerous other examples of U.S.-Central American interdependence as fictionally represented in these literary works, yet one facet remains central: these novels demonstrate that the aesthetics of representing U.S. foreign policy and culture in the region becomes an integral and inseparable part in establishing cultural identities in Central American fiction under globalization. The incorporation of U.S. federal agents, hitmen, food products, gas stations, automobiles, goods, universities, and conservative social values provides the required footing for the fictional reconsideration of political, economic, and cultural ties between the regions, thus allowing for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century literary critique of what we may call an unrelenting U.S. influence in Nicaragua and Panama. Not only are the literary representations of the North key to this exploration, but the structure of the novels – detective fiction – is as well. This genre, a distinctive feature shared by both authors, offers a space for a more thorough exposition of their social criticism.

In addition, the novels discussed in this chapter represent works by canonical writers that have not yet received much critical literary attention. Sergio Ramírez and Gloria Guardia are undoubtedly recognized and respected names in their respective countries, as well as more broadly as internationally-known Central American writers, which suggests that perhaps the recent publication dates of these works of fiction has excluded them from serious academic consideration so far. Ramírez and Guardia have both been publishing and receiving literary prizes for over 50 years, a clear indication that when they speak, many readers and critics tend to consider what they have to say. It would not be an exaggeration to state that their literature has been politically and socially influential in the region, hence the significance of looking into how

they perceive U.S.-Central American relations in the globalized 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ramírez, for his part, presents an especially interesting case, for his time with the Sandinistas during the 1970s and 1980s led him to the Vice Presidency of Nicaragua (1986-90), a position from which he presumably spoke on behalf of the Nicaraguan peoples. It is also of note to observe just how Ramírez's historically left-leaning political ideology does not really coincide with the social criticism that we read in this particular work.<sup>4</sup>

Given their themes and structures, *El cielo llora por mí* and *Lobos al anochecer* can be read as detective novels. Similar in nature to the fictional spy narratives that I discussed in chapter one, detective fiction may be generally thought of as a genre founded on exegesis, or clues and their interpretation (Hepburn 25). At the very core of the detective novel genre, then, the formal structure is simply defined by a problem (such as the murders we encounter in the works in question), a search for evidence, an assessment of the evidence gathered, and a passing of judgment (Winks 7-8). Detective fiction will, as Laura Marcus points out, intrinsically create what she calls a "complex double narrative" (245). That is, Marcus specifically refers to the dual nature of the genre: the reconstruction of an absent story (that of the crime) through another story (that of the investigation) (245). At the formal level, this dual narrative distinction is quite accurate, though without critical or figurative readings of the novels specifically considered as "narratives," the texts may be reduced to a more literal, apolitical state. To that end, although we may choose to read the clues of detective fiction literally, as critic Allan Hepburn calls for, we may also interpret them in a more figurative manner as well (25). It would thus be beneficial, of course, to consider various possible interpretations of the presented clues, facilitating allegorical and critical readings of the works that may otherwise be obscured with a more restricted reading.

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<sup>4</sup> This "phenomenon," if you will, is explored in much greater depth in chapter one concerning Arias's and Pallais's post-revolutionary era visions.

After all, do we read *El cielo llora por mí* to find out who killed Sheila Marengo? And do we read *Lobos al anochecer* to hypothesize about Remón Cantera's killers? Not necessarily. We depend more so, I argue, on these literary works to offer something more than just an invented story; we read them not only for their double narratives, but for another layer – the social criticism.<sup>5</sup> This is not to ignore the fact that each novel treated in this chapter could also be categorized into distinct genres or subgenres. Ramírez's *El cielo llora por mí* could also be thought of as police fiction, possibly in a *neopolicíaco* fashion, or even more broadly as a Latin American *novela negra*.<sup>6</sup> Guardia's novel may also be considered one of historical fiction (on which I will comment below). Still, at the center of each work is a murder that in some manner directly involves the United States and whose resolution, or attempted resolution, unveils an array of political, economic, and social criticism. Lastly, the process of questioning and discovery that inherently occurs within this fictional genre also parallels, to an extent, the reading process itself that we experience (Marcus 245).<sup>7</sup> That is, in Ramírez's and Guardia's works, for instance, the desire for knowledge on both the characters' and our part as readers must be fulfilled through specific "decoding" processes: the fictional investigation of a murder leads to clues and answers for the detectives, whereas each reader's personal interpretation of the texts

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<sup>5</sup> Terry Eagleton's thoughts on literature and art as always being politically-charged creations comes to mind here: "To understand literature, then, means understanding the total social process of which it is part...Literary works are not mysteriously inspired, or explicable simply in terms of their authors' psychology. They are forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world which is the 'social mentality' or ideology of an age" (5-6).

<sup>6</sup> The *novela negra* in Latin America is typically understood as a subgenre of detective fiction, a descendant of the North American "hard-boiled" tradition, with an emphasis on organized crime, violence, and corruption sourced in the capitalist system (Close 115). Many authors and critics choose to utilize the term synonymously with "crime fiction" generally. The *neopolicíaco* is also a broader generic term, oftentimes implying "una narrativa de corte social altamente crítico en varios aspectos: involucramiento de las instituciones estatales en situaciones de violencia y redes criminales, dialéctica entre la ley civil y las leyes impuestas por estamentos fácticos..., presencia de diversas problemáticas enquistadas en la historia latinoamericana del último siglo..., corrupción a diversos niveles, etc." (Galgani 14).

<sup>7</sup> Laura Marcus cites critics Peter Hühn and S. E. Sweeney in her brief description of this aspect of the self-reflexivity of detective novels. Given her concise synthesis of the topic, however, I choose to cite her.



yields a critical reflection on the social criticism that each novel offers. My interpretation of these narrative components in the present novels points towards contradiction: a U.S.-backed neoliberal economic system and direct political intervention receive criticism, yet, culturally and economically, the more vocally critical Isthmian characters in the texts depend upon the same systems to sustain their individual lifestyles.

Part of the significance, then, of having chosen the detective novel as a theoretical framework of analysis for these works lies in the very process of questioning, problematizing, and exploration inherent in this type of fictional text. Moving beyond Marcus's "double narrative" structural description of the genre, we find that other scholars who focus more on the social criticism of these works, such as literary critic Benjamin R. Fraser, have proposed that Latin American detective stories are generally narrated "a causa de ciertas creencias socio-económicas y dirigidas hacia la preservación de éstas mismas" (215).<sup>8</sup> In other words, detective fiction starts with a specific ideological premise conceived of by the author, and then serves to further those particular interests. This also helps to explain why Fraser points out that works of detective fiction can quite readily call attention to how discourses are constructed in order to make denunciations, either against the status quo or in support of it (215). I find Fraser's ideas useful when approaching Central America's detective fiction since the critical readings of the novels I provide below explore the representation of U.S. foreign policy, heavily relying on an interpretation of the texts' specific ideological slants in order to identify their respective social critiques.

Adriana Sara Jastrzębska, a critic of Central American crime fiction, coincides with Fraser's affirmation: "el enigma por resolver queda en el segundo plano [en la literatura

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<sup>8</sup> Fraser specifically has works by Cuban Leonardo Padura Fuentes and Spanish-Mexican Paco Ignacio Taibo II in mind. Please see his article "Narradores contra la ficción: La narración detectivesca como estrategia política" (2006) for a much more in-depth consideration of these and other works, as well as the genre itself.

detectivesca centroamericana] y lo que se acentúa es el contexto social cuya estructura genera criminalidad y delincuencia, la desconfianza en la ley, impunidad de los culpables, falta de soluciones que se puedan aceptar como definitivas y, por consiguiente, puesta en duda de la verdad objetiva y unívoca” (20). Thought of in this way, the idea of the “complex double narrative” and the suggestion for the linear reading of clues in Guardia’s and Ramírez’s works are, in a way, cast aside as relatively unimportant so that we can focus almost exclusively on their social criticism. The fictional plot and the clues that the authors develop, then, remain relegated to a second tier status. Thus, the essence of Central American crime fiction could be concisely construed as an ideologically-driven criticism, one that more often than not reveals anti-imperialist roots embedded in Marxist projects, but with certain neoliberal deviations being accepted and blended in as well. Other literary critics of the genre, such as Natalia Jacovkis, when considering Latin American crime fiction generally echo this critical interpretation: crime fiction has served to denounce society’s ills, dictatorships, human rights violations, and, more importantly in the context of this chapter, to “shed light on the local urban realities brought about by neoliberal policies” (128). Although *El cielo llora por mí* primarily takes place in Managua and *Lobos al anochecer* in Panama City, the urban atmosphere is less at stake than the evident neoliberal influences to which Jacovkis refers. The novels consequently dialogue with the so-called neoliberal Washington Consensus, evident through trade pacts like CAFTA-DR, in order to represent how this particular economic imposition has affected their respective societies.

What more, though, can these particular novels offer the reader? On social and political terms, it should be apparent by now that detective fiction “thus becomes a mirror to society. Through it we may see society’s fears made most explicit; for some, those fears are exorcised by the fiction” (Winks 7). These fears and the possibilities for their resolution, of course, represent

one perspective – that of the author. However, Peter Messent points to the role of the individual reader to consider his or her own views, which calls to mind the genre’s innate questioning and reading processes mentioned earlier. Messent states: “What I basically suggest here is that crime fiction confronts the problems of the everyday world in which we live as directly as any form of writing can. It allows its readers – though sometimes indirectly and obliquely – to engage with their deepest social concerns, their most fundamental anxieties about themselves and their surrounding world” (7).<sup>9</sup> As such, author, text, and reader enter into a dialogue that revolves around society’s outstanding problems.

This dialogue may implicate the author’s desire to align the reader “morally” with the detective and, ultimately, with the coincident ideological vision presented by the narrative. What I am speaking about here is the tendency in many, but not all, cases for the detective to sway us to her or his side; both reader and fictional detective desire resolution of the crime, which means that our “moral sympathies” may very well reflect those of the investigator (Palmer 96). Precisely for this reason, that is, the demand for an answer that the question of crime calls for, we find that “[d]etective stories remind us that nothing brings ideological positions more sharply into focus than a crime” (Porter 121). As the fictional crime unfolds, we as readers are able to interrogate the different power structures found within the represented society, whether it be the state of the nation and social concerns (Messent 44), or an exploration of a country’s repressed history (Fraser 215). For example, we find within *El cielo llora por mí* a disorganized, incapable Inspector Morales who, as a police officer, allegorizes, in part, the Nicaraguan state, as well as

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Messent specifically makes this statement in regard to U.S. and European crime fiction. However, I believe a very similar dialogue is occurring in Central and Latin American detective fiction, as other more regional literary critics (like Natalia Jacovkis and Adriana Sara Jastrzębska) have already insinuated. I would also like to call attention to the fact that many critics, like Peter Messent, tend to use “crime fiction” and “detective fiction” in a similar if not interchangeable way. For Messent, the types of crime fiction include classical detective fiction, hard-boiled detective fiction, the police novel, and transgressor narratives. As we can see, each genre categorized as “crime fiction” is, in essence, a variation of the detective novel; what changes, to state it simplistically, is the protagonist’s point of view.

the Sandinista Revolution from when he was a guerrilla combatant. *Lobos al anochecer*, for its part, delves more into Panama's unofficial, or repressed, history as it contemplates the U.S. involvement in planning and carrying out President Remón Cantera's execution, along with the political strings pulled to facilitate the obscuring of the crime and the subsequent finger-pointing taking place (predominantly amongst Panamanian politicians and the ruling elite). Keeping the aforementioned genre-related discussions in mind, I now turn to the exploration of each novel's fictional representations of the United States and its presence in Central America.

### ***El cielo llora por mí: Chuck Norris vs. Inspector Morales***

In *El cielo llora por mí*, an abandoned yacht is discovered near Bluefields along the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua around the year 2000. At first glance, it appears that drug smugglers have simply run aground and left the luxury boat behind. However, a bloody shirt indicates that there has been a murder, that of Sheila Marengo, an employee of the Caribbean Fishing Company. Various clues lead Inspector Dolores Morales and Inspector Bert Dixon, the detectives in charge of the case who are also both former Sandinista guerrillas, to suspect that the Caribbean Fishing Company is a Miami-based front for drug trafficking. Issues like filthiness, disorganization, and corruption plague the Nicaraguan police department, driving the lack of resources and personnel that ultimately leads to the recruitment of doña Sofía Smith, the Managua police station's custodian, to participate as an undercover agent. Sofía consequently obtains similar employment at a casino in the capital city where she seeks information regarding Caupolicán (his nickname), the casino's manager and a known collaborator of Caribbean Fishing.<sup>10</sup> Sofía's contributions and interpretations of the evidence throughout the case make her

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<sup>10</sup> The nickname Caupolicán reminds us of Rubén Darío's poem with the same title, a work that recounts the heroic feat of strength of the Mapuche leader Caupolicán who held a tree trunk for three days and three nights in order to become a military leader against the colonizing Spaniards in the mid-1500s. However, the fictional Caupolicán here was once part of the Sandinista revolution, and now, after losing politically in 1990, seeks power in any way

an indispensable figure. Meanwhile, Morales and Dixon pursue the company's lawyer, a man called Giggo. For his part, DEA agent Matt Revilla (or, as he is better known given his red hair, Chuck Norris) directly contributes essential information to the case, such as the yacht's history. The efforts of these four representatives of the law uncover the crime: cartels from Cali (in Colombia) and from Sinaloa (in Mexico) have been meeting in Nicaragua to expand their drug trafficking operations in conjunction. Sheila Marengo, it turns out, had stolen one hundred thousand dollars from the Colombian cartels so she could move with her baby (fathered by Caupolicán) to the United States, which explains her execution. Despite various additional killings, including that of Inspector Dixon, Morales and Norris push forward together with Sofía Smith and the police commissioners to arrest the cartels and the owner of the Caribbean Fishing Company during the same raid. Upon being captured, the prisoners are taken by Norris to the United States for trial per the prior agreement made with the Nicaraguan police.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist Inspector Morales tends to consistently elevate U.S. DEA agent Chuck Norris to a superior existence above the destitution and disorganization that the Nicaraguan police, among others, endure. For instance, when there are no funds to purchase a needed digital camera to replace an antiquated Polaroid, Morales comments, “Vamos a solicitar a Chuck Norris que te regale una cámara electrónica,” to which Inspector Dixon responds, “Aunque sea uno de esos humildes teléfonos que toman fotos digitales...que se apiade de nosotros” (17). Though likely meant to be humorous, the verb *apiadarse* (perhaps best translated as “to take pity on”) still draws a clear power distinction between the Nicaraguan detectives who seek financial assistance and the U.S. federal agent capable of granting their wishes. Other details call attention to the fact that Morales, in a way, looks up to Norris and the

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possible, even if it means corruption, crime, and gambling (36-37). Perhaps, then, his name is an ironic reminder of post-revolutionary hypocrisy, especially as with the *piñata*, or the distribution of public property to Sandinista leaders.

DEA: on the pettier side, he recognizes that Norris has better coffee than the police station can provide and, of much greater consequence, he has a photograph of himself greeting the head of DEA operations for Central America. What is significant about this particular photograph is that it remains on Morales's desk along with pictures of other important life events and cherished memories, leading us to conclude that Morales is proud of his brief moment with this DEA higher-up and that he values his sustained collaboration with the Agency. We later come to find out that without Norris and the information that the DEA can provide, the murder and drug trafficking case could not have progressed or, at the very least, not nearly as rapidly as it does. Norris offers invaluable data for the investigation involving both drugs and Sheila Marengo's murder, such as when the abandoned yacht was built, its recent voyages, its current and previous owners, and information surrounding the last departure from Colombia, as well as the identification of the Colombian narco-trafficking boss transported on board to Nicaragua. Like Morales, Commissioner Selva – the direct superior of both Morales and Dixon – also tends to value the relationship they maintain with Norris, at times choosing to confirm information first with him and later with his own detectives. This “hierarchy” of knowledge clearly relegates Morales and Dixon, in whom Selva seems to have less confidence, to a lower echelon, hinting at the fact that perhaps the detectives' intellectual contributions are less valuable.

Even Morales's body hints at the superiority that Norris enjoys within the novel. This is due to the physical handicap of having lost part of his left leg during the armed struggle as a Sandinista combatant and the necessity of utilizing a prosthesis in order to walk. Morales, a man who is literally incomplete, may also come to represent the ruptures within the broader Latin American Left and the uncertainty of a stable, promising future within it. This is so because we find that the pinkish plastic of his prosthetic leg, calling to mind the leftist governments of the

so-called “Pink Tide,” contrasts sharply with the darker complexion of Morales’s own flesh, who we understand as a representative of the past Sandinista Revolution.<sup>11</sup> The ability to remove the prosthesis, to distance and separate himself from it, could be interpreted, then, as a possible distance between the Left of the revolutionary period and the current trends of the Left throughout the continent as with Bolivian Evo Morales or Venezuelan Nicolás Maduro, which would signal a partial, fragmented cohesion that does not advance smoothly (as might two functioning legs that work together), but rather one that hobbles forward. The idea of unity, either for Morales and his prosthetic extension or for the Nicaraguan Left, therefore seems to be a relatively elusive concept.

The elevation of Norris, however, may also imply a viable alternative to this fragmentation. We find additional support for this hypothesis when considering the automobiles that Norris and Morales drive. The red Chevrolet Corvette that Norris owns marks a stark contrast from the old, run-down Lada on which Morales depends. It is not difficult to identify the Corvette as a symbol of the West and of the capitalist promise of wealth, whereas the Soviet-made Lada represents the Left, socialism, Marxism, and other related ideologies typically associated with Russia or the former Soviet Union. However, the well-used Lada from a past generation is no longer as dependable as it once was: it is “capaz de quedarse varado sin motivo, y a la vez de prolongar su último aliento con el tanque exhausto” (237). In other words, it is quite likely that the Lada will not last for much longer. The pending, yet implied, decline of leftist influence is thus deteriorated even further by the insinuated confidence that is inspired by the

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<sup>11</sup> The “Pink Tide,” according to John Beverley, marks a resurgence in the Latin American Left that roughly begins with Hugo Chávez’s rise to power in Venezuela in 1998 (*Latinamericanism* 7). The “Pink Tide” marks a post-9/11 trend by Latin American governments to “shift away from an identification with both the geopolitical and economic frameworks of the Washington consensus” (*Latinamericanism* 7).

Corvette, a tangible representation of global capitalism, as it sits and enjoys quiet admiration by those who see it.

The ongoing collaboration between Norris and the Nicaraguan detectives is not always a welcome relationship or an open, problem-free dialogue, however. When Commissioner Selva, Inspector Morales, and Norris meet at a DEA safe house to discuss the investigation, Morales becomes frustrated with the preferential treatment that Selva grants Norris. As a result, his vulgar thoughts make broad, sweeping anti-American and anti-DEA condemnations: “Gringos de mierda. Si no fuera porque Estados Unidos era el gran consumidor de drogas, y la DEA estaba infiltrada por los cárteles, no existiría el narcotráfico” (153). Despite the asperity of his words, they ultimately lose their validity when Morales pauses for a moment to do some honest self-reflection: “[E]l inspector Morales descubrió que *todo* el rencor que sentía contra ellos [Norris y el comisionado Selva] se había vuelto de pronto contra su misma ineptitud” (154, emphasis mine). After this realization, Morales doubts whether or not he serves any purpose as a police detective, a serious consideration given the gravity of the murder and drug trafficking case in which he currently participates. What we may understand from these thoughts is that Morales recognizes his professional incompetence, which is also, therefore, an intellectual incompetence if we consider the problem-solving nature of his work. This ineptitude implicates both the Nicaraguan police of which he is a part (and thus the Nicaraguan State as it represents the legal and moral extension of it) and Sandinismo as well, for Morales is an ex-Sandinista guerrilla who, in large part, continues to live the Revolution through his memories and the use of war-time pseudonyms, for instance. Each entity, then, is dragged down due to Morales’s ineffectiveness, calling into question the authority of these two vital social structures in Nicaragua.



Although in the end Morales does help to resolve the case, the doubts that arise regarding his capability to serve as a detective can still be questioned. Contrary to his name, it seems that morality and justice, at least in part, are not the most important considerations for him. In one particular instance, annoyed with Commissioner Selva for sharing information about the investigation with Norris, he thinks: “Gracias a aquella otra solemne pendejada, de ahora en adelante todo empezaría a aparecer como resultado de las investigaciones de la DEA, que es lo que Chuck Norris siempre buscaba con su silencio materno. Y él, por su parte, negando lo que era obvio. Porque en el fondo estás defendiendo tu migaja, se dijo” (156). What we find is that Morales is much more concerned about public glory and recognition for having solved the case and not so much with the consequent justice for Sheila’s murderer. Morales imagines that, upon resolution of the case, “él no estaría en la foto [de la prensa], y a lo mejor ni el propio comisionado Selva alcanzaría en ella. ¿De qué servía entonces defender su migaja?” (156). He does not even consider the concept of justice (towards which he supposedly works) to any extent, all while he reveals his selfish motives to us, the readers. Nevertheless, Norris is apparently not so self-centered; on one occasion, he even leaves the safe house running to catch Selva and Morales before they depart in order to share additional information with them (157).

Later, albeit reluctantly, Morales finally comes to accept the fact that Norris actually cares about the well-being of Inspector Dixon as he suffers (and later dies) in the hospital from a gunshot wound. As a show of his empathy and generosity, Norris arranges a flight to transport Dixon to Texas if need be, a genuine gesture of compassion. This action seems to soften Morales, at least to the point where they can begin to collaborate without significant difficulties and work towards finalizing the plan of attack to capture the Colombian and Mexican drug bosses. Morales and the participating commissioners agree to let Norris and the DEA extradite

the drug traffickers once they are detained after the planned raid. They make this decision even knowing the likelihood of the DEA receiving much more merit for their role in the arrests than will the Nicaraguan police. Still, the detail regarding the extradition of the drug bosses seems to question the faith that the novel has in the Nicaraguan justice system, suggesting that the U.S. system is more adequate or, in other words, superior regarding such legal processes. All of the aforementioned interactions, largely between Norris and Morales, are read here not only on individual terms within the novel, but also allegorically, pointing towards significant admiration of the United States and its foreign agenda, while simultaneously painting Nicaragua as more or less dependent on the North intellectually, politically, and, as we will see, economically and culturally, too.

Other elements of the narrative apart from the thoughts and actions of Morales and Norris also reinforce my interpretation of the text. I refer here to the police station custodian and exceptional provisional agent Sofía Smith, as well as the narrator's "criticism" towards the products and transnational businesses that come from the North. Sofía Smith is a very perceptive person who, despite the low level of prestige that accompanies her formal employment, remains an absolutely indispensable part of the case. Almost from the very beginning of the novel she actively participates and can make inferences and deductions much better than either Dixon or Morales, whose theories she must correct, at times "con severidad" (30). A lengthier quote from the work, though, will permit us to problematize her American father as well as her personal, intellectual, and ethical development:

Hija de un teniente de las tropas de Marina de Estados Unidos acantonadas en Nicaragua durante la intervención que terminó en 1933, y de una modista del barrio San Sebastián que cosía a domicilio para las esposas de los oficiales yankis, si llevaba el apellido Smith es porque la madre se lo había puesto a la brava, sin mediar matrimonio. Evangélica a muerte, y sandinista a muerte, doña Sofía era una mezcla de dos devociones; y en desuso

ya los ritos de la revolución, se refugiaba en los del culto protestante, afiliada como estaba a la iglesia Agua Viva. (13)

First, it is noteworthy and quite curious that her father is from the United States and that she is one of, if not *the*, strongest and most intelligent characters in the novel. Although her mother grudgingly passed down the Smith surname, Sofía does not seem to feel the same rancor towards it as does her mother. Additionally, we find some ambiguity surrounding the fact that her mother has given her the last name “a la brava” and rejected any possibility of matrimony with Lieutenant Smith. At a minimum, we know that Sofia’s mother slept with the Marine on at least one occasion and that her professional work centered on serving the U.S. troops and their families, actions that seemingly contradict her display of bitterness. Since Sofia’s mother typically performed domestic services for the officers’ wives, we could infer that Lieutenant Smith was married and that he potentially cheated on his wife, something that Sofia’s mother would have been aware of. This brief paragraph, then, superficially details Sofia Smith’s family history, but it really does not problematize or criticize the presence of U.S. soldiers in Nicaragua, the U.S. military intervention (from a moral, political, or any other perspective), nor the historic repercussions of these events for the country. Rather, the anger seems to gravitate exclusively towards the last name itself and not towards what it actually represents.

Likewise, we know that later in her life Sofía enlists as a Sandinista guerrilla, yet she still does not categorically reject U.S. interests abroad. To that end, her evangelical church, Agua Viva, was founded by missionaries from Alabama and the leader is a “pastor gringo” (135). Sofía regularly attends the worship services and she adopts her moral attitudes from the pastor’s sermons. Amidst so much corruption on the part of the Nicaraguan state, ex-Sandinistas now converted into criminals (like Caupolicán), and even the national police force that steals from confiscated items, Agua Viva stands out for having principles and for actually expressing

concern over the immoral, or, in a general sense, between what may be right and what may be wrong. The passion and commitment Sofía has for her church eclipse the revolutionary rituals, now “en desuso.” The Sandinista Revolution for Sofía, then, has diminishing relevance, whereas what comes from the North – in this case morality – has an increasing importance and necessity for Sofía in the novel. Sofía allegorically represents, then, a leftist tendency in Nicaragua to stray towards more conservative political ground after the 1990 electoral defeat.<sup>12</sup> I am thinking of, for instance, John Beverley’s “paradigm of disillusion” that I discussed in chapter one, for Sofía was born around the Sandino era of the 1930s and became a committed Sandinista combatant during the Revolution, yet she eventually exchanges those social values for conservative ones coming from the United States. In other words, she seems to find her salvation more so in the North than in her own Nicaragua, a perspective that the fictional works throughout chapters one and two have highlighted thus far. Sofía may also embody William I. Robinson’s description of the Nicaraguan Left’s fracturing after the 1990 electoral defeat: “The electoral defeat plunged the Sandinista party, its social base and legitimacy already seriously eroded, into a sharp internal crisis over programs, *ideological orientation*, and strategy” (83, emphasis mine).

Apart from moral values, there is much more arriving in Nicaragua from the United States: there is a “jerga en inglés que invadía el país como una calamidad bíblica. Las súper gasolineras surgían ahora por todas partes, otra calamidad bíblica, construidas de la noche a la mañana en predios gigantescos” (118). Nevertheless, these “complaints” from the narrator are not necessarily reflected in the thoughts or actions of the novel’s characters. For their part, they

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<sup>12</sup> The socially conservative religion with which Sofía affiliates may also allude to Daniel Ortega’s 2006 electoral victory, in which the religious vote was crucial (Gooren 51). Ortega’s redefined image for the election included “effectively campaigning against his *own* former image of a leftist, anti-American guerrilla leader” (Gooren 50, emphasis in the original). Furthermore, social anthropologist Henri Gooren points out that Ortega did become, primarily via his Roman Catholicism, socially conservative by banning abortion and generally converting to neoliberal economic policies (55-56).

consume the products and enjoy the cultural influence, and they even use the gas stations to take refuge from inclement weather. Inspector Dixon proudly wears a Miami Marlins t-shirt to remember his time as a baseball player with the possibility of playing in the United States before participating in the guerrilla struggle. Likewise, Inspector Morales has Tabasco hot sauce and Quaker oatmeal containers in his apartment, and one of the murderers sports Nike shoes, to enumerate only a few cases. None of these instances provokes negative commentaries from the novel's characters towards the presence of this merchandise. In a similar manner, when a torrential rainstorm moves in on Managua, the Lada's window becomes jammed and Morales seeks shelter and safety in an Esso gas station, precisely one of the establishments criticized by the narrator. Nonetheless, this and other similar gas stations do not represent a "calamidad bíblica" for Morales, but instead a place to stay dry, get off the road and rest, and grab a cheap lunch once in a while. The few lines of text criticizing the visible flow of U.S. economic influence in the novel, compared with the benefits enjoyed by the various characters throughout the entire narrative, reduce the complaints to a merely superficial state. Again, as with Sofia's heritage, we do not encounter any truly meaningful problematizing or questioning of the United States in Nicaragua, but we do observe a tacit acceptance of this presence due to the constant consumption of the goods and services. Therefore, when Morales refuses to enter the U.S. embassy towards the end of the novel because he considers himself to be an "enemigo mortal del imperialismo" (274), it is an almost laughable statement because his preceding words and actions throughout the novel completely contradict this affirmation. Furthermore, *he* is the person taking Giggo, the Caribbean Fishing Company's lawyer, to the embassy in order to bestow upon him the status of a U.S. federally protected witness. Still, this particular scene may perhaps be read

ironically as a criticism of many Sandinista officials who effectively abandoned their cause after the 1990 electoral defeat in order to align more so with the transnational capitalist system:

While the Sandinista grassroots engaged in sustained resistance in the early 1990s to the counter-revolutionary program, a new Sandinista elite was also making its appearance among those who had acquired substantial properties during the 1990 regime change. This pillage and personal appropriation by Sandinista leaders and bureaucrats of state property was known in Nicaragua as the *piñata*. New Sandinista landlords and businessmen and women began to develop an affinity of class interests and to merge with the bourgeoisie, especially with transnational fractions clustered in the commercial and financial sectors. (Robinson 83-84)

Other literary critics, however, such as Emiliano Coello Gutiérrez, have differing takes on the criticism written into *El cielo llora por mí*. Coello Gutiérrez interprets the novel as one with a utopian vision:

En la obra [*El cielo llora por mí*] de Ramírez, ante la amenaza para Nicaragua que supone el narcotráfico, los distintos estamentos sociales se unen, desde el popular (que representa doña Sofía) hasta las altas jerarquías burocráticas... En la novela de Ramírez es la inteligencia nicaragüense la que consigue desentrañar el funcionamiento de una red internacional colombiana-mexicana de narcotraficantes que opera en el país, y no la DEA de Estados Unidos (Drug Enforcement Administration), a la que solo resta la captura de los delincuentes. Esta acción coordinada de la sociedad y de las instituciones nacionales es una apuesta del autor por el futuro de Nicaragua. (200-01)

There is, as this literary critic points out, a union of classes within the Nicaraguan police department to achieve the goal of resolving the crime. Although this collaboration could be understood as a collective, utopic wish for Nicaragua, reading it as such mandates the severing of some crucial pieces of information that refute this notion. Sofía Smith, despite joining the Policía Sandinista in 1979 with Inspector Morales, holds a lowly cleaning job, not a detective position as does her male counterpart. Her sacrifices can even be seen as greater, given the death of her son as an urban guerrilla combatant, yet her strength and intelligence have not been rewarded accordingly. The relatively incompetent Inspector Morales must grant her access to a higher, more privileged realm. Gender role issues such as this are being completely ignored by Coello

Gutiérrez's patriarchal "utopia." A second-in-command police commissioner, la Monja (her nickname), also does very little to offset the incorporation of this type of stereotypical gender roles: la Monja, or Violeta María Barquero, was an actual nun and primary school teacher before participating clandestinely in the guerrilla struggle. However, even after becoming a high-ranking police officer, "seguía siendo la monja aun sin el hábito, y lo seguiría siendo hasta el fin de sus días, célibe como se había quedado" (196). In other words, even though la Monja has succeeded in acquiring a "masculine" job, she will forever remain the celibate (virgin nun), motherly (school teacher) figure.

Besides the superficiality of the utopic vision potentially alluded to by the smearing of class lines during the investigation, Coello Gutiérrez also minimizes U.S. participation in the resolution of the case. He is correct in stating that it is the Nicaraguans who first figure out that the Colombian and Mexican cartels have been using their country as a meeting ground. His conclusion, though, does not take into consideration the important role that Chuck Norris and the DEA have maintained throughout the case, including the sharing of pertinent information inaccessible to the Nicaraguan police and the exchange of ideas during their conversations. To that end, once Sofía, Commissioner Selva, and la Monja realize what is going on, la Monja states: "Necesito hablar con la gente de la DEA de inmediato" (210). Likewise, other issues are not considered by him either: What about Sofia Smith's U.S. heritage? And Commissioner Selva's training in Washington that makes him "imprescindible" to the police department (23)? And Inspector Morales's admiration for the DEA head of Central America? And Inspector Dixon's baseball connection to the North? And, yes, what about the significance of the DEA transporting the criminals to the United States at the end of the novel? We find, when responding to these (and other) inquiries, that the United States has played a pivotal role in the resolution of

the case, if not directly through information provided, then indirectly through professional training programs and inspiration. Appreciating the success of the Nicaraguan characters is certainly merited, but extending the praise so far as to obscure the evident contributions from the North makes little sense. (As an aside, I find it quite ironic that Coello Gutiérrez, in his discussion of the detective genre and Ramírez's novel, chooses to constantly compare, or contrast, rather, the work to the North American detective or hard-boiled fictional tradition. As a result, this critic's exploration of the novel relies precisely on a conversation with the North in order to determine the work's "identity.")

I argue, therefore, that despite some level of discontent with the way international economic relations with the United States have continued to unfold since the Sandinista Revolution, as is evident in the narrator's few, yet caustic, remarks against economic imperialism, we find that the characters in the novel participate in and support these very processes. In a number of cases, U.S.-brand foods or goods are utilized when a national Nicaraguan, or possibly Central American, equivalent could easily replace them. Transnational businesses and cultural centers, such as the gas stations and the evangelical church Agua Viva, all count on Nicaraguan popular support in order to function. Faith in the U.S. justice system, technology, professional training and education programs, and so on mark the inherent belief in the superiority of these U.S.-centered contributions in the novel as well. These indications within the novel point towards the neoliberalization of Nicaragua after the 1990 elections removed the Sandinistas from power. The newly-elected Chamorro administration, as we know, helped usher in the transnational agenda: "The new government announced sweeping neo-liberal measures, including massive public-sector layoffs, privatizations, rate increases in transportation, utilities and other services, a sharp reduction in social spending, and the elimination of subsidies on basic



consumption” (Robinson 76). After popular resistance took hold against these measures, however, the Chamorro administration, in conjunction with U.S. economic and other aid packages, enacted a “slow-motion counterrevolution” which would serve as a more subtle implementation of the neoliberal policies (Robinson 76). One of the primary objectives of this “slow-motion counterrevolution” is immediately apparent in *El cielo llora por mí*: “eroding the revolution’s value system,” notably in regards to “religious values, patriarchal and traditional cultural patterns, and economic insecurities” (Robinson 77).

Without a more consistent and practical rejection of these and other elements in *El cielo llora por mí*, it is difficult to genuinely read this fictional narrative as one that is truly anti-imperialist given the present contradictions. Instead, the recognition of the possible dangers associated with the global free market economy is visible, yet the warnings go unheeded. Despite the proliferation of English and transnational businesses, Morales continues to patronize the oversized gas stations. Sofía, for her part, remains attached to her U.S.-centric church, where more conservative morals and social values are taught. Lastly, imperialism is not truly challenged either, for Morales intends to send multiple people to live in the United States, effectively contradicting his “anti-imperialist” sentiments. As such, it is apparent that the characters, regardless of their economic and political criticisms of U.S. foreign policy, continue to desire and even thrive off of this Northern influence. These conclusions have naturally been drawn based on the specific fictional clues and their critical implications that this detective novel offers the reader, as well as their subsequent interpretation in order to identify the salient (and somewhat surprising) social criticism as read here.

### ***Lobos al anochecer* and the Struggle for Sovereignty**

We can draw similar conclusions from Gloria Guardia's novel *Lobos al anochecer*, a novel that treats the assassination of former Panamanian president José Antonio Remón Cantera in January of 1955 from the point of view of three fictional characters: Ana Lorena, Willie Fernández, and Remón Cantera himself. The principal narrator, Ana Lorena, is part of the Panamanian elite and lives in Buenos Aires, Argentina with her military officer husband Ernesto with whom conflicts of class, ideology, and etiquette often arise. Upon finding out that President Remón Cantera, who had been in the midst of Canal renegotiations with U.S. President Eisenhower, has been murdered, Ernesto announces that he is being sent to Panama to aid in the murder investigation; as such, Ana returns home to Panama City. The perspective of Willie Fernández, one of the key intellectual authors behind the assassination, transports us as readers to the day of the attack. Willie's primary role is to coordinate the efforts of the CIA, the New York-Italian mafia Cosa Nostra, and the Panamanian National Guard, along with a few other Panamanian participants. Combining so many actors means that the crime will be extremely difficult to unravel for any outside observer.<sup>13</sup> As Willie relates the motives provoking the joint effort elimination, we learn that Remón and Willie are long time personal enemies, and due to Remón's nationalist-minded treaty negotiations paired with his stifling of the mafia's drug trade, he has become a target on multiple fronts. Remón, another fictional voice shared with the readers, even goes so far as to decide to draft a memorandum to the Panamanian peoples detailing his dissatisfaction with the predominantly unilateral Canal renegotiation favoring the United States. Upon Remón's death at the horse racing track Juan Franco, a number of foreign criminology experts are summoned, some of which come from the United States. As expected,

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<sup>13</sup> Curiously enough, Remón Cantera's historical death motive still "remains officially clouded," though to many the cause clearly relates to mafia drug trafficking (LaFeber, *Panama* 94). In the novel, this would equate to the Cosa Nostra's interest in keeping their illicit merchandise circulating in the Western hemisphere.

only rumors abound; false accusations and testimonies mislead the investigators and the real hitmen manage to evade capture. It soon becomes clear that the crime is not going to be resolved and that justice will not be served. As such, Ernesto and Ana are to return to Argentina, but due to Ana's reinvigorated sense of independence and strong will, she refuses to submit to Ernesto (or anyone) any longer and she ends the marriage. Ana resumes her former life in Panama where she later learns of the extrajudicial killing fifteen years later of one of the supposed assailants, Rubén Miró, who had falsely accused then Vice President Guizado of having orchestrated the crime. Ana consequently reconsiders the Remón assassination, still blanketed in mystery over a decade later, as she reads her deceased father's political account of the intrigues and underhandedness occurring throughout the 1950s in Panama. Although both Ana and Panama have matured since that violent moment in 1955, the resolution of the murder still only lends itself to hypotheses.

*Lobos al anochecer*, though generally complicit with U.S. cultural and economic influences, reflects a much more disdainful attitude towards U.S. political imperialism than *El cielo llora por mí* due to restraints on Panama's sovereignty in the Canal Zone throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As stated above, this critical dynamic is contradictory, for the goals of U.S. political foreign policy and intervention in the narrative are ultimately to strengthen economic power and to increase the consumption of U.S. cultural products, outcomes that are not criticized in the work yet which still perpetuate forms of neocolonialism and imperialism. In other words, the problem seems to be with *how* the United States is shaping Panama's social, economic, and cultural atmospheres and not necessarily *what* is happening (or *why*, for that matter) on a broader scale. One salient example of such political criticism comes from a newspaper account of Remón Cantera's assassination that appears within the work that

specifically points out that Panama is “en apariencias, dominado por los yanquis” (21). This particular remark, however, does not fit organically with the general description of the President’s assassination presented in the article, which would seem to indicate two possible reasons for its inclusion: first, latent tensions surface here in the form of anger and suspicion towards the United States although there is no other mention whatsoever of U.S. involvement with the crime in the newspaper article; second, the publication of such a seemingly out of place comment also points to the fact that this sentiment is likely one commonly shared amongst the Panamanian people within the novel. This interpretation is confirmed various times throughout the narrative, such as when Ana’s father, don Manuel María Jiménez, asserts that the United States need not officially make a statement regarding Remón’s death: “No han dicho nada porque no les corresponde...Ellos, de suyo, ya interfieren demasiado” (67). Don Manuel undoubtedly refers to the U.S. military presence in the country since World War II, as well as the Canal negotiations that Remón and Dwight D. Eisenhower have undertaken. What the Canal treaty renegotiations have made painstakingly clear is that Panama’s intimate history with the United States, even from the very beginning in 1903, reflects a “mentalidad colonialista” (77). Remón’s demands for the 1955 Canal treaty push for a reversal of this political and military colonialism. His historically accurate protest plea “¡Ni millones, ni limosnas, queremos justicia!” echoes the call for Panamanian sovereignty.<sup>14</sup> Although numerous, Panama’s list of desired changes for the Canal renegotiation, and thus their relationship with the North, largely concentrates on equality. For instance, the unequal pay for Panamanians in the Canal Zone who earn half or a quarter of what their U.S. counterparts earn is brought up, as are issues of a fairer

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<sup>14</sup> Historian Walter LaFeber points out that, in reality, “Panamanians had little chance of receiving either ‘millions’ or what they considered ‘justice.’ In the final 1955 treaty draft they nevertheless received a number of economic concessions” (*Panama* 93). Still, “Panamanians received no percentage of the Canal’s revenue or *any recognition of their sovereignty* within the Zone” (LaFeber, *Panama* 93-94, emphasis mine).

annuity for “renting” the Canal Zone and acceptance of the Panamanian flag and Spanish language as officially able to accompany the American flag and the English language in the Zone. A recuperation of some land, as well as a reduction to 99 years as the lasting duration of the negotiations, also appears on the agenda. However, as it becomes clear that Eisenhower and his negotiators are unwilling to cede much power or authority to Panama, Octavio Fábrega, an advisor to Remón, bursts out: “¡Al diablo con la soberbia imperialista de los gringos!” (93).

The critical dialogue that the novel presents clearly positions the U.S. political foreign policy agenda directly against Panamanian nationalist interests. These political interactions (or perhaps better termed here as interventions) diminish the role of Panama to a more or less colonial state with a repressed independence, even outside of the disputed Canal Zone given the nation’s economic dependence on the Canal (and thus the United States). As in *El cielo llora por mí*, emotional releases that speak out against the injustices of a controlling and manipulating North periodically dot the pages. For example, Ana Lorena recalls her father’s thoughts as he compares life beneath the United States to living under the eye of an “Ángel Exterminador” (124), or when Remón remembers how former Panamanian president Arnulfo Arias was deposed twice by the “cílope norteamericano” (148). These two metaphors conjure up images of monstrosity, and with those images come implications of power, violence, and savagery.

The focus on the eye, whether under the watchful ones of the Angel or the one-eyed giant Cyclops, makes known the fact that Panama is constantly under surveillance, which may be read as an effort to maintain the hierarchical power structure between these two nations. As Michel Foucault points out, “Visibility is a trap” (200). This idea relates to Foucault’s exploration of Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the panopticon, a prison with a central watchtower surrounded by a circular building housing the inmates. Given that the prisoners may always be watched, yet do

not know precisely when the watchperson's gaze falls upon them, they will theoretically act as if they are in fact being directly observed at all times. This dynamic ultimately aims to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). In other words, the prisoners necessarily perpetuate the uneven power structure.

Foucault brings up Bentham's suggestion that power should be visible, yet unverifiable:

"Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so" (201). The repressed

sovereignty of Panama calls to mind this very power structure. The tall, looming tower could be represented by U.S. foreign policy and interests, whereas the observed subjects (who inevitably help to perpetuate the power imbalance) would correspond to Panamanian politicians, the press, and the general public, too. As alluded to above, the end goal of this type of surveillance is "a machinery that assures dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference" (202). The fictional

Panamanian characters are therefore likely well aware of the consequences of the established system of political relationships between them and the United States. The characters must also realize, though, that they do not enjoy a position from which they can effectively renegotiate their role. When presented with the final version of the Canal treaty, for instance, Remón tells

Fábrega: "quiero redactar un memorándum que deje constancia de mi rechazo a ciertas posiciones de los gringos. No quiero pasar a la historia como un traidor, ni como un cobarde que entregó al mejor postor los anhelos del pueblo panameño" (87). Thus, despite a disapproval for and an expressed discontent with the revised Canal treaty, Remón *accepts it*, therefore further embedding the imperialist mentality against which he had fought. A public speech documenting

his dissatisfaction will do very little, if anything, to alleviate the grave issues of inequality and a lack of Panamanian sovereignty that will remain unresolved.

It is predominantly through the 1955 Remón-Eisenhower Canal renegotiations that the political imbalance of the U.S.-Panama relationship is called into question in the work, culminating in the assassination of President Remón Cantera. The ability to even enter into such discussions with U.S. President Eisenhower earns Remón much respect, and he manages to provide an open forum to promote Panamanian nationalism. Nonetheless, the challenges of gaining ground (in this case, both literally and figuratively) with the United States become pronounced, with the “hostilidad y la falta de comprensión de los gringos” edging Remón closer to the point of breaking off the negotiations entirely (89). Nevertheless, Remón, strong-armed into accepting crumbs, likens the United States’ attitude to that of a child throwing a tantrum: “Estaba iracundo con ésta y tantas otras jugarretas de los gringos. Siempre, ¡qué vaina!, se salían con las suyas” (83). Later on in the novel, Remón seriously misjudges the perceived juvenile character of the North’s manner when he proclaims that, “[I]es guste o no les guste, tienen que aguantarme. Soy el Presidente constitucional de este país, y tal como ellos nos exigen, gracias al sufragio de las mayorías” (255). Meeting U.S. demands for democracy, however, will subsequently prove insufficient to save Remón’s life from CIA-sponsored executioners, marking Fábrega’s previous remark that the struggle against North American imperialism will continue long after the current Canal renegotiations as a prophetic one (91).

The assassination of President Remón Cantera, as we know, involves various groups of actors, including the CIA, a New York-based Italian mafia, the Panamanian elite, and members of Panama’s National Guard. It turns out that Willie Fernández Wagner is indeed the mastermind of the crime, but he coordinates the effort only at the CIA and the mafia’s behest. Thus, although

Willie, a Panamanian, retains exclusive knowledge of the plan's "llave maestra," the primary proponents are clearly North American (56). Direct participation from the White House comes in the form of a meeting between Willie and U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon on a United Fruit Company plantation in Honduras so Willie can "informarle sobre el curso que habían tomado los acontecimientos y finiquitar detalles" (54). The CIA, who organized the rendezvous in Honduras, also helps provide the two main hitmen during the attack: Leroy Eggleston and Martin Lipstein, members of the Cosa Nostra mafia. The CIA-mafia connection, initiated years ago thanks to Willie, has since come to be a very well-established collaboration (217). The Cosa Nostra, for its part, is motivated to eliminate Remón to facilitate their international drug trafficking operations. Despite desires from the Panamanian National Guard to induce a military coup by ousting Remón, which explains their involvement, the most significant impetus certainly comes from the U.S. participants. We find that the hostility encountered during the treaty negotiations ultimately transforms into visceral, physical violence when the gunmen slaughter Remón and a handful of other people at the horse track with him that evening, along with injuring others present as well. A few short weeks later, the Canal treaty is signed and the U.S. government, who has not had to cede to any more demands, receives the bargain end of the deal as expected, while Panama must abide by "la llamada 'mordaza perpetua'" (375). Of note is that one of the Panamanian elites, Rubén Miró, through an attempted political power play, confesses to the assassination, consequently letting the other Panamanian and, more significantly, U.S. actors off the hook entirely. Years later, Miró's silence is ensured through his murder, yet the political imperialism of the U.S. government, its agencies, and its associates never go on trial. As a result, yet another chance to push back and resist U.S. political imperialism, then, does not take form despite the criticisms that have been voiced by many Panamanians.



Rubén Miró's decision to confess as the sole orchestrator and gunman may be conceived of as selfish, for he hopes to become the "ministro de Gobierno" (332), or simply foolish for accepting such a weighty burden and presuming everything will work out to his advantage (which it clearly does not). What's more, Miró's choice safeguards the U.S. participants from exposure. That is, Miró takes the fall for a crime that he has only marginally been a part of, a self-sacrifice that ultimately allows the guilty parties to escape unscathed.<sup>15</sup> This unexpected attitude of a presumed, and thus implied, U.S. superiority, where representatives of the United States – assassins, negotiators, and politicians – seemingly deserve success, underlies much of the novel. To that end, and in direct contradiction to the anti-imperialist sentiments regarding political interventions and manipulation, the fictional Panamanian characters constantly admire U.S. cultural and economic influences and even continuously strive to be more "American." I read this aspect of the novel as quite problematic, for the criticized political imperialism largely serves to expand the economic "free market" and U.S. authority in the country, and the consumption of U.S. cultural products and other goods is a clear manifestation of support (albeit indirectly and perhaps subconsciously) for the underlying intentions behind the political strategies of the United States in Panama.

One attempt to reproduce a more "American" atmosphere in the novel has to do with the Anglicization of Hispanic names, or the adoption of names in English altogether. For instance, Willie's real name is Guillermo Fernández Wagner, also known as the "*playboy*" (31). Likewise, Ana Lorena's brother Federico often goes by Freddy. President Remón's favored horse at the

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<sup>15</sup> Historically speaking, Rubén Miró did confess to being the mastermind of the assassination, though he later implicated the succeeding (Vice) President Guizado as well. Both men, however, were ultimately absolved of all guilt, and other suspects like Martin Lipstein were only subjected to questioning. The crime is still unresolved today: "Theories about the crime abound and implicate the international drug trade (in which Remón and the Guardia [Nacional] were allegedly involved); the CIA (which had already overthrown nationalist and progressive President Árbenz in Guatemala); the U.S. mafia (which wanted to further penetrate Panama as it had done in Cuba); the oligarchy (which wanted to regain political and economic control); and even some elements within the Guardia (led by Alejandro Remón, the commander's own brother)" (Sánchez 123).

race track is named Valley Star, and Remón laments the fact that his father wasn't John Smith, for example, so that he may have grown up a wealthier man in a higher class. Yet the imitations and admiration for the English-speaking North extend well beyond names. The consumption of U.S. products also marks the very visible presence of a lifestyle that the upper-class Panamanians seek. As a boy, Remón cursed his impoverished family for not being able to afford the “Cadillacs, Lincolns, Buicks y Packards, de todos los modelos y colores” in which his classmates enjoyed being chauffeured around (37). Remón's taste for luxury vehicles imported from the United States remains with him throughout adulthood, for the presidential transport automobile of choice is a black Cadillac, just the same as Willie's personal car. Don Manuel, Ana's father (and a political opponent of Remón) also participates in the consumption of imported U.S. products by writing with Parker pens and smoking Camel cigarettes. With both the nationalists and the liberals participating and purchasing from the North, we may effectively presume that political ideologies and even stark anti-U.S. sentiments in regards to political imperialism have little to do with the urge to become “Americanized.” This particular cultural curiosity should really not come as much of a surprise given the significant and deep-rooted influence that the United States has had in Panama throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The legacy of the Canal Zone, extending from 1903-1999, certainly comes to mind: “The Zone operated as the supreme diffuser of U.S. popular culture on the isthmus. Its television shows, radio programs, movies, plays, food products, books, customs, and sports fascinated many Panamanians...long before globalization struck their Latin American brothers farther south” (Donoghue 250).

Likewise, the upper echelon of Panamanian society, as depicted throughout the novel, depends significantly on U.S. institutions of higher education for professional and intellectual development. This is not to say that European or Latin American institutions are irrelevant to the

work's characters, but the emphasis in terms of importance (and prestige) certainly finds itself continuously returning to North American universities, likewise indicating the adoption of U.S.-based political and economic ideologies and social mentalities. To enumerate the most noteworthy cases, Ana studied at the New York School of Interior Design, her father at Harvard, Willie at both Harvard and Columbia, Rubén Miró at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and Vice President Guizado (who transitions into the presidency upon Remón's death) studied at Vanderbilt. Along with university academics, an affinity for U.S. culture, goods, and, quite plainly, way of life, seems to have been embedded in the Panamanian ruling class in *Lobos al anochecer*. This magnetic attraction to the North entices Ana to live in New York City for a number of years, it keeps Cecilia Pinel (Remón's wife) frequently traveling back and forth between the two countries, and it accentuates "la afición y el respeto de los panameños por lo foráneo" (107). This last remark arises when, among other nationalities, criminology experts from the United States are brought in to help solve the assassination, understood here as a sign of mutual trust and respect. Remón, on occasion, even contemplates trying to win over a *gringa* with whom he is relatively enthralled by persuading her with gifts centered on his "afición" for southern Florida's large houses and Cadillacs. Coveting of this nature is also stirred by Remón's desire to become part of the U.S. elite like the Fernández Wagner family, who are members of the "codiciado *Social Register*" (37), a directory of the most socially prominent and powerful families in the United States.

What's behind the yearning and admiration in many cases throughout the fictional narrative is an implicit comparison of Panama to a United States culture, economy, and capitalist manner of thinking. Establishing these connections, along with more overtly explicit comparisons, positions United States consumerism and societal values in the novel above

whatever Panama could possibly offer in terms of culture, education, and lifestyle, which has the effect of undermining Panama's educational, medical, and financial institutions, as well as national lines of production and small businesses, too. Though the consumerism in the novel is largely cultural, it is not entirely innocent, for it is still directly related to political force (such as Remón's seemingly inconsequential – and still unresolved – assassination) that intends to gain an economic upper hand for the CIA and the U.S.-based mafia, for instance. What's more, President Remón Cantera also tends to liken himself to U.S. President Eisenhower since both are military men and not businessmen, although the Canal renegotiations have become their responsibility anyway: "tal como se lo había expresado a Eisenhower, él no era ni abogado, ni diplomático, ni negociador, ni nada que se le pareciera. No, Chichi [Remón] era, *al igual que el gringo*, un hombre de uniforme, especialista en Estrategia y en Caballería" (31-32, emphasis mine). Despite this professional connection, Remón is anything but an equal to Eisenhower; the Canal treaty negotiations, along with the CIA-sponsored assassination under the Eisenhower administration, make this distinction quite obvious. Perhaps Remón intends to hide a weakness at diplomatic relations and persuasion by pointing to similarities between himself and the U.S. president, but Eisenhower does not suffer from the same political shortcomings as Remón. Nudging himself closer to an imitation of Eisenhower's presidential life, Remón insists on waiting for medical attention for a prolonged pain until Eisenhower's personal doctor can attend to him, effectively snubbing the entire Panamanian medical professional field as a result. Remón also slights Panamanian political and economic advisors by keeping Jack Vaughn, a representative of the U.S. international economic development program Point Four, as an advisor.<sup>16</sup> A non-gambler

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<sup>16</sup> The Point Four Program was created as an international economic assistance program by U.S. President Harry S. Truman in 1949. It concentrated on spreading scientific and technological knowledge with underdeveloped regions, along with the necessary advisors to implement the shared information.

and non-drinker at the horse track, Vaughn also stands out for his intelligence and discretion, along with his mastery of the Spanish language and knowledge regarding agriculture, public works, and economics. Yet “lo más importante: [Vaughn] comprendía la mentalidad y las urgencias de los panameños” (242). It would seem that a U.S. economic advisor, then, somehow knows more about Panama and what the Panamanians need than does a compatriot of Remón. I suggest that Vaughn’s status as a close counselor to the president has much to do with the desired adoption of a U.S.-based economic approach and the incorporation of U.S. technology and research, and thus the aligning of Panama with U.S. neoliberal interests. Nonetheless, the positive image of Vaughn in the novel may also be an anachronistic reference to his historical role in the 1967 Canal negotiations, a time when he served as Ambassador to Panama. These negotiations, finally implemented many years after Remón Cantera’s death in the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaties, would have most likely met with Remón’s approval given the increased sovereignty that Panama enjoyed as a result.<sup>17</sup> Even so, we cannot forget that such U.S. strategy concerning foreign policies may likely not be as philanthropic as it may seem. William I. Robinson reminds us that it was around the 1980s that the U.S. heavily transitioned from military might (like the occupied Canal Zone) to political and economic maneuverings in order to promote economic globalization (69).

For his part, Willie’s political, professional, and personal connections in the United States result in his being “tan bien relacionado como cualquier WASP [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant] que se preciara” (58). As such, the relationships he has managed to forge while studying law in the United States elevate him as a welcome member of the U.S. ruling elite, where political

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<sup>17</sup> Highlights of the 1967 negotiations included “abrogation of the 1903 treaty, U.S. recognition of Panama’s effective sovereignty over the canal and integration of the zone into Panamanian national life, termination of the U.S. role in the lock canal upon a fixed date or when a sea-level canal began operations, fair wages and benefits for Panamanian employees, and a joint guarantee of the neutrality and defense of the waterway” (Conniff 122).

power is equated with white skin, given the above comment that appears in the text. What becomes clear here is that Willie's Panamanian (that is, Hispanic or Latin American) parentage is insufficient to grant access to these inner circles of concentrated power and wealth; he cannot be an "Other," but rather must be directly comparable to his U.S. counterparts. Willie and Freddy also unfavorably compare Panamanian nationalism to U.S. pragmatism at one point in the novel, implying simultaneously that Panama is more barbaric than the "civilized" United States and that Panama cannot control its own destiny: "Siquiera tú y yo, mi estimado Freddy, somos hombres prácticos...Pragmáticos, como los más civilizados del planeta," to which Freddy responds, "Como los gringos. Tal cual, como los gringos de la nueva ola. A buena hora dejamos a un lado el saco podrido del nacionalismo" (335). After each one comments briefly on the evils and failures of nationalistic political approaches in Central America, Willie returns to the praises of the United States for their ever-superior, ever-guiding hand:

Si quieres mi opinión, no dudo en elegir a los marines y a las 'contabularias'. Ambas han sido influencias positivas. Gentes y organismos que nos han enseñado disciplina y a manejarnos como lo que somos: los hombres del presente y del futuro. Incluso, ¿quién sabe lo que habrían hecho las bestias de Somoza y de Trujillo de no haber sido por la guía y el padrinazgo de los gringos? No en balde Franklin Delano Roosevelt lo dijo, del uno y el otro, al referirse a ellos indistintamente: '*So and so is a son of a bitch, but he is our son of a bitch.*'" (335, emphasis in the original)

Willie and Freddy clearly maintain a political and economic ideology that favors the United States and diminishes the significance of opposing Panamanian nationalism. Yet, despite even Remón's staunch nationalism in support of Panamanian sovereignty, for example, he moves forward with the Canal treaty, ceding his values in the face of adversity. Likewise, Ana Lorena, who had lived in New York City for a number of years, returned to find Panama City "diminuta y calurosa, provinciana en sus modos y costumbres, claustrofóbica en su panorama" (131). The "mundillo" to which she returns represents a reduction of choices, a restriction of space, an

oppressive heat; in other words, freedom is noticeably lacking and certainly not comparable to any degree with New York (131).

The contradictory nature of Remón's and Ana's attitudes and actions as observed in these cases, where their adoration for Panama transforms into a conforming admiration, or submission, before North American interests, is best exemplified allegorically through Ana's relationships with Willie (her former lover) and her husband Ernesto.<sup>18</sup> In a conversation with her mother, Ana points out that the assassination has inspired her to seriously reflect not only upon her own life, but on the broader role of women in Panama: "Éste [el magnicidio], aunque no lo creas, me ha revelado otros aspectos ocultos de mí misma" (230). After her mother inquires further, Ana explains these previously hidden personal aspects: "El rechazo que he sentido hacia el comportamiento de la mayoría de los hombres. ¿No has observado cómo nos aíslan y nos descalifican? ¿Cómo insisten en que su opinión es la única que tiene validez en estas circunstancias? Buscan restringirnos a un papel pasivo, alegando que somos incapaces de pensar u opinar con lógica" (230). This particular conversation significantly takes place by the poolside in the Jiménez family home. As literary critic Maida Watson indicates, the pool represents a place of refuge within the novel, not only from the intense heat and humidity, but also from the patriarchal society and political conversations taking place within the home (23). The poolside conversation calls to mind, then, a space in which one can escape that also points to independence, for in 1955, a personal swimming pool symbolized economic independence for many Panamanians (Watson 26). Continuing with these thoughts, Watson attributes Ana's social

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<sup>18</sup> Michael E. Donoghue describes a very similar historical contradiction just after World War II (the period immediately preceding the novel's time frame) when he speaks about Panamanians living in the Canal borderlands and how they experienced a sort of "attraction-repulsion syndrome" towards the Canal Zone and the United States generally. This "syndrome" is briefly defined as such: "Panamanians, many of whom admired aspects of U.S. society, its modernity, technological innovation, and democratic ideals, recognized [the] Zonian drive for exclusion and resented it" (60-61).

and gender awareness epiphany, in part, to her home, which represents “una prisión para Ana Lorena al simbolizar la estructura social que la controla y que representa un mundo machista que la obliga a formar parte de dos relaciones muy diferentes” (24). The ultimate rejection of both Willie and Ernesto plays a central role in the liberation Ana seeks from traditional gender roles, and she finds additional support in the post-assassination days, coincidentally, from the very house that serves as a patriarchal social stronghold, for the Jiménez home provides the space and stimulation Ana needs to recognize the lack of freedom Panamanian women have when compared to the men (Watson 26).

In this context, Ana realizes just how grave the patriarchal repression against her has been all along, and that her push for independence equates with Panama’s desire for sovereignty. Unsurprisingly, the two men in Ana’s life, Ernesto and Willie, could easily represent the oppressive, masculine North, matching President (and General) Eisenhower’s military prowess and strong-handedness during the Canal renegotiations, for example. Additionally, as a young woman in the late-1930s, Ana’s parents send her to the New York School of Interior Design, during which time she also immerses herself in art museums and dance, while also learning how to play bridge, smoke, and wash and iron her own clothes. Recognizing her newfound independence and fondly remembering those formative years, she recalls: “Mis padres supieron darme alas” (17). Ana’s “wings” and rebelliousness eventually lead her to marry the Argentine military man Ernesto against her family’s recommendations, who she comes to loathe over the years despite her somewhat visceral attraction to him since he provokes her “fiera” to come out (18). Likewise, having dated Willie in both Paris and New York years ago, she remains torn between desire and rejection: “¿cómo puedo explicar que, por turnos, anhele los besos y las caricias de un hombre como Willie y, por tandas, los repudie?” (130). Ana’s longing to gain



control of her life seems to parallel Remón's wishes to secure a more sovereign Panamanian state with less oversight and control by the United States government, yet there is oftentimes a certain hesitancy to provoke radical change. In one particularly remarkable case that connects these ideas, Ana reveals her ability to resist Willie's advances and to also fight for her independence: "Willie acaba de llamar. Dice que le urge verme. Ya no pregunta si puedo recibirlo. Me ha dado la orden, con su consabido engreimiento. Me ha impuesto su voluntad, como ha sido su estilo desde que recuerdo. La diferencia entre entonces y ahora es que hoy estoy consciente de su comportamiento y, en primera instancia, he podido responderle que no tenemos nada de qué hablar" (222). Power subsequently shifts to Ana's side: "Eso lo ha desconcertado y, tras una pausa, ha moderado el tono; casi me ha rogado que nos encontremos" (222). What the narrative suggests, then, is that Panamanian dependence is not permanent nor should it be an accepted condition. The exchange between Ana and Willie could be read as an allegory of the nation-state's ability to resist U.S. imperialism, even if it comes with a high price; Remón's murder and Arnulfo Arias's multiple oustings at the hands of the *gringos* embody a small part of the national cost of pushing back, but as Ana's ability to overcome emotional distress, familial disapproval, and a challenging marriage confirm, independence is possible nonetheless...with some strings attached.

When the time comes for Ernesto and Ana to head back to Buenos Aires after the criminal investigation has run its course, Ana refuses to submit to Ernesto and decides to end the marriage. Shortly after Ernesto's departure, Ana can finally enjoy her freedom from the "par de hombres que [le] han mantenido por demasiado tiempo atada a sus caprichos" (348). However, the rupture that Ana provokes does not necessarily ensure the present and the future that she has been imagining, implying that Panama will still need to tread very carefully pursuing its interests

even after resisting U.S. advances, which certainly weakens the hopeful demeanor expressed earlier in the narrative. We may come to this conclusion due to Ana's neglect for the past's relevance: "En este instante estoy consciente, sin embargo, de que ninguna cosa puede ni debe intimidarme. Yo, y sólo yo, estoy a cargo de mi presente y mi futuro. El pasado no cuenta, lo debo obliterar si he de reconstruirme y hacerme a un nuevo molde de mujer independiente" (357). Ana carries out a purging and purification ritual in her bathtub where she does effectively obliterate her past so she may begin with a clean slate. Yet the final page of the novel has Ana surrounded by memories, an indication that the abruptness of her choices may not have been the most tactful manner to secure the independent life she envisions. For one, she looks out across the Pacific Ocean, thinking of the ancient waters as "aguas con memoria, [aguas que] conocían desde siempre la respuesta" (376). In addition, she has just put down her father's personal account detailing the Remón assassination and the surrounding events, a document that concludes with the following popular omen: "Los que olvidan la historia están condenados irremediabilmente a repetirla" (376). Thus, remembering historic U.S.-Panamanian relations and previous negotiations is an essential component to restructuring the nation and establishing future sovereignty, and, in Ana's case, to rethinking gender roles beyond her personal experiences. Instead of offering optimism, then, Ana leaves us with lingering doubts, both for her own life and regarding Panama's uncertain future.

*Lobos al anochecer*, through its very genre and form as both a detective novel and historical fiction, constantly reminds us that remembering is a worthwhile endeavor. In her book on memory in late-20<sup>th</sup>-century Central American literature, Nicole Caso points to fiction as serving "to expose the open-ended and the unresolved," as well as a space for the author "to question (or reinforce) current modes of collective behavior" (3). These concepts, though

generalizations to a large extent, are what make Guardia's novel relevant today despite the Remón-era recreation. The "unresolved" could easily be Remón Cantera's assassination; the questioning within the novel has much to do with how women fit into (or not) a patriarchal Panamanian society, along with how the United States has been and continues to be represented in Isthmian literature in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Guardia's work does reinforce a pattern of literary disdain towards U.S. political imperialism in the region, yet the criticism remains relatively problematic – as in Ramírez's *El cielo llora por mí* – because of how the individual characters act and think, along with what they value, ultimately undermining in a very significant way the opposition to international U.S. politics. As such, there is economic, cultural, and social reinforcement of a U.S. presence in Panama and Nicaragua in these two novels (thus creating a critical tie to the works of chapter one).

Historical memory, as Alice A. Nelson explains, is largely about two moments: the moment remembered (a past context) and the moment of remembering (a present context) (340-41). To this description, though, Nelson adds a third dimension: "the moment of reception and interpretation, continuously evolving over time in relation to the other two [moments]" (341). This last point links *Lobos al anochecer*'s 2006 publication date and its historical content to a 21<sup>st</sup>-century moment of reception and interpretation. As such, even if the novel were to aim to accurately or "objectively" represent the political and social atmosphere of 1950s Panama, the constant reinforcement of U.S. superiority through education, automobiles, the English language, certain freedoms, and so on are not without serious consequence. For this particular reason, *Lobos al anochecer* may be read alongside *El cielo llora por mí* as a novel that speaks out against the United States for political meddling, yet it does very little to reinforce that negative criticism by presenting any type of substantial alternative system from which the characters

could adopt their morals or values, or even from where they could purchase their everyday goods. As such, a truly Panamanian response to the nation's lack of sovereignty within the novel is not put forward; instead, underlying wishes for economic and political independence are largely thwarted by substantial desires to be more "Americanized," both as individual citizens and as a collective nation.

Hayden White, for his part, moves to more tightly bind fictional narratives, like those treated here, with reality. White claims that individuals may find that literature creates "an unreal but meaningful relation to the social formations in which they are indentured to live out their lives and realize their destinies as social subjects" (x). In other words, narrative fiction has the power to influence its readers, and one manner of doing so is for a literary work to moralize, or, as I'd like to think about the term here, to offer an ideological position for the reader to consider: "If every fully realized story, however we define that familiar but conceptually elusive entity, is a kind of allegory, points to a moral, or endows events, whether real or imaginary, with a significance that they do not possess as a mere sequence, then it seems possible to conclude that every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats" (White 14). The moralizing nature of Guardia's novel, then, as one specifically of historical detective fiction, intends to promote the independent, sovereign nation, yet with a noticeably pro-U.S. attitude that, at least culturally and economically, supports globalization. As with the "moral sympathies" discussed earlier that we may feel in relation to the fictional detectives in this genre of literature, so, too, are we asked to consider the ideological visions as we read Guardia's novel.

Both *El cielo llora por mí* and *Lobos al anocheecer*, then, offer contradictory readings of how the United States is represented in each work, for U.S. economic or political imperialism is

denounced, at least in part, while the characters actively encourage interactions with and even dependence on other North American contributions. However, this dynamic presents potentially unresolvable problems. A sharp criticism on one hand and an inviting acceptance on the other do not accomplish much of anything in the way of working towards true sovereignty, economic independence, or political autonomy. Edward W. Said has pointed out that although the “subordinate realm” within a system of imperialism relies on the dominant one, the reverse is also true (*Culture* xix). That is to say, “Western imperialism and Third World nationalism feed off each other” (*Culture* xxiv). This cyclical dynamic calls to mind the “attraction-repulsion syndrome” referenced earlier in regards to Panamanian borderlanders’ feelings towards the then-operated U.S. Canal Zone, and it reminds us of Ana’s waffling ambivalence towards Ernesto and Willie before her final decision to abandon them both; likewise, the internal conflicts Inspector Morales faces as he comes to realize that he must collaborate with Norris and the DEA is also conceptually related. With all of the aforementioned thoughts and analysis in mind for these particular Central American fictional narratives, I believe that they fall more in line as supporters of the economic, social, cultural, and political status quo than as opponents of it.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, Said’s thoughts seem quite relevant when questioning just how culture becomes complicit in imperialism, yet it finds itself frequently evading any such accusations (*Culture* 107). As we can see, the contradictory nature of U.S.-Nicaraguan and U.S.-Panamanian relations as represented in these texts is undeniably complex, and it may perhaps be explained, at least in part, by the gaps between cultural traditions, incomplete modernization processes, and democratization projects as experienced by many Latin American nations. This is, indeed, the

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<sup>19</sup> I recognize that the present-day “status quo” is a very complex interrelation of nations, peoples, and ideas, among many other entities. Nonetheless, keeping in mind relatively recent developments such as CAFTA-DR (finalized in 2009) and the U.S.-Panama Trade Promotion Agreement (2012), it is obvious that the United States still maintains significant economic and political power within the Isthmus despite the more general phenomenon of globalization.

argument that Néstor García Canclini presents in his book *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (1995). Such “hybridity” results in an eclectic combination of social, cultural, political, and economic elements, which could be partially driving the conflicting literary representations of U.S. foreign policy in this chapter. Though lacking the necessary space in this chapter to consider the complexity of García Canclini’s discussion (that I greatly simplify here), we still must entertain these thoughts as viable possibilities as well.

Still, it is difficult not to consider García Canclini’s notion of hybridity, Said’s thoughts, or the aforementioned ideas regarding imperialism without reflecting on hegemony, or the “arena of struggle and negotiation between the interests of dominant groups and the interests of subordinate groups” (Storey 4). The conflicting propositions on how U.S. foreign policy and interests abroad come into contact with Central American ways of thinking in the works marks this site of debate and negotiation. Nevertheless, a U.S. political and economic hegemony is indeed upheld in these novels, ultimately helping to maintain a predominantly U.S.-centered globalization to keep its grasp on the region, one that has been relentless over time. Many political and historic events help to explain the persistent hegemonic grip that the United States has been able to retain in Latin America, including “the Sandinistas’ defeat in the 1990 elections in Nicaragua, which brought to an end one of the most promising experiments in finding a non-Communist form of Latin American revolutionary nationalism” and “the consequent attraction of neoliberal political economy for important sectors of the Latin American bourgeoisie and intelligentsia previously tied to nationalist paradigms” (Beverley et al. 5). Linking these anti-Western, hegemony-inspired thoughts to literature such as the novels analyzed here, Beverley and Oviedo call for the Latin American left to make their aesthetic experiences “both a place of resistance to actually existing forms of domination and exploitation and an enactment of new

forms of community, work, and pleasure” (10-11). Ramírez and Guardia, however, do not meet these rather lofty goals that might aid in the diminishing of U.S.-based power in the region.

Likewise, as John Beverley explains, literature has a “connection with the formation of the modern state and the conditions of maintaining and redefining capitalist hegemony, particularly in situations of colonial or neocolonial domination” (*Against* xiii). Consequently, we see that Morales and the Nicaraguan police, upon ceding authority to Norris and relying on DEA technology and information, as well as the rampant spread of U.S. products and gas stations, to name just a few cases, signals anything but a redefinition of capitalist hegemony in Nicaragua in the novel. Guardia’s work does not truly challenge the capitalist U.S. hegemony either, for Ana’s negligence towards the past and remembering already faces ominous foreshadowing, the North American assassination actors are all free, and U.S. educational institutions and social values are still held in high esteem. In this regard, Beverley echoes Said’s words when he states that literature has been and continues to be implicated in the “contemporary structure of neocolonial and imperialist control” (*Against* 27). Such seems to be the case, albeit lamentable, for *El cielo llora por mí* and *Lobos al anochecer*. Cultural critic Jorge Volpi’s thoughts on U.S.-Latin American cultural relations, especially his general diagnosis for the region, seems to ring true when considering the two novels treated in this chapter: “Estados Unidos no sólo ha sido para América Latina una pesadilla o un dios, sino una obsesión clínica, una neurosis patológica. El imaginario latinoamericano y la propia existencia de América Latina no podrían explicarse sin la angustia y tensa relación con su vecino del norte,” a revelation of the love-hate relationship that these novels also demonstrate (136). What’s more, after the Cold War era, Latin America’s dependence, generally speaking, became even more tightly bound to the United States’ economic and political policies like neoliberalism (Volpi 137).

These novels, then, resultantly endorse a certain U.S. “neodependency” in the region, a system that historian Walter LaFeber describes as one where “informal control” is sought as opposed to a day-to-day micromanagement system of one nation by another (*Inevitable* 16). Previous tactics, LaFeber points out, revolved around cornering Central American nations into transforming their economies into systems based on one or two export crops, such as bananas or coffee, thus making the national economies very dependent on North American interests and consumption (*Inevitable* 17). Ramírez and Guardia show us through these two recent literary works that Central America remains significantly attached to and dependent on the United States for any number of reasons, including morals, food products, clothing, cars, education, professional training, and, ultimately, ideologies. As such, I argue that the novels analyzed here perpetuate the idea of neodependency, whether they intend to or not. This begs the question, then, of how Central American narrative fiction might break the constraints of U.S.-influenced economics, politics, and culture, as well as other ideas relating to neodependency.

Potential responses to this question (and many others) may nonetheless be discovered through the process of deeper social questioning and problematizing that such works of detective fiction as these offer the critical reader. The “complex double narrative,” along with the social criticism of each novel, encourages not only an engagement with the issues presented, but their resolution. Some (dystopian) literary responses that radically oppose the concept of neodependency and the related notions of neocolonialism and imperialism will be explored in chapter three.



### CHAPTER 3: THE MONOLITHIC TENTACLE: DESIRES FOR DECOLONIZATION IN COSTA RICAN AND GUATEMALAN FICTION

This chapter explores a Central American literary vein that coincides chronologically with the early 21<sup>st</sup>-century works from chapter two, yet whose criticism towards the capitalist values of the U.S. foreign policy agenda and the U.S.'s corresponding international presence proves much more condemning than what we have encountered so far. That is, the selected fictional narratives by Arturo Arias, María Lourdes Pallais, Sergio Ramírez, and Gloria Guardia in chapters one and two, despite some efforts to criticize the North, have largely (even if unintentionally) been supportive of the image of the United States as an influential economic, political, moral, intellectual, and cultural leader on whom Central America may depend. A radically opposite view is presented by Costa Rican Fernando Contreras Castro in *Cantos de las guerras preventivas* (2006) and Guatemalan-Nicaraguan Franz Galich in *Tikal Futura: Memorias para un futuro incierto (novelita futurista)* (2012), the novels that I discuss in this chapter. These authors target the logic of global capitalism, as well as the ill effects of some of the practices associated with its realization, such as environmental destruction, military repression, and the marginalization of many groups within a given society, acts that inevitably implicate the United States as a major antagonist in the texts. As a result, the United States' neoliberal economic model and the ensuing social consequences are fictionally represented in these works on exceedingly negative terms. This is so, I argue, due to the direct U.S. participation in and perpetuation of these and other inherently violent global processes and social structures, in addition to the disproportionate blame that the North receives for the social

consequences of the aforementioned systems within the narratives (simply because no other nation is singled out for its contributions as is the United States). Similarly, the United States is certainly not the only nation that has ever participated in (neo)colonial or imperialistic practices; there are other guilty parties, yet none others are directly named within the novels.<sup>1</sup> I have in mind other free trade agreements like the one China officially initiated with Costa Rica in 2011, and the European Union-Central American Association Agreement signed in 2012 and provisionally implemented in 2013. Since the systems and processes that receive the bulk of the criticism in these narratives are of a global nature, however, ones to which many nations actually contribute, I propose that we consider the representation of the United States in these works as a monolithic tentacle, where the North serves as one representative country, eclipsing all others as if it were universal and supreme. This understanding also requires a shift of perspective from the previous chapters that have essentially imagined the head and body of the “octopus” as the United States itself with influential “tentacle” extensions reaching southward. Nevertheless, this image would be insufficient for this chapter, where the octopus would essentially be the Global North. Accordingly, the United States only represents one part of that whole, yet it is the only visible member here and, without a doubt, the main antagonist in the present novels. As we will come to see below, these two particular narratives have successfully amplified their negative criticism against Western, Eurocentric dominance through the utilization of extremes, along with

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<sup>1</sup> The criticism predominantly directed towards U.S. foreign policies found within Contreras Castro’s and Galich’s novels is, of course, understandable given the relatively tumultuous nature of the U.S.-Central American relationship. As historian Greg Grandin reminds us, Latin America has oftentimes served as the United States’ “workshop,” where military and soft power – “the spread of America’s authority through nonmilitary means, through commerce, cultural exchange, and multilateral cooperation” – have been continuously refined (3). Likewise, Grandin also argues that military strategies, transnational corporate maneuvers, and economic policies were smoothed out in the “workshop” before U.S. overseas expansion transported them to Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and beyond (3). As these various tactics and policies travelled around the globe, the repressive power dynamics inherent within them have undoubtedly been replicated elsewhere over time, even if in an appropriated manner, and thus carried on by other governments, nation-states, and peoples that also participate in the global economy.

exaggerated, if not hyperbolic, visions of the future by employing the futuristic dystopian genre. Contreras Castro and Galich thus treat social and economic shifts on a broader Central American scale in these two fictional narratives, an effort that has to do with the reformulation of Central American “resistance” to the exploitative nature of global capitalism spearheaded by U.S. economic policies. Unlike the novels from chapters one and two, these texts actively promote an agenda for cultural decolonization, and in large part a “decolonization of the mind” (per critic and theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o), or the breaking with a Eurocentric coloniality via alternative knowledge structures and epistemologies, an approach that also marks a significant departure from the many armed struggles, protests, and *coups* of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Critic Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s distinction between revolution in a political sense and in an intellectual sense comes to mind here, where the intellectual resistance “provokes some revolutionary thinking about the roles that knowledge, knowledge production, knowledge hierarchies and knowledge institutions play in decolonization and social transformation” (xii). To be sure, though, it is precisely the fictional representation of the United States in these novels that provides the platform on which the decolonial projects within the works may be established.

In order to thoroughly consider the literary and critical value of the selected fictional narratives by Contreras Castro and Galich, including their representations of the United States, I will first explore their representative nature as Central American texts written into a literary vein that critically opposes Western forms of colonialism. This discussion will lead us to consider the futuristic dystopian genre around which each narrative is structured and which frames the negative economic and social criticism while simultaneously signaling the possibility of alternative social structures. After these preliminary analyses, I will examine the individual novels as I have in the previous chapters, at which point the contributions of cultural critics such

as Greg Grandin, Néstor García Canclini, and William I. Robinson, among others, will be useful to better understand these novels. However, the entirety of this chapter will also rely significantly on decolonial and postcolonial thought from thinkers and theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Ranajit Guha, Walter D. Mignolo, Ileana Rodríguez, and Arturo Escobar to contextualize the ongoing discussion of global processes and systems – namely global capitalism – and their consequences in these fictional narratives as they relate to Central America. This theoretical and critical approach to the novels aims to address a fundamental concern when attempting to carry out such criticism that intimately ties together notions of literature and coloniality. As Mabel Moraña et al. explain, “Problems related to the scenarios of neoliberalism, globalization, migration, social movements, cultural hybridity, and the like cannot be appropriately analyzed without an understanding of Latin America’s coloniality” (5). Likewise, fictional texts like novels are, as Said reminds us, significant cultural artifacts where the colonizer and the colonized may voice themselves (*Culture* xii). Analyzing the decolonial projects within Contreras Castro’s and Galich’s novels is, in essence, a study of how the texts engage with (neo)colonialism and imperialism, most notably as they pertain to U.S.-Central American relationships. The works consequently place themselves into a position of epistemic resistance, for we know that the “power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (Said, *Culture* xiii). Thus, the speaking out that occurs through the very writing of these novels represents part of the struggle against imperialism, in this case, the global capitalist extension of it.

*Cantos de las guerras preventivas* and *Tikal Futura* are novels that merit critical literary attention for a variety of reasons, the most notable of which being their representative nature of

broader Central American literary and political trends.<sup>2</sup> Literarily speaking, these two narratives continue the long-standing literary legacy of fictionally writing about the United States and its foreign policies with sharp, piercing criticism, in part carrying on the work of writers like Miguel Ángel Asturias, for instance. More contemptuous denunciations of this bent have, in a way, come to be expected from many authors from the Central American region, which explains why the works from chapters one and two stand apart so dramatically. This literary tendency, as Arturo Arias reminds us, has a lengthy history: “Desde por lo menos 1855 cuando William Walker invadió Nicaragua, los países centroamericanos han operado en la órbita del imaginario geopolítico de los Estados Unidos” (“Narratividades” 1). The disdain towards foreign imperialism of this nature has, as we already know, historically been written into much of the region’s literature. However, what distinguishes these two particular novels from previous generations, and even from many of their contemporaries, are the presentations of radical social and economic visions that take our present reality to conceivable, albeit very extreme, conclusions, while simultaneously indicating that alternative systems to the economic, social, and environmental models currently failing the majority of Central Americans are urgently needed. Unlike the narratives from the preceding chapters, these fictional texts wholeheartedly reject global capitalism and its related processes that ultimately devalue human life. Instead, they seek structural possibilities that move against the Western, Eurocentric thought canon altogether.

To that end, these novels call for the cultural decolonization of Central America and the subsequent shedding of the multifarious U.S. hegemony embedded so deeply in the region.

Additionally, each work successfully contextualizes U.S.-Central American relations on a

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<sup>2</sup> To be sure, the title of Galich’s novel makes a dual reference to Tikal, the pre-Columbian Maya city in the Guatemalan department of Petén, and to Grand Tikal Futura, a luxury hotel, conference center, casino, and shopping mall located in Guatemala City. The duality of time (past, present, future) and space (urban-rural, Indigenous-non-Indigenous) that the title conjures are themes that surface frequently in the narrative.

broader, more globalized scale, specifically calling attention to certain economic and social relationships. The novels resultantly open themselves up very readily to allegorical readings, not only within the framework of Guatemala/Costa Rica and the United States, or even Central America and the United States, but rather in terms of dominance and subordination, hegemonic and non-hegemonic, the West and the Other. Similar to Marx's theory that the collapse of capitalism would lead to a more enlightened communism, these novels also become more prophetic in the sense that they imagine an accelerated world where global capitalism has indeed reached the verge of collapse, or perhaps a new stage beyond what we currently conceive as global capitalism. This structural shift within the fictional works creates the potential space for the implementation of new epistemologies, such as decolonization.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, both Contreras Castro and Galich have permanently inserted themselves into the Central American literary tradition. Contreras Castro has, to date, already secured the prestigious Costa Rican Premio Nacional Aquileo J. Echeverría twice in his career, and his first novel, *Única mirando al mar* (1993), a work treating environmental damage, waste, and capitalist excesses, became required reading for high school-aged Costa Rican students (Hoeg 177).<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, Contreras Castro continues to write today, with his latest publication being *Fragmentos de la tierra prometida* (2012), a collection of micro-fiction stories that criticizes global capitalism as does *Cantos*. Likewise, Galich has also earned coveted Central American literary prizes, such as Panama's Premio Centroamericano de Literatura "Rogelio

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<sup>3</sup> A decolonial epistemic, as thought of in this context, requires (1) a broader canon of thought beyond the Western one, (2) that the decolonial perspective not be based on an abstract universal, but rather on pluriversal critical dialogue across many political and ethical projects, and (3) that the decolonization of knowledge would necessitate serious consideration of perspectives and contributions *from* and *with* the Global South and subaltern groups (Grosfoguel, "Epistemic" 212, emphasis in the original).

<sup>4</sup> The two fictional works that earned Contreras Castro the Premio Nacional Aquileo J. Echeverría are *Los peor* (1995) and *El tibio recinto de la oscuridad* (2000).

Sinán” for his novel *Managua, Salsa City* (*¡Devórame otra vez!*) (1999), the first novel of the intended tetralogy of which *Tikal Futura* is the third part, a project not carried to fruition given Galich’s premature death in 2007. *Tikal Futura*, then, was published posthumously, yet it strongly continues the social criticism inherent in much of Galich’s other writing: “las obras de Galich se sitúan en la realidad más cercana, en las contradicciones sociales generadas por políticas económicas injustas, indagando sobre la identidad cambiante que configura la sociedad de Nicaragua [y Guatemala]” (Gianni 27).

As for the broader, regional political and social trends to which the novels speak, there are many 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century movements that ideologically coincide with the project of decolonization (and the rejection of global capitalism) that the works propose. In Contreras Castro’s native Costa Rica, for instance, widespread opposition to the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) intended to slow, if not prevent, the ratification of the Agreement (of which Costa Rica was the last to sign) that now tightly binds the country’s economic lot with the United States. Likewise, in Galich’s Guatemala, the more comprehensive Pan-Maya Movement immediately comes to mind, representing an Indigenous struggle against Ladino hegemony and social and political marginalization.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, chapter five in *Cantos* is titled “‘Intemperie’, refugio de disidentes oculto en algún lugar de la selva entre Puebla y Panamá.” The mention of a *selva*, *disidentes*, and Mexico all together hint at the Lacandon Jungle and the Zapatista National Liberation Army’s (EZLN) project that struggles for Indigenous rights, and for those of many repressed groups, as well as to escape economic and

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<sup>5</sup> I realize that I am greatly simplifying very complex social movements in this paragraph. The goal, however, is not to describe the movements in detail, but rather to exemplify the prominence of recent social projects that may be considered “decolonial” in nature throughout the Isthmus. For further reading, please see Arturo Arias’s *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America* (2007), Kay B. Warren’s *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (1998), *Our Word is Our Weapon: Selected Writings* by Subcomandante Marcos (edited by Juana Ponce de León) (2001), and *Challenges of CAFTA: Maximizing the Benefits for Central America* (2006) by Carlos Felipe Jaramillo and Daniel Lederman.

political impositions such as NAFTA; likewise, the geographical sites mentioned may also allude to the Plan Puebla-Panama.<sup>6</sup> Other examples undoubtedly abound, such as the promotion of the idea of Abya Yala, a Kuna concept that, in part, undermines foreign influence by rejecting the imposed name of Latin America, consequently restoring some Indigenous rights to those peoples subjugated by such outside classifications. It is likely apparent that these and other political and social movements have been sparked in no small part due to direct or indirect U.S. economic interests abroad. Historian Greg Grandin affirms that “America’s imposition of free-trade absolutism [as with CAFTA-DR and NAFTA] produces throughout the world perpetual instability – thus justifying the need for an imperial power to impose order” (234). However, as *Cantos* and *Tikal Futura* show, such “violence will generate more anger, more ‘extremism,’ which, sooner or later, will need to be met with more repression” (Grandin 234). In a sense, then, Grandin indicates that the United States plays a major role in the creation of its own political instability abroad, that it has inadvertently established global parameters that cyclically perpetuate resistance to many U.S. foreign policies (as is evident in the social movements mentioned above), and that systems like free trade and global capitalism will only continue these patterns in places like Central America, as the novels in this chapter illustrate.

The attention that Galich and Contreras Castro call to the unjust economic designs of global capitalism and its social and environmental ramifications explore national and regional identities predominantly through the employment of the futuristic dystopian genre. For the purposes of this chapter, we may rely on the simple definition of dystopian literature as a work, generally with a grim future, that “needs to foreground the oppressive society in which it is set, using that setting as an opportunity to comment in a critical way on some other society, typically

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<sup>6</sup> The Puebla-Panama Plan proposed by the Mexican president Vicente Fox in 2000 intended to significantly develop Mexican and Central American infrastructure to support the demands of trade in a globalized economy. The Plan has since grown into the broader Mesoamerica Integration and Development Project.



that of the author or the audience,” encouraging the reader to transfer his or her thoughts from fiction to reality (Booker, *Critical Insights* 5). Literary critic M. Keith Booker clarifies these dystopian ideas further: “literature quite often plays a critical role, opposing its imaginative visions to existing or potential ills and injustices in society. On the other hand, imaginative literature is one of the most important means by which any culture can investigate new ways of defining itself and of exploring alternatives to the social and political status quo” (*Dystopian Literature* 3). As we will see below, the fictional redefinition of Central American-United States relationships, along with the narratives’ overt desires to substantially alter the power and dependency dynamics of them, will be made clear through the unmistakable indications that other social structures must be considered.

The fictional representations of the United States and its foreign policies are framed by critical questions that seek systemic change, that is, radical social transformations that aim to topple the existing neocolonial power structures imposed upon Costa Rica and Guatemala by the Eurocentric West, and these changes may be effected through the rewriting of history, the telling of one’s own stories, and the recuperation of cultural knowledge that has been appropriated from the many marginalized peoples subject to forms of colonialism. Literary critic Erika Gottlieb draws connections among such dystopian literary criticism, religious faith, colonialism, and the salvation of humanity: “Dystopian fiction is a post-Christian genre. If the central drama of the age of faith was the conflict between salvation and damnation by deity, in our secular modern age this drama has been transposed to a conflict between humanity’s salvation or damnation by society in the historical arena” (3). As is apparent from Gottlieb’s assessment of dystopian literature, there is much at stake for those without power, a voice, or representation when considering the role of society as being repressive or not. Dystopian works, then, tend to confront

the overarching hegemonic economic and political systems that perpetuate social repression, ultimately intending to offer a counter-narrative of resistance (Baccolini 5). Hope, however, is likely to be found outside of the pages of the novel, not within the narrative itself (Baccolini 7). In other words, fictional dystopian texts urge us to consider the veiled critical description of our reality. Though the literary works in question may not offer complete and comprehensive plans of resistance or well-developed, guaranteed alternative global or even local systems, we may still apply our critical interpretations of the novels to the real world in which we live, ultimately reconsidering how we understand and conceptualize such complex phenomena as global capitalism along with both its intended and unintentional consequences.

As we may have come to realize already, dystopian and utopian projects share many similar characteristics, not least of which is their desire for social change and the presentation of different ways of being and living as within the realm of the conceivable (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 15). Nonetheless, each political and social vision wishes for a more perfect world, albeit in an exaggerated manner. In a general sense, the utopian narrative depicts life as it would be if the project's ideas were fully realized, whereas the dystopian project represents life as it would be if the same ideas and values were, in essence, eliminated from society. As such, the end goals of each social project are quite comparable, yet one takes a more positive path while the other a more pessimistic approach. Given the critical overlap between the concepts of utopia and dystopia, then, it seems appropriate to consider the perspectives of two literary critics on utopias here since their ideas are largely coincident between the two genres. As I have mentioned, at the heart of these types of works of fiction is the strong desire for social change: "The fundamental dynamic of any Utopian politics (or of any political Utopianism) will therefore always lie in the dialectic of Identity and Difference, to the degree to which such a politics aims at imagining, and

sometimes even realizing, a system radically different from this one” (Jameson xii). Fredric Jameson recognizes the overt political nature of such imaginative projects, as do John Beverley and José Oviedo when they deem any utopian project “a project for the reconstitution of the historical meaning of society” (213-14). The strong push for social change thus becomes the most prominent feature of the dystopian literary genre, a notion akin to the fact that the spy narratives and detective fiction of chapters one and two serve primarily to question and critique society as opposed to the mere narration of a thrilling story. Key to dystopian works of fiction like those considered here, however, is the futuristic setting. Critic M. Keith Booker explains why: “The principal technique of dystopian fiction is defamiliarization: by focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporally distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (*Dystopian Impulse* 19).

The fictional narratives of this chapter transport us as readers forward in time in order to depict two possible (yet very similar) outcomes to which concepts embodied by the term “global capitalism,” such as the free market, individual happiness, the accumulation of wealth, and the widening of economic class gaps, may lead society in the future. The result in each novel is, not surprisingly, an incredibly nightmarish existence for Central American societies and their populations as a completely dominated and powerless region, subordinated most prominently by the United States (or the former United States, as it may be) with whom the Isthmian elites are at times complicit. However, the “unreality” of the dystopian literary representations in the novels does have roots in global economic and social processes that are indeed occurring in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. William I. Robinson has asserted, regarding social and economic exploitation, that “[p]overty and deprivation become conditions favorable for successful ‘development’ [in Central

America]” (305). He has also stated, in a more prophetic manner, the following conclusion concerning globalization: “In sum, and to reiterate, it is doubtful that the transnational model will lift a majority of Central Americans out of poverty, or that it will generate greater equalities or social justice, political empowerment of local communities and control by them of their own resources or the terms of their relationship to the global economy” (311).

Robinson’s thoughts and predictions heavily coincide with the literary visions of both *Tikal Futura* and *Cantos de las guerras preventivas*. As we will see, each novel imagines the United States (as we currently know it) as a mostly collapsed, if not extremely condensed, superpower still wielding authority in a world society largely failed by global capitalism, concerns also shared by political and social critics outside of Central America like documentarian Michael Moore and writer Gore Vidal. The economic, social, and political megaprojects in the narratives that once aimed to deepen the embedding of globalization have resulted in severe environmental destruction, extreme class fragmentation, an almost complete loss of the past and knowledge of it, as well as ongoing political clashes, social tensions, and economic conflicts, oftentimes in the form of low-intensity warfare and forced physical and ideological isolation. The dismal tone of the narratives calls to mind Beatriz Cortez’s idea of the “aesthetics of cynicism” that I discussed in chapter one, a certain post-war Central American literary trend that directly contrasts the utopian and hopeful ideals of the revolutionary struggles with a sense of unfulfillment after the signing of the various peace accords (25). Still, Cortez chooses to focus more so on individual fictional characters (like Claudette in *La carta*, or Pacal in *Cascabel*) and his or her passion and secret desires as they are carried out in dark and cynical fashions, whereas Galich and Contreras Castro, as we will see, center their efforts on criticizing broader, more abstract global systems. For this reason, in this chapter I have chosen to also

incorporate the intellectual contributions of decolonial thinkers like Walter D. Mignolo who point out that a de-linking from “modernity, ideals of humanity and promises of economic growth and financial prosperity” is necessary to escape the pervasive system of Western thought that continues to subject regions in the Global South like Central America to varying forms of neocolonialism (“Epistemic” 161).

As with the genres explored in previous chapters, considering *Cantos de las guerras preventivas* and *Tikal Futura* exclusively as works of futuristic dystopian fiction would be limiting. Still, for the purposes of this chapter, the scope must be sufficiently reduced in order to thoroughly analyze the literary representations of the United States and its foreign policies within a reasonable theoretical framework. Otherwise, we may wish to consider the tendency towards ecoliterature in each of the narratives, where intersections may be found with utopian ideas when contemplating nature and place (DeGrave 90). Likewise, both Contreras Castro and Galich explicitly treat environmental damage at the expense of economic and social “progress,” or the pursuit of happiness and the production of (mostly) non-essential goods and services. Ecocriticism that directly treats these themes oftentimes highlights environmental and societal challenges, offering “an anticolonial critique of the very idea of ‘civilization,’ ‘progress’ and ‘modernity,’ linking all of these topics to the question of colonization and neocolonization” (DeGrave 101). Although we will not continue to delve into the critical aspects of ecoliterature or ecologically-oriented fiction here, it is relevant to state that said genre also calls attention to human intervention (in nature) and social justice as it relates to politically disenfranchised populations, thus advocating for social change as well (DeVries 5-6).

### ***Cantos de las guerras preventivas: Rejecting the Notion of Universality***

Fernando Contreras Castro's *Cantos de las guerras preventivas* is an overtly allegorical, yet parodic, epic novel of sorts, beginning the story with a *Preludio a la agonía de la Musa*. The Muse of poetry and the arts, now old, decrepit, and blind, has been raped and mutilated at the hands of an unknown "they," most likely the economically and politically powerful of the world: "cobardes que arrasan pueblos enteros sin moverse de sus casas" (13). It is the year 2034, and the narrator, a disciple of the Muse, feels compelled to inform her about the current state of affairs on Earth. Subsequently, and in a loosely connected fashion, we move from *canto* to *canto* throughout the narrative, starting with *Canto I*, which intimately details the sepulcher for the last Gerente General de la Mega Empresa Planetaria.<sup>7</sup> The tomb will be immense, extravagant, and technologically advanced, with soldiers always present to protect the corpse, for this General controlled the entire nuclear arsenal and, for many people, he represented a quasi-religious figure. However, the Asamblea of the Mega Empresa Planetaria is currently at odds with its Empresas Subsidiarias, formerly known as countries or nation-states, and will now consider a Proyecto Alternativo to the existing economic structure where heads of state are simply fireable subdirectors of the global "Company" headed by the United States. Given the perpetual and nonsensical nature of military violence and repression to which they have been exposed, the public concocts an absurd Alternative Project in response – they wish to share the war equally, so that everyone can have an equal opportunity to kill each other.<sup>8</sup> The Asamblea rejects their ridiculous idea and instead enacts that of the Guerras Preventivas, the pre-emptive strikes – wars meant to prevent future wars and, therefore, to achieve peace.

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<sup>7</sup> Using *cantos* as chapters is reminiscent of Pablo Neruda's *Canto general* (1950), a collection of poetry that intends to detail the history of the Americas.

<sup>8</sup> We may recall that, according to Frantz Fanon, "Challenging the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of viewpoints" (6).

*Canto II* begins with a televised account of the effects of the low-intensity warfare in a “southern” country, alluding to Central America’s geographic position below the United States. While the conflict occurs above ground, a selected and controlled underground art exposition for the wealthy is taking place. However, a bomb sets off the art gallery’s protective mechanisms, enclosing the people until it is safe to exit. Nevertheless, the bombing leaves a long-lasting cloud of dust in the air, obscuring the solar panels that consequently do not allow the security doors to reopen, thus eventually killing all of the attendees inside. The destroyed urban infrastructure after the bombardment is described in *Canto III*, where gray and black are the dominant colors. A priest nicknamed Juan de las Cenizas continues to serve his parishioners despite the absurdity of merely entertaining them with bizarre antics (such as acting like a rooster) and the evident futility of attempting to record their lived history. As the people slowly become more barbaric, they also become more comfortable with their misery and existence in Juan’s church, San Grisóstomo, a Mecca for the sick and desperate. When some creative types construct an apparatus that electronically connects to the dying in order to display their pain, suffering, and death in a wild display of colors on a projector screen, the people find a renewed sense of control, pride, and ownership over their fate. In any case, once the death apparatus’s batteries run out, everyone abandons the church, carrying with them the only writing they have not burned – Juan’s *Código Bitleriano*, an eclectic mixture of Beatles’ song lyrics and Juan’s prophetic, poetic, and amorous words.

*Canto IV* describes how Arca Mall, a forbidden type of structure to bomb, survives and serves as a monastic haven for the training of children to become prophets. Even hunger does not escape the more sacred Arca Mall, however, and the pre-emptive strikes, supposedly intended to purify inferior societies, are at last connected to the presidency of George W. Bush in this

chapter. *Canto V* then describes Intemperie, a place where God rests in an ancient temple after having been injured by a low-intensity warfare missile. Although God is “malherido y moribundo,” the people quickly establish a “zona de tolerancia” in Intemperie, ultimately creating a utopian-style commune where many peoples, cultures, and languages come peacefully together. However, the Catholic Church, large food manufacturers, and the Mega Empresa Planetaria reject the premise of Intemperie and, in an effort to regain power over the lost wage workers who make the religious pilgrimage there, Intemperie is bombed. Now, though, “Cambio” and “Resistencia” unite the peoples.

Finally, *Canto VI* represents the end result of the Guerras Preventivas Alternative Project: Panama has sunk into the ocean, the wall between Mexico and the United States is impenetrable, and Central America has become the garbage dump of the world. To make matters worse, the now primitive and tribal peoples that remain on the Isthmus have no recollection of the past, and they opt to kill off the *brujos*, the intellectuals and prophets who do have some awareness of the past, present, and future. The various groups of peoples, further divided into geographic regions, slowly come to realize their mistake and are able to recuperate the song of one *brujo* that encourages them to construct a new world from the ruins.

Given the strong figurative and “anonymous” nature of much of the novel, detailing the connections between the content of the text and the relationships that exist between Central America and the United States will be an important first step. To do so, we must examine how each respective geopolitical expanse is fictionally written into the literary work. Beginning with Central America, the first reference to this region does not explicitly appear until chapter two, after the novel’s global economic and political context has been established (where the entire planet has been organized into one giant corporation). The allusion to Central America appears



once the pre-emptive strikes have been unleashed, which fall squarely on the “*hermosa tierra austral*,” a description that at once establishes an identity for Central America as a geographic space to the south of the United States (the apparent perpetrator), as well as one that also calls to mind the broader concept of the Global South (29, emphasis in the original). Another more direct reference appears in chapter five when the area in which the commune Intemperie sits is described as existing somewhere between Puebla and Panama, clearly implicating the Central American isthmus as it also signals the region known as Mesoamerica.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the temple at Intemperie in which the agonizing God rests is presumably an ancient Maya structure, and other nearby cities bombarded by low-intensity missiles include San José, Managua, and Guatemala City (112). The same chapter eventually divulges that the indicated region is in fact Central America, or rather at least what was “la antigua Centroamérica,” for it has now been converted into an inhospitable place plagued by acid rain and noxious winds (132). Countries like Honduras and Nicaragua also no longer exist as they once were, for they are now simply Empresas Subsidiarias, wholly converted into “el basurero del planeta, o uno de los basureros del planeta...una tierra explotada hasta la resequedad y después abandonada” once the citizens were deemed “ungovernable” (159). Under a system of neocolonial state rule, this abandonment of the populace, or “dumping” them, follows a certain logic, for as Frantz Fanon puts it, “If you think you can perfectly govern a country without involving the people, if you think that by their very presence the people confuse the issue, that they are a hindrance or, through their inherent unconsciousness, an undermining factor, then there should be no hesitation: The people must be excluded” (131). The Mega Empresa Planetaria has, indeed, subscribed to this belief.

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<sup>9</sup> Again, the novel may be read as a reaction to the Plan Puebla-Panamá originally proposed by Mexican president Fox in 2000. This economic development plan has been described by anthropologist John Richard Stepp as “a massive rural economic and infrastructure development program by Mexican and Central American governments,” one not too different from other “top-down neoliberal-oriented development schemes” (28). The project, backed by the Inter-American Development Bank and other organizations, would have promoted international free trade.

The “subaltern,” as critic Ileana Rodríguez explains, has much to do with the idea of “ungovernability,” a notion that clearly surfaces in this novel. She affirms that the subaltern can counter-negate her or his position through insurrections, disobedience, and indiscipline, although there may oftentimes be punishment including a loss of body and self (14). John Beverley, for his part, pronounces ungovernability as “the space of resistance, opposition, and insurgency in globalization,” which all points towards a failure of hegemonic politics (Rodríguez, *Subaltern Studies* 49). The end result of such resistance would, for Beverley, mark a decline in (or complete abolition of) the consequences that he sees as necessary byproducts of modernity: “colonialism, slavery, genocide, demographic catastrophe, mass immigration, combined and uneven development, boom and bust cycles, the reproduction of sexism and racism, and so on” (49). However, what is notable for Beverley as well within this context is that a reimagining of the left, where the left does not find itself incorporated into global capitalism (which would suggest a tacit acceptance of the modernization process), comes more so in the form of knowledge than any other: “For reasons that will be obvious, the project of reimagining the left will have to be, for the time being, more a project in the field of culture than in the sphere of practical politics or economics. It will depend on the work of contemporary cultural and social theory, art practice, history and ethnography, developments in cybernetics, media and communication systems, and, above all, on the multiple forms of struggle and creativity of subaltern classes and social groups” (60). These thoughts, to which we will return, pair well with the analysis I offer below regarding knowledge and writing as forms of resistance that may work towards the goal of cultural decolonization. Still, Rodríguez points out that ungovernability is, for her, an act of transgression, which is an important distinction because “what is at stake in transgression is decolonization, or the possibilities of breaking colonial patterns by contradicting,

however mildly, however incompletely, and however topically, the presuppositions of a relationship that are not necessarily unwavering” (362).

Although few references elucidate the fact that the fictionalized region targeted by the pre-emptive strikes in the novel is a futuristic and dystopian vision of Central America, which we may also choose to read as representative of the disenfranchised Global South as I have indicated above, the connections ultimately remain unmistakable. The references to the United States, although even less frequent throughout the text, are painstakingly clear as well. These particular literary representations will naturally comprise an important part of this chapter’s analysis given their significance when considering how the United States has been fictionally represented in the Central American post-war period in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The only physical description, or reference rather, that the novel presents regarding the North is the “enorme pared del fin del mundo,” a giant wall at the end of an extensive desert that “nadie ha visto en muchas generaciones” (158). Since no one has seen the wall, much less the other side, in many decades, the inhabitants of the Isthmian garbage dump imagine another extensive desert, or perhaps armed soldiers ready to shoot trespassers, on the opposite side. Still, some of the *brujos* suggest, out of desperation, that even if crossing the colossal wall were in vain, at least “alguien tendría que ponernos atención” (167). Isolated and trapped, the peoples of former Central America can only conceive of their world as a prison: “una tierra que comienza con una pared y termina como un muñón en el mar,” for the previous bombings and destruction made Panama sink beneath the sea (170).

The U.S.-Mexico border wall in the novel, then, represents much more than a structure that intends to reduce undocumented immigration and drug trafficking, as it purportedly does today.<sup>10</sup> Rather, the wall inherently establishes hierarchies between the two regions of the world

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<sup>10</sup> The U.S.-Mexico border wall, largely constructed after the signing of NAFTA in 1994 and again after the events of 9/11, continues to receive much political attention. Though early building initiatives such as Operation

it separates, placing those to the North in a privileged category that transmits the message “keep out – you are not welcome here,” while those to the South find themselves at times deprived of even basic human rights as the novel shows, not “worthy” of the North. This hierarchy is further deepened in the text by relegating those of Central America to the garbage dump of society, which implies that not only are their cultures, values, and beliefs inferior, they are completely worthless. This example demonstrates that, problematically so, “hidden behind the rhetoric of modernity, economic practices [have] dispensed with human lives, and knowledge [has] justified racism and the inferiority of human lives that were naturally considered dispensable” (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 6). On the U.S. side of the wall, though, economic production, consumption, value, and stability all remain high, yet for those who are excluded, they are all unobtainable achievements – a clear indication (and criticism) of profoundly embedded social inequalities. This type of exaggerated disparity calls to mind the historical concept of Manifest Destiny, which was, regarding the U.S.’s southerly border, “deeply rooted in a racist ideology of the superiority of the Anglo-Americans over Mexicans,” one that “has continued to influence popular beliefs and culture to the present time” (Chaichian 178). Furthermore, this prominent physical barrier not only divides peoples and economies, but also cultures, knowledges, and epistemologies. That is, in the narrative, those of Central America do not and cannot know the world beyond their confines, for the wall quite literally represents “el fin del mundo” for them, nor can they fully comprehend why the destruction on the Isthmus occurred or what existed before such devastation took place; their history has effectively been erased over time. For the neocolonial superpower, however, represented here by the United States, this erasure is not problematic in the least, unless the Isthmians choose to rebel once again: “The history of other

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Blockade/Operation Hold-the-Line (1993) and Operation Gate Keeper (1994) have been completed, many laws, including The Secure Fence Act (2006), continued under the Obama administration. The wall will undoubtedly receive much attention under the Trump administration as well.

cultures is non-existent until it erupts in confrontation with the United States” (Said, *Culture* 322-23). Forgotten and abandoned as the Central American characters are, the peoples of the North also willingly perpetuate their isolation by enjoying the border wall’s forced blindness, where the “Other” is not only kept physically at bay, but also mentally and intellectually distant – out of sight, out of mind. This psychological and affective distance is, as the novel indicates through the image of U.S. soldiers willing to kill immigrants attempting to reach the North, violently enforced and highly militarized.

Nonetheless, the violence that the wall represents does not necessarily end here, for it may also remind the reader of larger issues stretching throughout history like the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and Mexico’s significant loss of land in 1848 after a prolonged struggle with the United States, for instance. The current U.S.-Mexico border, largely established at that time, still conjures thoughts of unequal power dynamics and a legacy of colonialism (and Manifest Destiny) that reaches into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The wall itself reflects the frequently troubled U.S.-Latin American relationships, representing differences of “history, ideologies, politics, cultures, forms of racism, design preferences, and so on” (Casey 109). The “enorme pared,” for its part, does not permit rational dialogue in the sense that it is simply an inanimate mass, one that silently (and unilaterally) diminishes human rights and perpetuates geographic, economic, social, and cultural divides. And even if the violence of the journey and border crossing is surmounted, forms of political, economic, and social exclusion still persist for many immigrants from within the borders of the United States (Casey 2). The wall, then, is a reminder of this potentially hostile environment, an object that has the capacity to constantly make threats of denunciation and deportation, where the violence against Central American immigrants (among others) is propagated on multiple fronts.

The fact that the wall is the exclusive fictional representation of the United States and its physicality in the novel suggests that it holds an iconic status that, for those forcibly excluded by its sheer existence, embodies the ideals and attitudes of U.S. foreign policy towards the South, if not a perception of the broader values and fears of the nation itself. The separation and subsequent unilateral classification of peoples implied by the wall's presence in the novel, as well as the violence and death that the wall begets, is understandably presented as a U.S. phenomenon. To be sure, however, the U.S.-Mexico-Central America border wall is not the only one in existence today.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the monolithic nature of the situation truly stands out: the wall is representative not only of one nation's foreign policy and its related undertakings, but also representative of the attitudes of a larger segment of the world's society, notably the Global North, that actively promotes global capitalism and the pursuit of profit over life and cultural values.

The economic and social divides in the novel, among others, continue in large part due to the Mega Empresa Planetaria, the global "Company" of which every single nation-state comprises a "subsidiary" in the novel, a nod to the emergence of a single global society that economic globalization brings about (Robinson 13). The head of this company, responsible for enacting the contradictory policy of the Guerras Preventivas, may be traced back to the United States. Similar to the nonsensical idea of initiating war to achieve peace, we may also draw a historical connection between this notion and U.S. foreign policies directed towards Central America throughout the 1980s and 1990s, when "faith in America's mission justified atrocities in the name of liberty" (Grandin 89). Furthermore, as anthropologist Arturo Escobar points out, global capitalism helps stimulate such violent projects: "The result is an oppressive globality in

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<sup>11</sup> The Israeli West Bank separation barrier (read: wall) immediately comes to mind here. To be sure, this wall places much less emphasis on the "Global North" versus the "Global South" distinction than does the U.S.-Mexico one.

which manifold forms of violence increasingly take on the function of regulation of peoples and economies. This feature has become central to the neoliberal approach of the American empire... This modernist attempt at combating the symptoms but not the cause of the social, political and ecological crises of the times results in multiple ‘cruel little wars’ in which the control of territories, people and resources is at stake” (209). These underlying thoughts and allegorical associations are undoubtedly with us throughout much of *Cantos de las guerras preventivas*. Although the sentiment that the United States represents the head of the Mega Empresa Planetaria is ever present throughout the text, the first direct implication actually appears relatively late in the novel (in *Canto IV*). The narrator of this chapter, lamenting the destruction, hunger, and lack of basic necessities after the pre-emptive strikes near Arca Mall, angrily cries out: “¡Tiempos difíciles de vaqueros imbéciles persiguiendo terroristas inexistentes!” (92). The “vaquero” undoubtedly refers to former U.S. president George W. Bush, previously the governor of Texas, accused of pursuing non-existent weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in the early 2000s shortly after the events of 9/11 and the start of the so-called “War on Terror.” The same unnamed “vaquero” is later referred to as a “fanático” in the novel because “había iniciado las guerras preventivas justificándose en el supuesto de que Dios no solo no era neutral, sino que estaba de acuerdo con lo que hacía su maldito gobierno y su maldito ejército” (135). Again, the reference to George W. Bush is clear, for on September 20, 2001 as he addressed the nation, Bush affirmed, “The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that *God is not neutral* between them” (“Address” n.p., emphasis mine).

Knowing who controls the Mega Empresa Planetaria helps to explain the significance of why the attacks (or lack thereof) against Arca Mall in *Canto IV* tie together three elements in the

narrative that come to represent the North: militarized violence, the capitalist economy, and religion, all further united by the overbearing determination and “Manifest Destiny” of the W. Bush administration. Although the brunt of the novel’s criticism in that regard is appropriately attributed to W. Bush, historian Greg Grandin does remind us that his legacy (and, really, that of the United States in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century) began before he took office: “So even before 9/11, three central planks of the Bush Doctrine – the promotion of free-trade capitalism as the only acceptable road to development, the tendency to view America’s interests as the world’s interests, and a willingness among Washington’s political classes to use military force to advance those interests – were already in operation” (194). Nonetheless, it was “up to George W. Bush...to hitch predatory capitalism more tightly to America’s military might and sense of historical mission” (195). The militarized violence coming from the North is present in the text from the very beginning, smoothing the transition from the *Preludio*, where the Muse of the arts has been defiled, to *Canto I*, which explores the mausoleum of the last Gerente General of the Mega Empresa Planetaria. Select descriptions of this extraordinary burial site enshrine the worshiped nature of military might for the Mega Empresa Planetaria. The sepulcher is designed to incorporate “baterías antiaéreas,” “vidrios antibala,” “sacos de arena,” “una alambrada electrificada,” “un circuito cerrado de televisión,” “[la capacidad] de resistir impactos nucleares,” and thousands of soldiers and employees to ensure the smooth day-to-day operation and protection of the Gerente General’s cadaver, who will forever be holding the controls for all of the planet’s nuclear arsenal in his right hand (15-17). The extreme and superfluous lengths to which the Empresa has gone to glorify and preserve their deceased leader reveal the extent to which the narrative intertwines military power and the global capitalist economy, for every country necessarily participates in this rigidly structured “Company.” The corpse has also, of



course, been made ready for its “segunda venida,” when it will “resucitará de entre los muertos” (18). The evident parody of Jesus Christ and the mockery of Christianity intrinsically link the world economic system to a certain devoutness, a religious fervor that continues even after the death of the Gerente General, for the Company’s Assembly opts to carry out the “viejo plan” of the Guerras Preventivas (28).

This quasi-religious devotion to global capitalism is signaled in the very title of chapter 4 where we learn that special economically- and commercially-relevant infrastructures are forbidden to be damaged by the pre-emptive strikes. The *canto* is titled, “Arca Mall, Centro Comercial que se salvó de la destrucción dada la prohibición explícita de bombardear ese tipo de infraestructura,” a prohibition that radically contrasts with the waste-scape of *Canto III*’s ruined city, where ash and mud cake everything and even the (parodied) church of San Grisóstomo (originally San Crisóstomo) barely hangs on by a thread for survival. Still, Arca Mall serves as a safe haven for many, and ironically becomes a site of religious conversion for the otherwise starving and desperate children of the region. Since the Mall is the only type of edifice permitted to remain intact, this, in turn, may be read as a sweeping critique against the capitalist economic system. This is so because designating the only secure place as one of pure economic interest forces the novel’s population into this space, ultimately imposing an economic and social compliance upon the peoples who merely seek refuge, obligating them to submit to economic practices that they would possibly otherwise reject. This supposition is backed by the grotesque fact that “UNICEF estimates that thirteen *children* die every minute in the third world as a result of moneys being siphoned off from social services to finance debt” (Grandin 208, emphasis mine). Contreras Castro does indeed have a history of fictionally critiquing consumer society and the capitalist excesses that it necessarily entails, stretching back to at least *Única mirando al mar*

(1993), a novel in which he expresses discontent with Costa Rica's general lack of solidarity, a theme we will encounter momentarily when I discuss *Intemperie* (Calderón Salas 174-75). Arca Mall, though, long since converted into a "Ciudadela Sagrada" (95), takes in the children and adolescents from the surrounding area in order to convert each one into "un profeta hecho y derecho que volverá a su pueblo a predicar lo que sabe" (92). This systematic indoctrination is reminiscent of other such historic economic instruction, such as with the "Chicago Boys" and the case of Chile and other neighboring South American countries that they impacted as well.<sup>12</sup>

This type of ideological guiding by the hand of U.S. economic (and cultural, military, etc.) experts may be understood in *Cantos de las guerras preventivas* as a criticism of what the novel construes as an imperial, or neocolonial, imposition. This type of imperial "expansion," according to Arturo Escobar, characterizes the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: "The new [American] empire thus operates not so much through conquest, but through the imposition of norms (free-markets, US-style democracy and cultural notions of consumption, and so forth)" (214). In order to shrug these guiding hands off, some residents of Central America in the novel choose to abandon the capitalist way of life altogether. As a result, they create *Intemperie*, a utopia-like commune that, not surprisingly, revolves around how the inhabitants approach God and religion, a necessary step once the "faith" of global capitalism has been eroded or discarded. Those who survive the pre-emptive strikes and first arrive at *Intemperie* are considered *disidentes* and *cimarrones*, a term reflecting the former economic "slavery" of which they were a part when they worked in the mines and maquiladoras. Yet the biggest draw for these dissidents

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<sup>12</sup> The "Chicago Boys" were Chilean economists trained under the auspices of right-wing free trade University of Chicago professors Milton Friedman and Arnold Harberger. The "Chicago Boys" began to gain ground under General Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship in the mid-1970s (Grandin 164). Painting a larger picture of these economists, Grandin describes their higher education as such: "the University of Chicago's Economics Department, with financial support from the U.S. government, had turned itself into a free-market madrassa that indoctrinated a generation of Latin American economists in the need to spearhead an international capitalist insurgency" (169).

is God: “Dios fue alcanzado por un misil de bajo impacto y, malherido y moribundo, fue a refugiarse al sótano del Templo Mayor” (112). Many different peoples from Central America and the Caribbean eventually coexist peacefully in Intemperie and worship God in their own ways, and this pilgrimage site soon becomes a place of exchange and bartering; money does not exist, and the sought-after utopia becomes self-sufficient shortly thereafter. Once the number of pilgrims to Intemperie has increased dramatically, a representative of the Catholic Church, accompanied by heavily-armed soldiers, insists that God cannot be present in such an inhospitable place and that they stop worshiping false idols, for the true, all-powerful God is not neutral nor among them. The old woman who first discovered the “malherido y moribundo” God responds that of course God is in the temple, and he is certainly neutral: “por lo menos en lo que llevamos viviendo aquí, nadie lo ha visto tomar partido por nada ni por nadie, ni se le ha escuchado condena alguna contra nadie, y eso que aquí viene de todo, padre” (120). This interaction, mocking former U.S. president W. Bush’s remark mentioned above, establishes, in a way, a turning point for Intemperie as the priest leaves infuriated. Soon, the Empresas Subsidiarias initiate a defamatory campaign against Intemperie because they’re tired of losing profits as their employees become religious pilgrims, in addition to the “agrotráfico” that feeds the population through the exchange of patented and proprietary seeds of the giant food corporations which becomes an issue of concern for these companies losing profits as well. As the Gerencia General becomes less and less pleased with Intemperie, not even millions of protesters can stop the Mega Empresa Planetaria’s wrath: “las gentes desfilaron sumando millones de manifestantes pidiendo, rogando, que por una vez no desataran la guerra preventiva contra un pueblo inocente” (140). Even these efforts are insufficient, for the bombings begin, leaving only a profound silence in the place that once was Intemperie. Still, the newly militarized

zone yields a different form of unification for the peoples of Central America: “Cambio” and “Resistencia,” even if it takes a long time for these ideas to reach fruition (142).

What *Intemperie*’s outcome tells us as readers is that the Mega Empresa Planetaria has effectively imposed a universal, monotheistic religion: global capitalism. Not only are alternate beliefs unacceptable, so, too, are distinct ways of living that intermingle the thoughts, values, and cultures of different peoples. A segmented, relatively homogenized society seems to be what the all-powerful Gerente General seeks for his “church.” Despite the affirmation from the elderly woman who first discovered God in the depths of the temple, critic Olman Delgado Rodríguez makes the argument that God is, in fact, *not* neutral within the novel, but rather on the side of the oppressed. Although it is not explicitly stated in his article, I understand Delgado Rodríguez’s central argument as coinciding with my own: *Intemperie* and God represent one way to disengage from coloniality, and they ultimately help to create a decolonial epistemology centered on Change and Resistance. We know that God in this case supports heterogeneity, for the abundance of cultures, music, foods, and languages in his presence are treated as equals. What’s more, the injured and dying God allows the peoples the opportunity to recognize their own systematic oppression, as well as their role in its perpetuation: “estas [personas] han encontrado en él una razón para reconocerse como responsables de su destino y la mano que debe cambiar el sistema que los oprime” (Delgado Rodríguez 238). Through the diverse coexistence in *Intemperie*, we see how it “moldea sus vidas en una forma positiva, proactiva y significativamente liberadora, haciéndoles reconocer en ‘el otro’ la posibilidad de un mundo más justo y equitativo” (238). For once, the Central American and other oppressed peoples of the novel can live with freedom and dignity, human qualities highly valued by decolonization (Mignolo, “Citizenship” 313). For instance, they create the Tratado de Libre Conciencia, where

every worker in the region receives the right to make the pilgrimage to Intemperie twice a year. The strong cult of faith that develops around the “malherido y moribundo” God reveals to the peoples that God is, in fact, on their side, and not on that of the oppressors. One of the most important consequences of this model of God that has been created, argues Delgado Rodríguez, is the recognition of the peoples that their role in their freedom versus their oppression is much more significant than they ever imagined: “Fue, precisamente, este el efecto del modelo de dios herido y moribundo: el reconocimiento de ellos mismos en esa construcción colectiva, en esa construcción de un dios tan parecido a nosotros, que merecía ser escuchado y atendido como nosotros mismos” (261).

The awareness and consciousness brought about by Intemperie highlights another related theme that courses throughout the novel, that of writing and recuperating one’s own history, of narrating one’s own stories, of sharing one’s own perspective. This is, to be sure, a goal established from the novel’s very first sentence: “Musa, te vamos a contar de otras gentes y otros tiempos, ahora que estás ciega y casi sorda, ahora que de la voz dulcísima sólo te queda un lamento ferruginoso, ahora que tu memoria es un papiro indescifrable” (13). *Canto III*, which tells the story of the priest Juan de las Cenizas and his refuge parish San Crisóstomo (Grisóstomo) del Atardecer in the aftermath of the bombings, recuperates the idea of writing and recording history. However, when people are starving to death and dying from needlessly lethal maladies such as diarrhea and vomiting due to the “low-intensity” warfare taking place, Juan desperately exclaims: “No escribo para escarmiento de las generaciones futuras pues no vive el futuro en ningún corazón. Escribo porque es absurdo escribir” (44). For the victims of the attacks, nothing has been making sense lately, especially the violent bombings against Central America based on the excuse that future peace will be ensured. Still, the belief in the futility of

writing is not necessarily held by the ill, desperate, and agonizing population that Juan's church serves, for they approve of his recording of their history, even if it costs them precious kindling for their fires. Perhaps these weary, war-torn people understand, as Ranajit Guha explains, that "for every narrative of triumph and hope told in the conqueror's voice there is a counternarrative of defeat and despair told by the conquered" (*Small Voice* 338). It isn't until *Canto VI*, however, that Juan's words are rediscovered, ostensibly many years after having written them. His *Código Bitleriano*, in part, has been converted into customary prayers for the coastal population of the Isthmian garbage dump, peoples that essentially have no memory of the world before its destruction at the hands of the Mega Empresa Planetaria. The prayer, having to do with freedom (it concludes with "Seremos felices y nadie nos dirá / qué hay que hacer" (153)), parodically echoes the words of the *brujos*, or prophets, who explain that although one set of oppressors – those of the pre-emptive strikes – have long since passed, they are now subject to another oppression – that of the constantly incoming garbage. This particular knowledge, that is, this manner of understanding oppression is the "historia prohibida que amenaza con repetirse ahora que la gente cree que vive en paz" (162). What this story refers to is the myth of decolonization as Ramón Grosfoguel explains it: "One of the most powerful myths of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to the decolonization of the world" ("Epistemic" 219). Thus, according to Grosfoguel, there now exists a global coloniality as opposed to a more concrete global colonialism. At this point, in order to break the cycle of oppression, the *brujos* suggest a march to the "enorme pared del fin del mundo," an effort likely to garner at least some attention from those on the opposite side, returning us to the above discussion regarding the physical representation of the United States in the novel. Despite a lack

of success with this particular social movement, one of the *brujos* has left a poetic song to which the peoples subsequently cling, although they do not fully comprehend it just yet:

Del mundo, sus ruinas.  
De las gentes, sus memorias como tumbas profanadas.  
Del amanecer, la incertidumbre.  
Del cenit, la ilusión de una certeza.  
Del ocaso, la lección.

De las ruinas, los cimientos.  
De las gentes, su semilla.  
Del amanecer, la ilusión de una certeza.  
Del cenit, una mesa bien servida.  
Del ocaso, el sueño bienhechor. (184)

As such, the fundamental nature of writing and the written word as they relate to a decolonial epistemic and the end of neocolonialism is made clear throughout the text. We know that writing and intellectual contributions hold fundamental roles in colonial systems, for fields of knowledge are frequently manifestations of imperialism (Tuhiwai Smith 22). Through discourses and systems of knowledge, Tuhiwai Smith explains, intellectual spaces and human minds were essentially “colonized” (24). As stated above, hope for Change and Resistance, and realizing the many possibilities for social change, is what ultimately remains. The possibilities that do remain as the text concludes are undoubtedly very significant, for “the task of decolonial thinking and the enactment of the decolonial option in the 21<sup>st</sup> century *starts* from epistemic de-linking: from acts of epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo, “Epistemic” 173-74, emphasis mine). I believe Tuhiwai Smith would coincide with the sentiment behind Mignolo’s words here, for she also states that history, for instance, is about power: “In fact history is mostly about power. It is the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominate others” (35). Acts of epistemic disobedience, then, may surface in the form of alternative histories, yielding alternative

knowledges and, therefore, alternative pedagogies, which ultimately leads to alternative ways of doing things (Tuhiwai Smith 36). As the novel reveals, history and writing can quite easily, in many cases, move beyond the local. That is, the circulation of texts and knowledge can occur even if overarching imperial structures do not change as rapidly, hence the importance of Indigenous and other textual production that has the capacity to “*rewrite*” and, accordingly, “*reright*” history (Tuhiwai Smith 29-30).

Nevertheless, the constant allusions throughout the literary work to the United States as the primary assailant on Central America’s well-being do not leave critical space for other nations to be directly confronted in *Cantos*, hence the monolithic nature of my reading. Rather, as literary critic Dorde Cuvardic García points out, Contreras Castro tends to critique the colonality of transnational capitalism and to consider problems that extend well beyond Costa Rica’s borders, thus bringing to light “post-national” relationships that have to do with survival (123). Critic María del Carmen Caña Jiménez echoes the words of Cuvardic García when she also affirms that Contreras Castro makes an effort for his criticism to stretch beyond Costa Rica’s borders (“Mutantes” 18). Caña Jiménez reminds us that Costa Rica has been a victim of neoliberal violence despite the intangible and gradual nature in which the negative effects manifest themselves (4). She relates the slow social decline of the country to what critic Rob Nixon has deemed a “slow violence,” or a violence that occurs so slowly that it is hardly perceptible except across many generations (7). The neoliberal economic impacts for many Costa Ricans have been unsettlingly violent, leading to the (exaggerated) environmental degradation, horrific bombings, and abysmal aftermath that we find in Contreras Castro’s work, argues Caña Jiménez (8). With these thoughts in mind, we see once more that the United States is, in reality, not the only target that Contreras Castro’s novel manages to critique. However, as



one of the most significant players in the global economics arena, and as the sole nation directly alluded to within the novel, the bulk of the criticism that is actually intended for global capitalism and its consequences falls squarely upon one participant – the United States – thus strengthening the force with which the work critically strikes the North. William I. Robinson helps to make a distinction between the U.S.’s role and the role of global capitalism in Central America, a useful differentiation in this literary context: “The United States has played a key role in the globalization of Central America. This role is more properly understood as US sponsorship of the region’s restructuring and integration into global capitalism on behalf of a transnational project, not a project of ‘US’ hegemony in rivalry with other core powers for influence in the Isthmus” (49).

Additionally, as literary critic Michael T. Millar points out, Contreras Castro criticizes not only the U.S. government and its foreign policies, but also the Costa Rican government and leadership as well (40). This is so because we understand, through the actual signing of pacts like CAFTA-DR, that the Costa Rican presidential administrations have been unable to secure economic and social stability for many of its nation’s citizens. This incapacity to effectively lead and to make decisions that benefit the entirety of the country are implicitly called out within the novel, for the global economy is not a one-way street. Nonetheless, some nation-states, in the face of global capitalism, may be forced into a position where they are unable to support their citizens: “Unable to resolve the contradictory problems of legitimacy and capital accumulation, local states opt simply for abandoning whole sectors of national populations. In many instances, they no longer even try to attain legitimacy among the marginalized and supernumeraries, who are isolated and contained in new ways, or subject to repressive social control measures” (Robinson 46). Likewise, as I indicated above, Contreras Castro does place some of the

responsibility for the dismal conditions on the peoples themselves. In a way, this is a necessary component of the novel's social criticism, because, as Said reminds us, not all of the problems in the colonized world can be blamed on the colonizers (*Culture* 81). Still, with the blame that Contreras Castro assigns to the peoples of Central America within the novel, he recognizes their power to alter their current situation through notions like Change and Resistance, along with solidarity and the rejection of neocolonial practices and epistemologies. I read this designation as a call to action, one that stretches across both the individual and collective levels, an interpretation of the text that I read along similar lines as I do Néstor García Canclini's proposition that for one to be considered a "citizen," s/he must perform political actions within society (rather than simply passively consume goods and services) (*Consumidores* 53). In other words, García Canclini calls upon each member of a given society to contribute to the deepening of "interacciones socioculturales más complejas" and not merely to utilize the market economy as a "simple lugar de intercambio de mercancías" (53).

Nevertheless, literary critic Roy Alfaro Vargas claims that Fernando Contreras Castro's social criticism in *Cantos de las guerras preventivas* is meager: "Hay un intento de hacer crítica, pero...su esfuerzo es insuficiente" (158). Alfaro Vargas subsequently explains that, yes, the text is clearly an allegorical criticism of the U.S. government during the George W. Bush administration and its policies of pre-emptive strikes in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, according to Alfaro Vargas, "[l]a puesta en duda de la justificación divina de la guerra...y la denuncia de la represión como el mecanismo preferido de la Mega Empresa Planetaria...no tiene ningún valor dentro de la ideología pesimista y fatalista que se representa en *Cantos de las guerras preventivas*. La crítica se reduce a hacer un inventario de hechos y no pasa de ahí" (169-70). Given the foregoing analysis of the novel that I have conducted, however, Alfaro Vargas's

statements seem to bear little weight. Contreras Castro successfully points out some of the most significant failures and consequences of both global capitalism as well as U.S. foreign policies that stem from such capitalist beliefs. Likewise, Contreras Castro indicates which areas of society are most urgently in need of change, and he also suggests that a decolonial shift may be the most appropriate way to obtain these goals. The idea that *Cantos* does not offer sufficient social criticism is also contradicted by the very fact that the author, rightfully so, refuses to establish *an* alternative system. Such a suggestion would imply that a “universal” economic and/or social solution would function well for *everyone* within the Costa Rican nation-state, as well as possibly implicating Central America or the Global South by extension. This type of thinking, as we know, is an impossible achievement. As such, highlighting the problem areas and supporting an agenda for social change is really the most that Contreras Castro could do in this particular situation. In this regard, I largely coincide with critic Cuvaradic García’s interpretation of and response to Alfaro Vargas’s conclusions:

creo que es equivocada su evaluación final de la novela, cuando la asume como un texto pequeño burgués que no ofrece ninguna propuesta o proyecto alternativo futuro (de sociedad, se sobreentiende). Alfaro Vargas (2009) no toma en cuenta que la *distopía* postmoderna, frente a la moderna, adopta una denuncia social sin asumir explícitamente una intencionalidad correctiva ni propositiva. Conserva la denuncia del presente, por medio de la representación del futuro, pero no formula normas de conducta para que la sociedad se enderece o se eliminen situaciones consideradas ‘indeseables’ (116, emphasis in the original).

Concluding with these thoughts, Mignolo’s reiteration that universal notions are impossible is relevant to the conversation: “Once again, the goal of decolonial options is not to take over, but to make clear, by thinking and doing, that global futures can no longer be thought of as one global future in which only one option is available; after all, when only one option is available, ‘option’ entirely loses its meaning” (*The Darker Side* 21). Likewise, Said indicates that literary theory and criticism (and by extension – I propose – literature itself) may help guide the reader

as to *what* to read, but not necessarily *how* to read any given text, hence the more open-ended conclusion to *Cantos de las guerras preventivas* (Culture 60).

### ***Tikal Futura: Breaking History's Violent Cycle***

Franz Galich's *Tikal Futura: Memorias para un futuro incierto* (novelita futurista) treats many of the same themes regarding global capitalism that *Cantos* explores and criticizes. The story begins with the discovery of a woman's cadaver on the grimy streets of Ciudad de Abajo. While passersby glance at the mutilated corpse on their way to work, a man nicknamed Apocalíptico contemplates the working-class masses from a privileged position hundreds of meters above. The pristine, elevated realm from which he observes is called Ciudad de Arriba, a space that is, for the most part, inaccessible to those below who remain perpetually enslaved to their factories and sites of production. Shortly thereafter, Apocalíptico meets with Mr. Kilowitz, a representative of Quisyanland, or the former United States that has essentially collapsed into a radically condensed, fractured, and exclusionary nation-state by the 23<sup>rd</sup> century. The two men meet to discuss the Tikal Futura joint megaproject that intends to craft an immense tourist metropolis in the skies above Ciudad de Abajo. The project's design incorporates aerial superhighways that will connect the airport, the Tikal Futura tourist complex and resort, and ecological hotels in the jungle that are of interest to foreign visitors because they no longer have any natural spaces in their own countries due to excessive economic production. Despite his recent arrival to what is ostensibly Guatemala, Quisyan Ambassador Kilowitz wields a significant amount of power over his business partner Apocalíptico. Kilowitz can, for instance, invite him to the Super Top Secret Servis, a place for the ultra-privileged where drugs, fantastic sexual interactions, and alcohol abound. What's notable as well about the explicit escapades to such a place is that they are not monitored in any way by the ever-present video cameras from

the Tribunal Supremo, an all-seeing surveillance and intelligence body that has also installed a microchip into each inhabitant's brain of Ciudad de Abajo in order to keep subversive thoughts, communication, and expression under control.

Meanwhile, another story unfolds hundreds of meters below the business dealings and political maneuvering occurring in Ciudad de Arriba. Cané and her grandson Namú live a stifled life in Ciudad de Abajo, yet Cané manages to protect and raise Namú and a young orphan girl, Ix, while simultaneously taking the time to clandestinely recuperate and record her peoples' history. She relies, in large part, on older, now prohibited texts like the *Anales de los cakchiquiles* and the *Popol Vuh*. Her writing, like the novel we as readers hold in our hands, is titled "Memorias para un futuro incierto," a text she also calls at one point "Libro del Consejo." Cané wishes for the recuperated history that she writes to be read by Namú and Ix, and presumably others, for the "family history" has been lost (referring not only to their personal family, but also to a broader Maya history). We soon discover that distant relatives of Cané, Vitz and Zacté, somehow managed to elude the ubiquitous microchips from being implanted in their brains and are thus able to participate in the Ejército Revolucionario de Liberación de Ciudad de Abajo (ERLCIA), a radical revolutionary group that seeks the liberation of Ciudad de Abajo. Those from Ciudad de Arriba, of course, view the members of ERLCIA as terrorists. Additionally, unlike the working-class multitudes of Ciudad de Abajo, ERLCIA members are largely not subjected to the effects of Opsin, a synthetic opium that is utilized to keep the masses mentally subdued. Population and subversion control is structured within the novel, then, upon two pillars: "Vicio y tecnología" (128). Still, the ERLCIA manages to attack key infrastructure of Ciudad de Arriba, as well as steal from their military armories in order to better equip themselves for future attacks. Eventually, Namú and Ix decide to join the revolutionary movement, though Cané

foresees their ultimate failure against the enemy and their demise. As tensions continue to mount between the two cities, Kilowitz becomes disconcerted at the way the subversives are not being controlled and he fears that the Tikal Futura megaproject will be in jeopardy. Ultimately, however, the project reaches completion and tourists begin to arrive by the thousands. Nevertheless, the novel concludes rather abruptly with a semi-failed attack by ERLCIA against another military outpost and infrastructure component both connected to Ciudad de Arriba.

The novel is about breaking the long-standing colonial tradition between the United States and Central America, as well as the rejection of the continuation of similar neocolonial impositions via global capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In order to effectively criticize these forms of systematic exclusion and exploitation, Galich's work strongly concentrates on two concepts: (historical) repetition and resistance. That is, he calls much attention to Guatemala's relatively cyclical and violent history in terms of Eurocentric domination and subjugation that effectively dates back to the conquistador and colonial periods. Like *Cantos*, *Tikal Futura* also proposes the basic concepts of Resistance and Change as ones that have the capacity to fundamentally alter Guatemala's (and, by extension, Central America's) unfavorable circumstances as perpetually part of the marginalized Global South. I argue, as I do in the above analysis as well, that the decolonization of the mind through writing, history, cultural recuperation, education, and knowledge is a central point of what I understand as a decolonial strategy within the text, and the United States is once again used as a base for the elaboration of the novel's critical platform.

The novel, in essence, begins with the premise of a non-sustainable form of run-away global capitalism that predominantly corresponds to the (former) United States. What is most immediately apparent about the form of global capitalism described in the novel are the extreme class divisions between the working-class poor and the wealthy elite. The classes have long been

separated physically as a result of their social and economic classifications. The impoverished Ciudad de Abajo, also known as Ciudad Miseria, Ciudad Inferior, and Xibalbá, contrasts radically with the well-polished Ciudad de Arriba, or Ciudad Superior. As the name implies, those of Ciudad Miseria are condemned to perpetual poverty, exploitation, and powerlessness: “Es una patria enferma, herida y agonizante. [...] Para los habitantes de Ciudad Inferior el universo se había extinguido hacía mucho tiempo” (56-57). Even the visionary Cané, grandmother of Namú and Ix, foretells the damnation of her city: “[Ix y Namú] no tienen ninguna posibilidad de superar la miseria con la que vivimos en Ciudad de Abajo. Nuestro destino y el de ellos está sellado” (82). As with *Cantos*, the story clearly takes place in a dystopian future, more specifically sometime after century XXIII, and the narrative’s dismal tone is notable from the very first line: “El color Coca-Cola invadía toda la Ciudad de Abajo” (11), a description that at once connects consumption, economic production, and environmental degradation, as well as describes which populations are most affected by these types of problems: the *lowest* echelons of society. These economically-inspired environmental issues, as we soon find out, stretch far beyond the borders of Guatemala. In fact, in an early exchange between Kilowitz and Apocalíptico, Apo seeks clarification regarding the motive for Kilowitz’s significant interest in conducting (eco)tourism business with him. He states: “quieren hacer algo que sea una alternativa para esos pobres países de ustedes que de tanta producción acabaron con toda su naturaleza, es decir, fauna y flora. ¿No es así?” (35). Shortly thereafter, it comes to light that the United States is not the only superpower that remains wealthy and in control of the producing nation-states, an economic structure quite reminiscent of the Mega Empresa Planetaria in Contreras Castro’s novel. However, the other powerful countries, of which there are “dos o

tres más,” are never named in the text, consequently obliging the work’s criticism to always center on the directly implicated North in a similar manner as in *Cantos* (36).

The fated lot of the impoverished and voiceless masses far below Ciudad Superior comes paired with an almost complete erasure of their history along with various forms of extreme dehumanization. For instance, we know that Cané bears the sole responsibility for recording her peoples’ alternate history, and we learn that as part of the Tikal Futura tourist package that Apo would like to offer wealthy foreign visitors, there is a Ruta Maya. This particular “attraction” would allow tourists to experience a simulated Indigenous rebellion where they could actually kill the Maya “insurgents” who would, not surprisingly, not have real weapons with which to defend themselves. The utter devaluation of human life in exchange for profit in terms of worldólares, the fictional global currency used in the novel, also surfaces explicitly in the Sex Safari that Apo and Kilowitz offer, where male visitors, accompanied by armed guards, enter Ciudad de Abajo in order to hunt, capture, and rape young girls and women of their choosing. This type of activity plainly speaks to the dominant patriarchal system amongst the ruling elite within the narrative. The sheer devaluing and disregard for other sexes and identities in such a male-centered social structure, states critical theorist María Lugones, cannot be simplified with a depiction of the entire gender system as “patriarchal” (188). Rather, Lugones also speaks about the relationship between coloniality and the violent imposition of heterosexuality as well, clearly indicating that both sex *and* gender are points of contention and oppression under Eurocentrically-driven societies, a point that fellow decolonial critics like Aníbal Quijano fail to address (188). However, the novel presents cases in which Lugones’s gender-related ideas are directly applicable beyond the Sex Safari, for both Apo and Kilowitz participate in what may be considered homosexual activities in the different sex clubs they frequent. Still, even if both men



are at one point or another penetrated, any type of non-heteronormative sexual activity remains separate: “Está el salón de los homosexuales, el de las lesbianas. Está el de los travestis, que por cierto, es uno de los más solicitados” (73). Despite the “popularity” of some of these sexual encounters, the fact that they are exotic, different, and non-normative is what makes them attractive for many of the guests, not to mention the fact that emotions have been removed altogether from the depersonalized and dehumanized sexual experiences. Thus, although homosexual and other non-heteronormative relations are tentatively acceptable within the text, they still clearly belong to an “unnatural” realm, indicating that heterosexuality is still to be expected regardless of what types of personal pleasures one seeks behind closed doors. As such, we really find little room for alternate sexualities within the narrative just as there is little room for females within Ciudad de Arriba. What is of note, however, and as Lugones points out, this type of “gendering” occurs throughout society, including educational systems and the narration of histories, too (201). Cané’s position, then, as someone who writes as a female with significant power to disrupt such sex- and gender-based schemes, as well as to speak out against other repressive social structures, is fundamentally important to the decolonial epistemic within the novel. I will comment more on Cané and her writing below.

Continuing with the “sport” aspect of the Ruta Maya and Sex Safari attractions, though, it is undeniably grotesque and exaggerated, yet it speaks to the general values of global capitalism where profits generally come first and people come second (or perhaps at an even lower rank) when it comes to economic and social priorities. This type of backwards thinking helps to explain why decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo believes that the very structure of global capitalism as one that aggressively seeks economic growth, development, and happiness leads political and financial leaders to make decisions that further exploit the marginalized masses

(*The Darker Side* 116). If it has not been made apparent by now, a decolonial alternative places human lives first rather than capitalist abstractions and values, a perspective and belief system that would never have permitted the allegorical tourist safaris in Tikal Futura to exist (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 144). Yet the draw for the well-to-do foreign tourists is significant, for one thousand people arrive on the first two planes ready to relish the wonders of Tikal Futura, and the various safaris are rapidly filled by guests that very first night. The visitors, who all come from Quisyanland, demonstrate their adherence to and upholding of the tenets of global capitalism mentioned above, for as García Canclini reminds us, consumption constructs part of the “*racionalidad integrativa y comunicativa de una sociedad*” (*Consumidores* 45, emphasis in the original). As such, the tentatively “peaceful expansion” of the free market through collaborative binational tourist projects has, once again, only occurred through violence, a phenomenon that has, in a way, come to be expected (Escobar 214). The dominant superpower, then, must be significantly altered or eliminated if society wishes to see any meaningful structural changes: “It is that fraction of capital [of the transnational bourgeoisie] that imposes the general direction and character on production worldwide and conditions the social, political, and cultural character of capitalist society worldwide” (Robinson 39). Unfortunately, the representative of said transnational capital in the novel is the cynical and perverse Mr. Kilowitz.

As with the Gerente General as head of the Mega Empresa Planetaria in *Cantos de las guerras preventivas*, Kilowitz represents not only the United States as an official Ambassador of Quisyanland, but also the broader global capitalist system itself given his explicit promotion (and wild exploitation) of said system with the transnational Tikal Futura project. Although the United States has suffered serious social and economic fracture in the novel, the nation-state still clings to its political and economic power, even if part of the wealthiest class has begun to seek

economic refuge elsewhere. Accordingly, the *gringo* Kilowitz, “nieto de los que tramaron la caída del primitivo socialismo,” appears in Guatemala to extend the U.S.’s sphere of influence (16). Kilowitz’s dual role as an Ambassador and as a representative of the Empresa Constructora, the financial backer of Tikal Futura, binds national interests and foreign policy with economic exploitation and aggression. The construction company, “encargada de reconstruir lo que los quisyan destruían en sus frecuentes guerras punitivas,” reminds us of the pre-emptive strikes that Contreras Castro denounces in *Cantos* (68). Later, as the relationship between Kilowitz and Apo stabilizes and strengthens, Kilowitz more openly proclaims that Quisyanland effectively owns Guatemala, a statement to which Apo humbly concedes as true (212). As progress on the Tikal Futura complex continues, the Resistance in Ciudad de Abajo realizes that Kilowitz, in addition to his multiplicity of roles, also represents the Gran Confraternidad de la Cofradía del Nuevo Orden Mundial y Universal, a notion that plainly characterizes the U.S.-sponsored global capitalism within the text as a powerful homogenizing, monolithic, and hegemonic force with claims to universality. Not surprisingly, Kilowitz subsequently explains that Tikal Futura is merely a pilot project for the remainder of the Gran Puente Continental, that is, Central America. After this admission, Kilowitz then excitedly reveals, “¡Después, iremos por el continente todo!” (166). In order to help ensure the success of such neocolonial, imperialistic expansion projects, the foreign tourists that visit Tikal Futura are shown various indoctrinating videos upon arrival. One of the videos, for example, speaks of Guatemala’s “antiguos habitantes autóctonos y la proeza de la civilización Quisyan que logró transformarlos, evolutivamente, casi, de la edad de piedra al desarrollo que ellos podían ver con sus ojos” (273). The video’s description clearly promotes a self-fashioning, Eurocentric perspective that, as the novel shows, makes absolutely

no sense, for the Quisyans are the savage barbarians that have come to Guatemala to rape and murder, both literally and metaphorically.

Kilowitz, like the “enorme pared del fin del mundo” in *Cantos*, is the most significant physical representation embodying the United States in the narrative, for in *Tikal Futura* there are no other characters or objects that come from the North, save for the occasional whiskey or the anonymous hordes of tourists towards the end of the novel. As such, Kilowitz and his words and actions merit special attention, for they come to stand for the U.S. foreign policy agenda within the text. We know this to be true since one of his official titles is the Ambassador of Quisyanland, or, in other words, an official representative of the Quisyan (U.S.) government. Part of his “civilizing” mission, then, as well as the United States’ by extension, is to promote and aggressively enforce a predatory form of global capitalism, a variant that leaves no room for alternative thinking and one that forcefully establishes exploitative and exclusionary social systems. The enormous undertaking is seemingly inspired by a perverse revival of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the belief in the inherent superiority of the North and Western values. Furthermore, the complete lack of scruples across the board also implicates the broader United States, for Kilowitz also represents a construction company (read: private enterprise) and he behaves according to his own personal whims, a character trait that appeals to capitalist ideals such as the pursuit of happiness, individualism, and the accumulation of wealth. His impulses and personal desires oftentimes transport him to the realm of frequent sexual exploitation and mistreatment of others, as well as drug and substance abuse, along with varying forms of physical, sexual, and psychological violence for those who cross his path. As the only individual representative of the United States, then, I read Kilowitz allegorically as dually representing the U.S. foreign policy agenda as well as the generally perceived values, priorities, and beliefs that

are, according to the narrative, fostered nationally and exported internationally. The fact that Kilowitz wishes to be the first to participate in the Ruta Maya Sexy, for example, hunting and raping young women in Ciudad de Abajo, suggests that alternative lines of thought have been greatly corrupted or made altogether impossible due to the narrowed field of vision and the priorities that aggressive global capitalism produces. This presumption is supported in the novel when Apocalíptico affirms that the only ideology that is permissible is that of neoliberal (global) capitalism, a system enforced by the only army left in the world – that of Quisyanland. Kilowitz begins the dialogue:

–¡Oh! Eso haber sido antes, mucho antes. Ahora no hay tales, ni teles, nuestro ejército ser el único y más fuerte del mundo.

–¡Claro, claro! A eso me voy a referir ahora...Pues antes, hace muchos años atrás, aquí en Cuahutemallán (se llamaba Guatemala), existió una guerra a causa de que pequeños grupúsculos como se les llama también a las pandillas, se alzaron en armas en contra del gobierno. Ellos pertenecían a una ideología.

–¿Idiotología? ¿Qué cosa ser eso?

–No, Mr. Klitorikz, no es idiotía ni idiotología. Se dice i-deo-lo-gía...Eran formas equivocadas del pensamiento de la modernidad primitiva, opuestas a la única forma correcta de pensar: el capitalismo neoliberal, que por supuesto era la forma de pensar de nuestros últimos padres, los quisyan... (51-52)<sup>13</sup>

The fact that in the narrative the United States has the only remaining army in the world points to the militant force with which global capitalism allows no other space for differing thought in the text. The characters readily acknowledge that if it weren't for their army, the United States would have surely lost its neocolonial economic grasp on the planet. Additionally, the army also reveals another level of exploitation perpetrated by the North: that of utilizing the “second-class” citizens of the poorer, producing nation-states as soldiers so as not to risk the loss of their own lives when fighting for petroleum (13). This violent structure has subsequently been

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<sup>13</sup> To be sure, Kilowitz's name changes many times throughout the text to mirror what he and Apocalíptico are doing. Here, “Klitorikz” clearly shows that they have been engaging in sexual activity, hence the “clitoris” connection with his name. On other occasions, when they are also drinking, he goes by “Klitoriswisky.”

replicated in Guatemala, for the Indio Sacul, leader of Ciudad de Arriba's Comando Central de Control, studied under the auspices of the Academia de Altos Estudios Militares de Quisyan, an allusion to the School of the Americas that previously thrived in Central America. Sacul now serves the North as another "tentacular" ideological extension, citing the elimination of 30,000 *descartables* from Ciudad de Abajo as a praiseworthy sacrifice to Quisyanland (277).<sup>14</sup> The master-servant relationship between the United States and Guatemala/Central America/the Global South is one established early on in the novel, an entrenched dynamic that, for some like Apo, slowly shifts from disdainful to welcome as the text progresses and corruption increases. Apo, at first, speaks ill of the Maya peoples to Kilowitz, later lamenting to himself: "lo que tiene que hacer uno para ganarse unos cuantos milloncitos de worldólares, porque si no tenés te miran como miserable habitante de Ciudad de Abajo" (43). Later on, however, Kilowitz begins to fear Apo and the Indio Sacul for their extremely violent ideas that creatively "serve" the North, stretching the perversion of profiteering to unimaginable lengths. For example, the Indio Sacul enthusiastically forces Apo and Kilowitz to look on as they watch thousands and thousands of cadavers burn after a surprise raid on Ciudad de Abajo, resulting in a wild spectacle of searing flesh that excites Sacul to the point of frenzied masturbation and orgasm. The sexualization of "serving" the interests of the North, then, is ultimately converted here into a pleasure-driven mission, if not from orgasm itself, then from metaphoric orgasm from the earning of millions of worldólares that would otherwise be impossible for people like Apo.

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<sup>14</sup> The name "Sacul" appears to be a reference to the Lucas García (spelled backwards) brothers Fernando Romeo and Manuel Benedicto, the former the 25th "president" of Guatemala and the latter a high-ranking Guatemalan army official. According to an article on the School of the Americas Watch website, both brothers were graduates from the infamous military academy (n.p.). Likewise, the massacres that took place under the dictatorship of Fernando Romeo Lucas García echo the murderous violence we witness in the text, such as the burning and slaughter of hundreds of people in the market. Lastly, perhaps the "Indio" part of Indio Sacul alludes to Lucas García's upbringing in San Juan Chamelco, a small, rural village in the department of Alta Verapaz, an area of the country recognized for its many Indigenous peoples.

However, the implication of sexuality within the text hints at the simultaneous prostitution and raping of Guatemala as a result of economic negotiations. Not only are the natural resources sold for those foreign tourists who have completely squandered their own natural wonders, but the inhabitants of the land are sold as part of the tourist package: “¡Hasta masacres de aldeas y todo y niños, podremos organizar! ¡Y sesiones de torturas, en diferentes estilos y modelos!” (186). Despite calling him an “auténtico monstruo maldito” for his sinister ideas (186), Kilowitz soon has a change of heart and emphatically proclaims that although Apocalíptico is a sadistic son of a bitch, “por eso y más lo queremos” (186) – with the first person plural naturally implying the U.S. government as well.<sup>15</sup> As such, the savagery and true barbarism continue in the name of worldólares and global capitalism, a process that becomes more graphically violent as time moves forward, eventually culminating in the scene referenced above regarding Sacul and the burning cadavers. Literary critic María del Carmen Caña Jiménez, in this sexualized, violent context, likens Kilowitz and Apo to vampires, yet she explains that they have essentially exchanged fangs for phalluses, though they are still more than capable of penetrating and possessing (“Vida” 76). The resultant sexual pleasure from their actions, dehumanized and without true emotion, represents the neoliberal economic system for Caña Jiménez: “el rechazo de la sociedad a merced de la ambiciosa promoción del individuo/empresa privada” (“Vida” 77).

The extreme devotion to global capitalism by some of the novel’s characters reminds us of the religious components also apparent in *Cantos*. By now, it may be clear that the very name “Quisyan” potentially has religious connotations as well. Within the context of the novel, I interpret the name as a Spanish-ized pronunciation of the word “Christian,” a faith closely

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<sup>15</sup> Apocalíptico’s statement brings to mind the quote frequently attributed to Franklin D. Roosevelt regarding Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza García: “Somoza may be a son of a bitch, but he’s our son of a bitch.”

associated with Europe, North America, and the original Spanish conquistadors, one that also hints strongly at the concept of Eurocentrism within the work. Ramón Grosfoguel reminds us that what arrived at the time of the conquest in the Americas was not simply an economic and labor system, but rather a “European/capitalist/military/*christian*/patriarchal/white/heterosexual/male” paradigm (“Epistemic” 216, emphasis mine). Decolonial critic and anthropologist Aníbal Quijano supports Grosfoguel’s conclusion: “the modern world-system that began to form with the colonization of America, has in common three central elements that affect the quotidian life of the totality of the global population: the coloniality of power, capitalism, and Eurocentrism” (545). This process, at least during the imperial period, was, for Europe, natural and undisputed; as Europeans traveled, studied, and classified other cultures throughout the ages, they essentially injected a Eurocentrism into everything, consistently raising themselves to the status of “superior” (Said, *Culture* 222). The Quisyan people in the novel have effectively become economic conquistadors, imposing their superiority and encouraging others (like Apo and the Indio Sacul) to aspire to imitate their values.

It is the Tikal Futura megaproject, of course, that directly connects Quisyanland with Ciudad de Arriba. The Eurocentrism of both spaces is quite tangible given the very essence of the existence of Ciudad de Arriba, where only those with white skin, light-colored eyes, formal education, and a respectable economic level are permitted to live (126). Still, even if all of these pre-requisites are met, there is no guarantee of acceptance. Thus, while some people are “saved,” many others are condemned to a miserable existence in a metaphorical hell, or Xibalbá (Ciudad de Abajo), as the case may be, drawing more explicit connections between global capitalism-centered convictions of a religious bent and the violent realities to which Guatemala is subjected within the work. According to critic J.T. Way, the actual Grand Tikal Futura in Guatemala City



and similar commercial developments imagine “a first-world future that effaces the local and enshrines the global” (14). This U.S.-influenced vision of the future “references a national cultural treasure and a Mayan national identity but portends a homogenized nation. Figuratively speaking, Tikal Futura and the economic system it represents are ‘putting the Mayan in the mall’” (Way 1).

One of the implicitly violent acts to which I refer that is carried out by the powerful, quasi-religious figures of Ciudad de Arriba is the constant monitoring of those in Ciudad de Abajo. This social control of the masses is a necessary part of the process to maximize the earning of worldólares in the global economic system within the text, a process that mandates constant drugging and microchips in their very brains to curb “subversive” thoughts. What’s more, the imperious vigilance occurring in Guatemala is suggested as also being linked directly to the North, for Kilowitz boasts to Apo that the Quisyan “sabemos que nosotros todo lo sabemos. Además sus fuentes también son nuestras fuentes [de información]” (153). The interest in continuously monitoring the economic and social conditions in Guatemala makes perfect sense as well within the logic of global capitalism, for as William I. Robinson indicates, under this economic system it is the basic job of the producing nation-states (Guatemala) to foster conditions amenable to foreign investors (Quisyanland/the U.S.), stabilizing conditions for structural changes, liberalizing trade and financial institutions, deregulating state decision-making, and privatizing the public sphere (51). At the same time as the nation-state is manipulated, so, too, the population it incorporates, as we have seen above. The “political economy” of the body is also central to the paving of the way for global capitalism, resulting in submission, docility, and the like (Foucault 25). However, we find that although there is a capitalist logic at work within the narrative, the same economic system leaves little room for

social logic: “With few exceptions, neo-liberal adjustment results in a decline in popular consumption and social conditions, a rise in poverty, immizeration, and insecurity, ‘food riots,’ heightened inequalities, social polarization, and resultant political conflict” (Robinson 52). Lastly, the fierce addictions to Opsin (synthetic opium) and Rogua (a type of alcohol) means that the denizens of Ciudad de Abajo will not only be physically, emotionally, and intellectually subdued, but that even their chemical and biological dependence on the ruling states – Ciudad de Arriba and Quisyanland – will not diminish.

Such a state of perpetual condemnation and exploitation has, naturally, given way to the rise of a resistance faction, the ERLCIA, which I describe above. The fact that Vitz and Zacté, two leaders of the revolutionary group, do not have microchips seems to imply that following social and economic norms in order to overturn the neocolonialism to which they are subjected will not be a viable path to take. The group, as it stands at the moment, is comprised of aging combatants that survived the insurrection 50 years prior, when those of Xibalbá almost defeated Ablabix (Arriba), bringing them to the brink of installing a more just and Indigenous-oriented political system, yet when Quisyanland intervened, hope of success was destroyed.<sup>16</sup> As the guerrilla organization grows and its attacks against Ciudad de Arriba become more consistent and violent, Kilowitz fears that the progress on Tikal Futura is at risk. As a result, he states that the subversion must be resolved, and offers the necessary worldólares in exchange for Apo providing the appropriate “mano de obra” to clean up what he sees as “tonterías” (152). Kilowitz

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<sup>16</sup> Like the names Sacul and Lucas above, we once again find word plays here. If Ciudad de Abajo is Xibalbá, Galich has flipped, or mirrored, the word to delineate the inverse as Ablabix, or Ciudad de Arriba. In my interpretation of the novel, a text quite dotted with such word plays, Galich uses the reversal technique in order to point out two things: first, the mirror-like “reflection” indicates that, despite the involvement of outside forces like the Quisyans, many concepts and peoples harming the Guatemalan characters are the Guatemalans themselves. Similarly, with words like Rabenz instead of Árbenz, the rotating of letters is, I argue, representative of the cyclical nature of Guatemala’s history. If one democratic leader was overthrown (Árbenz), so, too, will another (Rabenz). If one warrior could not defeat the invaders (Tecún Umán), another one is destined to fail as well (Namú), as Cané states.

believes, after reflecting on the historical relationship that Quisyanland has maintained with Cuahutemallán, that this struggle will be as decisive as that of the insurrection 50 years ago, where the Quisyans helped overthrow then-president Rabenz. This type of discomfort, anxiety, and fear amongst those of Arriba is exactly what the ERLCIA intends to provoke, because it would mean that power is shifting from the hegemonic group to the marginalized one. As the novel continues and the clashes transform into more organized attacks, the narrator prophetically comments that, “Del singular combate surgirá el libertador de estas tierras, pero antes son precisos el sufrimiento y la destrucción del orden universal” (225). In other words, decolonization must occur.

The theme of decolonization also surfaces quite prominently as a strong underlying force throughout the text in the form of writing, or of recording one’s own history, of utilizing one’s own narrative voice to share an alternative point of view. Cané, the grandmother of Ix and Namú, bears the responsibility for writing the “Memorias para un futuro incierto.” A lengthier passage establishes the significance of what Cané has the power to do with her writing not only in support of the resistance movement, but also for the destruction of the neocolonial yoke that has been placed upon her peoples – the Indigenous, the marginalized, and all those of Ciudad de Abajo:

Efectivamente, la abuela Cané era la depositaria de la sabiduría de los pueblos Yama y los mezclados, nombre con el que los Yama designaban, un tanto despectivamente, a los de su raza que se habían mezclado con otros. Finalmente, la explotación y la pobreza terminaron igualándolos. La abuela guardaba muchos tesoros en su prodigiosa memoria, sabía de ritos, libros y danzas, practicadas por los antepasados. Sabía de profecías y astronomía y astrología y de libros, de música, pintura y escultura. Pero eso era algo que sólo ella sabía que lo sabía. Asimismo ocultaba algunos objetos por ella llamados libros, libros que esperaba que algún día fueran leídos por los descendientes de la casa de los quichés y cakchiqueles. Nadie sabía de la existencia de esos libros. (46)

Cané's writing, then, is her form of resistance, which she explicitly confirms as such later on in the text.<sup>17</sup> This is an important distinction because, as Frantz Fanon points out, assimilation into (or subordination to) the colonizer group means that the colonized loses intellectual possessions (13). What is remarkable about the above cited passage, however, is that Cané proposes an epistemological shift, not a concretely political or economic upheaval. Cané presents an opportunity to resist at least one significant feature of colonialism, that of the commodification of knowledges and cultures: "The production of knowledge, new knowledge and transformed 'old' knowledge, ideas about the nature of knowledge and the validity of specific forms of knowledge, became as much commodities of colonial exploitation as other natural resources" (Tuhiwai Smith 62). The responsibility that Cané has to reintegrate and reinforce her peoples' lost and misappropriated cultures, values, and beliefs, I argue, represents a key part in the process of decolonization within the narrative, for "[c]apitalism' is not only a domain of economic transactions and exploitation of labor, but of control and management of knowledge and subjectivities" (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 33). In other words, as cultural critic Ranajit Guha points out, the need for self-representation is essential to breaking colonialist impositions and histories (*Dominance* 201). The task that lies before Cané is to effectively conjure the past in order to alter the direction of the present and, ultimately, the future. All of this is extremely important for decolonial critics such as Tuhiwai Smith, for whom "decolonization" implies a knowing from one's own perspective and for one's own purpose, referring to such categories as research, writing, theory, knowledge, and so on (41). The Indigenous research and writing agenda, arguably what Cané intends to implement in part, is primarily concerned with self-

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<sup>17</sup> Cané comments on the matter: "Yo, la abuela Cané, descendiente de la aquella otra famosa abuela Ixmucané, escribo estas crónicas sin otra intención más que de dejar constancia de que pese al grado de dominación que los de Ciudad Superior en alianza y protegidos por los de Quisyan, ejercen sobre nosotros, hemos seguido buscando la forma de poner resistencia" (64).

determination with the ultimate goal of social justice across many terrains, a goal coincident with not only *Tikal Futura*, but also with the criticism that *Cantos* offers (Tuhiwai Smith 120).

Not surprisingly, the Tikal Futura megaproject represents a turning point along this path. Although for those of Ciudad de Arriba Tikal Futura is synonymous with their city and their economic interests, for Cané Tikal Futura is also the title of her “uncertain memories,” that is, it is not *intrinsically* related to Ciudad de Arriba, but rather symbolizes the repressive economic system firmly rooted within the country and, thus, a space for resistance and possibilities. Accordingly, appropriating Tikal Futura for the benefit of the marginalized and the recuperation of their currently effaced history would be a crucial step in the dismantling of the neocolonial system. Although cultural appropriations have already taken place, Cané must be careful not to base the identity of the colonized on counter-appropriations that are based off of the actions of the colonizers, lest the history she writes still be subordinate to the dominant neocolonial system (Guha, *Dominance* 3). In order to combat this possibility, Cané firmly states that those marginalized peoples for whom she speaks face an ultimatum of sorts, for there will either be a revolutionary struggle of some sort, or there will be continued economic slavery: “o una paz cobarde o una libertad dolorosa” (162). Substantially reconfiguring the significance of Tikal Futura for the advantage of those of Abajo must occur, then, as the current society in the novel is re-appropriated by the marginalized. Guha explains that, “Making the past one’s own is therefore nothing less than an assertion of what is for the self an essential condition of its being. This must not be mistaken for an attempt to recover what has been lost. For the past, far from being lost, continues to militate with a futural orientation. In appropriating it, the individual lives up to her project of harnessing possibility to historicity” (*Small Voice* 337). Mignolo would likely coincide with this thought, for he claims that “[d]ecolonizing Western epistemology means to

strip it out of the pretense that it is the point of arrival and the guiding light of all kinds of knowledges. In other words, decolonizing knowledge is not rejecting Western epistemic contributions to the world. On the contrary, it implies appropriating its contributions in order to then de-chain from their imperial designs” (*The Darker Side* 82). As such, this cultural and epistemological attack would be a step forward, for any attack against colonialism is a step forward, regardless of bloodshed (Fanon 146). The rejection of Tikal Futura and the Eurocentrism it implies is quite apparent not only within the work of fiction, but also in Fanon’s call for decolonization as well: “Let us decide not to imitate Europe and let us tense our muscles and our brains in a new direction. Let us endeavor to invent a man in full, something which Europe has been incapable of achieving” (236).

This same sentiment against a Western hegemony and “superiority” is present throughout both of the novels analyzed in this chapter. As I have argued thus far, the unforgiving criticism towards the United States in particular in these two narratives is really a criticism that attacks, more so, pervasive phenomena like global capitalism and its ramifications. The fact that the North receives a more weighty blame than any other nation is not without reason, yet the representative nature of what the United States stands for is where the power of these texts lies as they promote, and prompt their readers to consider, viable social and economic alternatives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The struggle of the Central American characters in the works of fiction discussed here certainly extends well beyond the limits of a U.S. neocolonial economic expansion. Rather, we may think of the economic globalization explored in the works as one synonymous with modernization (Robinson 147). In other words, the neocolonialism of which I speak in this chapter is inherently part of that modernity, and not only a U.S.-driven phenomenon: “Coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity – there is no modernity without

coloniality” (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 3). It is precisely this violent social dynamic, argue Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui in *Coloniality at Large*, where globalization, neoliberalism, and capitalism necessarily perpetuate coloniality in Latin America (12). In a similar vein, García Canclini reminds us that we must not confuse “la globalización necesaria de la economía y la cultura con la hegemonía estadounidense” (*Consumidores* 128).

Even so, and despite the overwhelming nature of such immense, far-reaching systems and processes, the novels indicate – rightfully so – that alternative economic and social systems *do* exist. Unlike García Canclini’s belief that certain forms of globalization are “necessary,” other critics arrive at very distinct conclusions. William I. Robinson has constantly pointed out that the historical changes that brought about globalization primarily during the 1970s and 1980s were *not* predetermined. In fact, if the revolutionary forces throughout Latin America had won and gained political power, the outcome may have been very different (69). He later affirms, in a much more direct manner, that “[g]lobalization is the *resistible* renewal of capitalism” (319, emphasis in the original); it necessarily remains partial and incomplete as a process, with spaces for resistance. To that end, the ideas we may choose to implement as a means of seeking true democracy and equality need not be perfect before they are indeed applied. In other words, the decolonial projects that *Cantos de las guerras preventivas* and *Tikal Futura* promote do not need to reach a state of polished perfection or fullness prior to the employment of these concepts in society. The project of decolonization will, undoubtedly, take any number of forms given the community and peoples that are employing the ideas, meaning that there is ultimately no perfect form on which to wait to be developed anyway (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 295).

The slow dismantling of global capitalism will, most likely, result in substantial difficulties for Central America (and the broader Global South as well). Fanon comments on the

matter in a less than eloquent, yet very realistic way, when he states that decolonization is “clearly an agenda for total disorder,” a process that obviously mandates the vast restructuring of Eurocentric-based Western societies first and foremost (2). Once the social conception of development finds a firm foothold in the nation-states allegorically represented within the novels, global capitalism will certainly be altered at a much greater rate (Robinson 330). Finally, as Said points out, the peoples of any given nation-state hold significant political power, for we know that the dominant nations (colonizers) depend on the subordinate ones (colonized) in order to maintain their colonizing and imperialist mentalities (*Culture* xix). This is why each novel in this chapter also places no small amount of responsibility on the inhabitants of Central America for resisting and changing the current state of affairs, not exclusively for what has happened to them, but instead for what might happen to them in the future with the newfound knowledge and insight provided by the fictional texts.

As we can see, the novels in this chapter radically differ from those in chapters one and two in regards to their support for or complicity with the U.S.-sponsored neoliberal economic agenda. The social criticism as identified in Contreras Castro and Galich tends much more towards an Asturian form of critiquing the North wholeheartedly as with his Banana Trilogy narratives of the 1950s and 1960. This is evident not only from the words and actions of the characters in each text considered here, but also in the futuristic dystopian genres that reflect each author’s response to economic globalization. Still, the intense and relatively exclusive critical focus on the United States as the major proponent of such an economic world system, diminishing the participation of Central American elites and effectively erasing that of other nations, means that the fictional works in question, like Asturias, may also establish unrepresentative binaries. That is, the narratives could be understood as drawing up the



relationships between the North and Central America as an us-versus-them dynamic, which – although possibly quite effective for transmitting social criticism – has the potential to oversimplify and essentialize very complex issues. Nevertheless, *Cantos* and *Tikal Futura* offer critical perspectives on cultural decolonization that urgently need to be considered in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## CHAPTER 4: THE CONSTRICTING TENTACLE: IMPOSING IDENTITIES ON CENTRAL AMERICAN-AMERICANS

The previous three chapters of this study have all considered the imperialist legacy of U.S. foreign policies as fictionalized in a number of representative Central American narratives during the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The explorations of this enduring legacy have largely centered on social, cultural, and economic imperialism as it manifests in various forms in the selected literary works. Chapter four, however, refocuses the critical gaze geographically, shifting from the Isthmus to the United States itself. That is, the same dominant Eurocentric power structures will be analyzed, yet the novels in this chapter – Salvadoran(-American) Mario Bencastro's *Odisea del Norte* (1999) and Honduran(-American) Roberto Quesada's *Nunca entres por Miami* (2002) – bring to light questions of identity impositions and social limitations forced upon the broader Central American-American population, a group to which both authors belong. The designation of Central American-American in this chapter simply refers to those of Central American descent living in the United States, including both recent arrivals and those who have been established for many generations, that also voluntarily acknowledge and accept such a classification along with its social and political implications as part of their identities. Naturally, this widely-encompassing definition runs the risk of homogenizing very diverse Central American(-American) peoples at the same time that it intends to defy the “Latina/o” and “Latin American” labels that frequently efface the Isthmian presence in the United States, as cultural critic Arturo Arias reminds us (“Invisibility” 172).<sup>1</sup> It is this broad conception of the

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<sup>1</sup> Dialoguing critically with Arturo Arias, whom he cites in his publication, literary critic Michael Millar indicates that Bencastro, in *Odisea* specifically, combats the “self-effacement and sense of non-belonging” that many Central

term posited by Arias that I adhere to in this chapter. The designation in this particular literary context, then, allows two primary goals to be achieved. First, it helps to underscore the significant regional immigration that has taken place predominantly from the 1980s on, mostly as a result of the armed struggles in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala as well as the ensuing neoliberal economic policies implemented in these and other Isthmian countries throughout the 1990s and 2000s (like CAFTA-DR). Additionally, the term also aids in a significant way in the recuperation of the displaced, diasporic population of Central America that is oftentimes excluded or disregarded from critical conversations, or considered separately as if it were a disconnected group: “Without dislocating Central America from its geographic location, and without finding new ways to conceive of Central America, the cultural experiences of the US diaspora will remain missing or marginal in most histories of Central America” (Cárdenas 118).<sup>2</sup> In this way, the works capture what cultural critic Stuart Hall considers a common cultural identity, an identity that on one hand obscures everyday details in order to promote unity and a shared history that unites cultures and peoples (223). Essential to this concept is undoubtedly what Hall deems an “imaginative rediscovery,” or how this sense of shared culture is expressed through art forms such as cinema, photography, and, of course, literature (224).

Besides concentrating on the difficulties of adopting and incorporating new cultural, social, and political identities for Central American-Americans, the novels in this chapter, I argue, problematize the role of U.S. society as one that ensures the continued marginalization of Central American-Americans through the promotion of exclusionary hegemonic social values

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American-Americans face by employing “cultural expression, imagination and the reinvention of Salvadoran experiences and identities” in his writing (48).

<sup>2</sup> Arturo Arias also calls attention to the fact that in many instances the Academy has – problematically so – divided Central Americans into those in the Isthmus (Latin American Studies) and those in the United States (Latina/o Studies) (“Centroamericanidades” 20). This chapter especially, as does this project in general, intends to consider Central America without such a radical division purely based on physical location.

that seriously impinge upon and, in a way, unilaterally determine who they are and how they are perceived and understood in the United States. When speaking of such exclusionary social values and structures, I have in mind what Ramón Grosfoguel deems to be a Eurocentric paradigm that prioritizes capitalism, militarism, Christianity, patriarchy, whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity (“Epistemic” 216), a notion quite in sync with social theorist Aníbal Quijano and his concept of coloniality of power.<sup>3</sup> We may understand, then, that the impositions upon Central American-American identity actually begin long before arrival to the United States. That is, past U.S. military interventions in the region, militarized and fortified U.S. borders that must be negotiated (with or without proper documentation), and even individual expectations and fantasies regarding the “American Dream” all shape the image of and simultaneously serve to place limits on what it means to be Central American-American. Once within the U.S. borders, however, countless additional challenges and impositions arise: the constant threat of deportation, economic failure, unemployment or underemployment, discrimination, and so on that potentially affect both undocumented immigrants and legal U.S. residents and citizens; mistaken identities (especially when physical features are superficially relied upon); the forced assumption of identities or other nationalities for strategic purposes; the personal mediation of connections to the homeland versus connections to the United States; the co-existence with more dominant groups of Hispanics, such as the traditional “big three” – Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, and Puerto Ricans; the need to bear an at times blatantly hostile or racist society; and constantly battling negative cultural and ethnic stereotypes that plague the broader immigrant

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<sup>3</sup> Quijano’s concept also centers on the idea of racial hierarchies as fundamental to social and labor dynamics: “The new historical identities produced around the foundation of the idea of race in the new global structure of the control of labor were associated with social roles and geohistorical places. In this way, both race and the division of labor remained structurally linked and mutually reinforcing...[and] a systematic racial division of labor was imposed” (536). Arturo Arias sums up Quijano’s idea in the following manner: “Coloniality of power basically means the production of identities based on race, conjoined with a hierarchy between European and non-European identities in which the first have oppressed all others...” (“Second Decade” 12).

community from south of the U.S. border. As a result of all of these impositions beyond the immediate control of Central American-Americans, it seems that the metaphor of a constricting tentacle is appropriate for this chapter. This is so because the imperialist social influences accompany the immigrants in their home countries as well as throughout their journey to the North. The relatively inescapable, tight grip of imposed inferiority does not lessen after arrival either – the current social, economic, and political hierarchies do not permit true freedom or democracy, but instead constantly squeeze, pressure, constrict, and mold those within their grasp.

Although *Odisea del Norte* and *Nunca entres por Miami* call attention to the power structures that continue to dictate Central American-American identity in large part within the texts, they do not actively criticize the hierarchical system nor do they propose a dismantling of it as do the novels in chapter three. Rather, Bencastro and Quesada contribute to what Said has termed the “ideological resistance” that may eventually lead to cultural decolonization (*Culture* 209), that is, an awareness of one’s circumstances and imposed limitations: “To become aware of one’s self as belonging to a subject people is the founding insight of anti-imperialist nationalism” (214). Though “nationalism” may not be the most appropriate word choice for the collectivity of all Central American-Americans in this particular context, the cultural consciousness presented through fictional writing allows for the expression of their repressed status to be contrasted with other marginalized groups, such as others identifying as Latinas/os in the United States. This is, of course, absolutely crucial for social and political recognition and for the avoidance of continued invisibility, or the lack of political power and a collective voice. As more and more Central American-American writers speak out by publishing literary works, their texts slowly erode the hegemony of the dominant voices that have long drowned them out: “conventional narrative is...central to imperialism’s appropriative and dominative attributes. Narrative itself is

the representation of power, and its teleology is associated with the global role of the West” (Said, *Culture* 273). This sentiment is also echoed by Stuart Hall in reference to Europe speaking on behalf of Africa, an Other: “Where Africa was a case of the unspoken, Europe was a case of that which is endlessly speaking – and endlessly speaking *us*” (232, emphasis in the original). Narrative production by the authors discussed in this chapter, then, may amount to a shift away from traditionally Western values as well as a degradation of the Eurocentric hegemony. Nonetheless, Central American-Americans face yet another obstacle: a “triple taint.” By this, cultural critic Arturo Arias explains that, unlike other well-established minority groups in the United States, including the “big three” Latinas/os, Central American-Americans are automatically perceived by the general U.S. society as “illegals,” Communists, and – by themselves – as lesser than Mexicans and Mexican-Americans (“Invisibility” 178). We come to see, then, that the “ideological resistance” offered by these literary works ties in to a much larger effort to achieve a recognized – and respected – status as Central American-Americans in the United States.

Though I will analyze each novel more in depth below, may it suffice to point out now that each work of immigrant literature explored here intends to speak out against negative stereotypes that haunt the Hispanic community generally in the United States, as well as to demythify the concept of the “land of opportunity,” goals that at once question prevailing social structures and what it means to be Central American-American.<sup>4</sup> The novels, to be sure, approach these ideas from distinct positions, offering thoughts on resistance and identity in their

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<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I subscribe to literary critic Nicolás Kanellos’s definition of Hispanic immigrant literature as conceived in the following manner: “Hispanic immigrant literature is the literature created orally or in written form by immigrants from the Hispanic world who have come to U.S. shores since the early nineteenth century. Among its characteristics are (1) predominantly using the language of the homeland; (2) serving a population united by that language, irrespective of national origin; and (3) solidifying and furthering national identity. The literature of immigration serves a population in transition from the land of origin to the United States by reflecting the reasons for emigrating, recording the trials and tribulations of immigration, and facilitating adjustment to the new society, all the while maintaining a link with the old society” (7).

own ways. Stuart Hall's second interpretation of cultural identity, then, which focuses not only on a common history but rather on individuality and uniqueness, becomes much more relevant (225). This second sense of identity, Hall asserts, is the only way to understand traumatic legacies (like the colonial and diasporic experiences) due to the deeper reflection on the part of the dominated and marginalized subjects (225). Both texts, for instance, make no qualms about revealing the extreme challenges of physically getting to the United States, securing and maintaining employment, affording basic necessities like housing and food, battling machismo and other culturally-based stereotypes, and the need to alter one's identity in an attempt to survive in a relatively hostile environment. All of these points challenge – rightfully so – the traditionally positive image of the “American Dream” and the idea of the “land of the free.” Grosfoguel reminds us that “[m]igrants do not arrive to an empty or neutral space. Rather, migrants arrive to metropolitan spaces that are already ‘polluted’ by a colonial history, a colonial imaginary, colonial knowledges, a racial/ethnic hierarchy linked to a history of empire” (*Latin@s* 10). This is, in part, what Bencastro's and Quesada's fictional narratives allude to, as well as to what Grosfoguel goes on to explain as a cultural racism: “Cultural racist discourse uses ‘culture’ as a marker of inferiority and superiority, reinstalling again the same colonial/racial hierarchy of the European/Euro-American colonial expansion” (*Latin@s* 13). To be sure, “[b]y essentializing and naturalizing cultural features or habits, cultural racism reproduces indirectly a form of biological racist reduction,” yet this new “discourse” effectively avoids the word “race” and, therefore, is oftentimes not viewed as racist by the general U.S. society (13).

In order to more fully analyze the fictional representations of the United States in this chapter, notably just how the Eurocentric hierarchical system encroaches upon the Central American-American characters, I rely on a number of cultural critics and theorists that have

already explored this topic in greater depth, including Arturo Arias, Claudia Milian, and Ana Patricia Rodríguez. These particular critics, among others, tend to focus on the invisibility and marginality of Central American-Americans. In addition to these cultural intellectuals, the contributions of post-colonial thinkers will be relevant to the conversation as well, namely Edward W. Said and Ramón Grosfoguel, along with other critics from areas like subaltern studies (Ranjit Guha) and diaspora studies (Stuart Hall). I begin by exploring Bencastro's and Quesada's texts individually, which ultimately leads us to consider an array of identity impositions stemming from the dominant social hierarchies presented in the narratives, such as the ones listed above (mistaken identities, forced identities, a hostile society, and so on). After analyzing the effects of each of these impositions in both of the novels, I then consider the patriarchal, male-centered perspective that the texts display. Accordingly, this aspect of the works enters into dialogue with the generally anti-Eurocentric stance that the novels assume, permitting a deeper exploration of just how ingrained, albeit subconsciously, the dominant power structures may be, even in those who struggle against them. Lastly, I comment on the works' joint status as narratives of immigrant literature and as didactic novels. This final exploration of the novels' genre serves to strengthen and unite the critical and theoretical framework throughout the chapter that problematizes Central American-American identity impositions. As a result of these generic connections, we find that the critical issues raised by the texts reveal wider, systemic concerns and not merely ones that arise on an infrequent or individual basis.

*Odisea del Norte* and *Nunca entres por Miami* may both be considered representative novels regarding the specific concerns raised in this chapter. The works, for their part, treat both undocumented immigration (Bencastro) along with those who arrive with their official paperwork in order (Quesada). We also know that both writers moved to the United States and



that they have each resided in the North for approximately 20 years, or more as is the case of Bencastro, adding a somewhat autobiographical layer to the insight and social criticism that the novels offer. To that end, at least one literary critic points out that Bencastro's migration was provoked in 1980 by the armed struggle in El Salvador, and that there are certain parallels that run between him and the undocumented political refugee and protagonist of *Odisea*, Calixto (Flores Caballero 18, 22). Each of the texts also connects historical U.S. foreign policies in the region to current immigration and resettling in the North, calling attention to the complexity and interrelated factors that define Central American-Americans today. In other words, the novels don't obscure the imperialist and neoliberal projects that have given rise to such massive northbound migrations, nor do they ignore the social and cultural implications of such processes for the immigrant subjects in the United States. Literary critic Rafael Lara-Martínez summarizes such transnational processes in the following manner: "Paradójicamente, la fuerza de intervención norteamericana que frenó el movimiento revolucionario se revirtió sobre los propios EEUU; de allí que el apoyo estratégico y militar se tradujera en éxodo masivo a la metrópolis" (22). This cyclical pattern, where the United States intervenes abroad only to be met with unintended consequences domestically after the fact, dialogues with historian Greg Grandin's idea that I mention in chapter three where the United States – in many cases – creates and perpetuates its ideological enemies who then resist imperialist interventions.

Thematically speaking, both novels studied in this chapter intimately concentrate on identity, namely the unstable balancing act that requires the division of self between a homeland and the United States; that is, the very process of becoming Central American-American. Such a challenge also implies managing personal desires and cultural and social expectations, hinting at what Arturo Arias calls the "performative contradiction" of being Central American-American

(but not considered by all as truly “American”) (“Invisibility” 171). The works also highlight the fact that the balancing act regarding one’s identity is not simply limited to the one-way mediation of personal reflection, adoption, and adaptation in relation to Central American-American questions of identity. Instead, the narratives point out that such an identity necessitates a two-way avenue in which those characters of Central American descent also effect positive change within the broader U.S. society as they assert both their individuality and their collectivity. That is to say, the Central American-Americans in the novels enrich the United States culturally (and economically, of course) by redefining the idea of “home” and “homeland” for many Americans (Aparicio 31). Furthermore, as the novels point out the identity crises that a Eurocentric U.S. society fuels for the Central American-American characters in the narratives, we find that the texts serve another purpose as well – to counterbalance the hegemonic “silence” tacitly expected from the diasporic Central American populations (Siu 95). Along these lines, Said also recognizes the importance of discrediting such an assumed silence from Othered and marginalized peoples: “Without significant exception the universalizing discourses of modern Europe and the United States assume the silence, willing or otherwise, of the non-European world. There is incorporation; there is inclusion; there is direct rule; there is coercion. But there is only infrequently an acknowledgement that the colonized people should be heard from, their ideas known” (*Culture* 50).

### ***Odisea del Norte: Keeping Central America Close at Heart***

*Odisea del Norte* takes place from the mid-1980s through the early 1990s, culminating in the 1991 Mount Pleasant riots in Washington, D.C. The novel begins with a crowd of people standing around an undocumented Central American who has fallen multiple stories to his death on a D.C. sidewalk while washing windows. Calixto, his fellow undocumented co-worker and

the protagonist of the novel, decides to leave the scene, frightened that the police will want to question him for the investigation. After this event, and despite living in the United States, Calixto reflects upon current hardships like the situation with his apartment, which is shared with 20 other people, and the hunger and poverty that he finds not so radically different from El Salvador. Calixto's sudden unemployment and his disillusion are soon replaced with hope when Juancho, his cousin, secures them both jobs as dishwashers in a restaurant that has recently been raided by U.S. immigration officers. Due to a series of flashbacks throughout the work, we know that Calixto fled El Salvador after being falsely declared a political enemy of the government. Knowing that José, a friend, was soon heading to the North, Calixto decided to leave Lina, his wife, and their children behind in order to embark on the treacherous journey, accompanying and protecting acquaintances Elisa and Silvia along the way. Although they must pass as Mexicans and endure physical pain from cactuses and dehydration, Calixto's group manages to avoid robberies, rapes, and other violent crimes. After crossing the Río Grande/Río Bravo, a small bus transports them to Silver City, New Mexico where, to their dismay, immigration officers arrest them and take them to *El Corralón*, a prison for undocumented immigrants in Texas. We learn that Juancho, who is already in D.C., pays Calixto's bail and, as a result, he is able to leave, as are José, Elisa, and Silvia who are also released on bail that same day. The group makes their way to the nation's capital to begin their new lives in the United States.

The novel, however, does not unfold in a chronological order, but rather intertwines Calixto's tale of departure and migration with his present life in Washington, D.C. In addition to Calixto's housing and hunger difficulties after arriving to the city, he fears being outside during his first few months there, yet his relatively stable job as a dishwasher brings some comfort and structure to his daily life. This place of employment plays host to many cultural and critical

conversations between Calixto, Juancho, and other members of the kitchen staff, including a Colombian and a Chilean. Each character offers his ideas on what it means to be American, each recalls memories of his homeland for the others, and they all nostalgically share stories from their pasts with the group. One afternoon, however, Calixto is off work and finds himself with fellow Salvadorans drinking in a park in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood where, unresponsive to a police officer's request (largely due to a language barrier) to stop consuming alcohol in public, a transgression takes place and a police officer shoots and wounds a man named Daniel. The ensuing mayhem produces what is now known as the Mount Pleasant riots, resulting in "diez oficiales [que] fueron heridos, incluso uno acuchillado en el hombro, cinco carro-patrullas y una camioneta de la policía [que] fueron incendiadas y varios otros vehículos [que] fueron dañados por piedras y otros proyectiles... Se hicieron un total de ocho arrestos por desorden civil" (Bencastro 134). The cultural clash eventually calms down a few days later, and before too long the New Year is arriving, a time when Calixto recognizes that he has much to be grateful for, such as his steady employment and the fact that he is still alive. Along with his restaurant co-workers and others of Mexican, Central, and South American origin, there is a lively celebration at a local bar to ring in the New Year, a reminder that each of these people from distinct backgrounds shares in the Hispanic, undocumented, and/or Central American-American experience. Lastly, it is necessary to mention that, although Calixto's storyline represents the main fictional plot, the novel has intercalated a number of side stories, including a handful of newspaper articles, the story of the rejection of Teresa's political asylum application, and a few letters between guerrilla combatant lovers, one fighting in El Salvador and the other removed to safety in Los Angeles. I will comment more on this multiplicity of voices below when I explore the novel's form and its critical implications.

Among many forms of identity imposition upon the Central American-American characters due to the U.S.'s Eurocentric social value system as represented in Bencastro's novel, the first to appear is that of mistaken identities. The first 30 pages of the novel present three distinct cases in which non-Spanish speaking characters are either believed to be of Hispanic descent or remain inexcusably unidentifiable, an indication that skin color and physical features are what many characters depend upon to make their hasty, incorrect ethnic judgments. In the first instance, police officers attempting to identify the deceased window washer in the opening scene speak in Spanish to an Afghan, who does not understand what they are asking at all (2). Likewise, Calixto speaks in Spanish to a man from India, whose inability to respond leaves Calixto upset and disheartened (5). Lastly, when an Indigenous immigrant perishes in a fire, Calixto and his friends are unable to determine if he was Quechua, Aymara, or Maya, or perhaps from another people altogether, despite having known him (26). Though seemingly innocent mistakes that come from both American and Central American characters in the work, the truly problematic nature of these errors surfaces when we consider them in greater depth. The ethnic mix-ups ultimately speak to social and cultural expectations that people have when physical attributes are the primary means of identification. What's more, the assumptions point to how race classifies everyone in modern U.S. society into specific "ranks, places, and roles," an extremely effective labeling system that the global, dominant power structure thrives upon (Quijano 535, 572). Since Central Americans, Indigenous peoples, Indians, and Middle Easterners are all misidentified together in the narrative, we may suspect that they all occupy a similarly marginalized social stratum based on their physical features (like dark skin) and their apparent inability to proficiently communicate in English. Keeping Grosfoguel's Eurocentric paradigm in mind, these characters, then, already do not meet the hegemonic criteria of being

white and English-speaking, and thus are all likely to find access to political, cultural, and social power lacking. Cultural critic Geoffrey Fox adds that

For many other Americans, the word Hispanic implies particular racial traits. Thus, in New York or Los Angeles or many other cities, the police will describe a perpetrator or victim as Hispanic based only on his or her appearance. This generally means someone who is too dark to be white, too light to be black, and who has no easily identifiable Asian traits. As a consequence, an Afghan, Asian Indian, American Indian, English-speaking West Indian, southern Italian, or Arab is frequently taken for Hispanic, whereas a Spanish-speaking blond Mexican or Chinese Peruvian is not. (32)

This critical observation by Fox finds direct relevance in *Odisea*, revealing just how many people in the United States, including representatives of the law, imagine “Hispanic” and, indeed, “Central American-American.” Fox’s description of how many Americans process the word “Hispanic” also points to the superficiality and lack of sincere interest on behalf of those in a more privileged position to consider their fellow, yet much more marginalized, citizens and neighbors in a respectful manner. Such classifications, both in Bencastro’s novel and in real life, serve to undermine the identities of those of other nationalities and ethnicities wrongly labeled as Hispanic as well as those who consider themselves Hispanic, though now greatly misrepresented (Arias, “Invisibility” 179).

What these mistaken identities ultimately unveil in Bencastro’s fictional narrative is that much of U.S. society classifies, stereotypes, and discriminates based on physical appearances and other racial or ethnic indicators, oftentimes in an exceedingly superficial manner. Although Said refers to an imperialistic “structure of attitude and reference” as the collectivity of cultural products of a society (like novels) that allude to imperialism and neocolonialism, his concept is also applicable to the Eurocentric mindset and manner of classifying that we can readily identify here (*Culture* 62). This is evident due to the relatively “unchallenged authority” that the hegemonic, white social power structures enjoy when compared to the devalued minorities in the

narrative (Said, *Culture* 101).<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, as literary critic Linda J. Craft points out, the opening scene of *Odisea*, with an unidentified Central American dead on the sidewalk and an Afghan presumed to be Hispanic, initiates a theme coursing throughout the entire novel – that of ambiguity and discrimination surrounding Salvadoran, Salvadoran-American, and, I propose, Central American-American identity in general (149).

Along with cases of mistaken identities, we must also consider those of forced identities where, in order to avoid standing out and to be more readily accepted, some Central American characters in the novel must assume an identity other than their own, oftentimes as Mexican or Mexican-American. On the trip to the North, for instance, the *coyotes* tell the travelers that, when passing through Guatemala and Mexico, that they must speak with a Mexican accent, know the Mexican Independence Day, employ Mexican vocabulary, memorize Mexico's national anthem and general history, and claim to be from Mexico: "Si en México les preguntan '¿De dónde vienes?' ustedes deben responder 'Yo vengo de Guanajuato'" (51). Others in the group will be from León, Guerrero, Jalisco and Mérida (51). José, Calixto's friend and travel companion, laughingly comments later at a Mexican market: "Esto sí que es chistoso. Nunca imaginé que un día, para comer, tendría que hablar como mexicano" (71). Although this compulsory identity adoption occurs beyond the borders of the United States, it is still a necessary step required by the broader immigration process to get to the North, and it offers practice for a survival tool Stateside that many find themselves forced to utilize, especially when we remember Arias's notion of the "triple taint." Nevertheless, there are significant cultural ramifications for Central Americans when wielding such a survival tool: it has "not only prevented their emergence and

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<sup>5</sup> These same concepts still maintain their vigor today, as noted especially by the recent election of Donald J. Trump as the succeeding president of the United States. Even a cursory glance at his winning election platform reveals anti-Muslim and anti-Hispanic policies and beliefs (among other discriminatory values) that reflect the very social power structures to which Said refers above. We find, then, that cultural production like the novels explored here have renewed and continuing relevance in today's society.

recognition, but [has] served to undermine their identity, and contributed to the discrediting of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans as well” (Arias, *Taking Their Word* 199). That is, just as with the mistaken identities discussed above, the identity of both the performer (Central American) and the performed (Mexican) fall subject to stereotypes, clichés, and essentializations that are not to the true advantage of anyone (Arias, “Invisibility” 179). As one character frustratingly comments, it is not easy nor desirable for Central American immigrants to make these major changes to themselves: “No es fácil... Es imposible cambiar de identidad de la noche a la mañana” (Bencastro 71). The “skill” of assuming another identity, then, has consequences that extend well beyond the immediate social circumstances in which the characters find themselves, ultimately contributing to the invisibility of the Central American-American population in the United States. Though still not a leading hegemonic group, the hierarchical social structure of the United States has placed Mexican-Americans, among other Latina/o groups, above Central American-Americans, hence the perceived necessity in the fictional narrative to change one’s identity for greater social agency.

The U.S. society and its cultural beliefs and social expectations, then, are what ultimately force the Central American-American characters to seek invisibility, oftentimes in the refuge of becoming a more “acceptable” Mexican-American as we see above. Without the political recognition and the social acceptability that Mexican-Americans have generally earned, Central American-Americans find that protection from the State is lacking, which means that these marginalized subjects are pushed farther to the fringes where they are otherwise transformed into social outcasts (Siu 108). Trying to resolve this invisibilization through the assumption of another nationality, as we have seen, may only result in more impositions upon their identities. Literary critic Ana Patricia Rodríguez brings up another potential pitfall in this regard:



“Although they [Central American migrants] leave their homelands as political martyrs, in the United States they are forced into a labor migrant narrative, in which they become depoliticized, dehistoricized, and deterritorialized economic seekers, searchers for the ‘American’ way” (“Refugees” 389-90). The “narratives” into which Central American immigrants may be carelessly classified, such as that of labor migrant, have the tendency to overwrite personal stories and to establish a homogenizing anonymity where plurality and diversity would otherwise dominate. This process of homogenization of immigrant stories surfaces ironically when Calixto and the group of immigrants are imprisoned in *El Corralón*, where they must wear decommissioned U.S. military pants and jackets to protect them from the winter cold (155). This clothing serves as an obvious reminder that the Eurocentric, militarized U.S. power structures envelop their lives, both literally and metaphorically, eliminating unique differences and individuality in the process as each prisoner bears the same garments.

Such forceful impositions of identity as this pull the characters in at least two directions – that of their homeland and that of the United States –, meaning that their status as Central American immigrants necessitates the formation and subsequent mediation of a dual, or even multiple, identity, for they now have various “homes,” regardless of their likes or dislikes. Early on, we learn that Calixto has major misgivings about his newly adopted home in Washington, D.C., and that at times he wonders if he made a terrible mistake by coming to the United States: “Lo asaltó el recuerdo de su barrio, la vida de hambre y miseria que allá llevaba, y pensó que hasta entonces poco o nada había cambiado su situación, porque en este país también sufría y le era difícil establecer si era mejor estar aquí o allá” (6). One of the most appropriate statements that summarizes the underlying message of the entire novel is provoked by nostalgia for El Salvador and the realization that life is unforgiving in the United States: “Aquí uno viene a pasar

situaciones difíciles” (16). Despite struggling to survive in the North, the Central American characters manage to keep much needed connections to their homelands alive through nostalgic recollections of their rural lifestyles, their wives and families, their childhoods, their favorite celebrations, and so on. Just as some researchers claim that sending gifts and remittances back home to the Isthmus represents a vicarious “return migration” when financial and legal restrictions do not permit a physical return, I argue that these personal memories that the fictional characters share largely serve the same purpose when the possibility of return is more or less non-existent (Miyares 75). The notion of the impossibility of return seems to be the perception, if not the reality, for many immigrants in the novel, where a return home due to economic failure is simply unfathomable; one homeless man even remarks that he’d rather die than go back to his family in El Salvador having failed at taking full advantage of the “land of opportunity,” an evasive notion that gains somewhat mythical status as the novel plays out (57).

The emotional pushes and pulls that so many of the Central American characters experience when attempting to mediate and balance their identities also implies a constant psychological sway between eagerness and energy and being downtrodden and dismayed, between economic success and failure, and between social acceptance and rejection. The effects of such wearing indecision and lack of clarity take on many forms within the narrative. In the most notable case, Calixto’s cousin Juancho Molinos decides that he is now Johnnie Mills, completely renouncing his Salvadoran past in order to be more American: “Es que, al país que fueres haz lo que vieres...,” his justification to Calixto for such an abrupt identity change (140). Along with his name change, Juancho begins to date a *gringa*, he buys all new clothes, and he acquires a Trans Am car. When Calixto questions his Salvadoran identity, Juancho/Johnnie emphatically exclaims that he is no longer Salvadoran: “¡Ahora soy de aquí!” (141). Perhaps a

purposefully ironic representation of assimilation, Calixto is bewildered by Juancho's new persona and remarks that with each passing day he, unlike his cousin, feels more and more Salvadoran because it's something that he feels in his heart; it isn't anything materialistic or superficial, nor a desire to feel more accepted (141). The fact that Calixto feels even closer to his Isthmian home and that he refuses to renounce that part of himself suggests that Bencastro affirms Salvadoran ethnicity and identity, even after emigrating, an implication that sacrificing one's identity in order to assimilate or to otherwise fit in is absolutely not necessary (Craft 159-60). To that end, we later find out that once Juancho loses his *gringa* girlfriend, he reverts back to his old self, Juancho Molinos. The depressing song on a jukebox to which he listens to console himself seems not only to apply to his fractured love life, but to the rejection and discrimination he faces thanks to the Eurocentric U.S. society for being Central American-American: "Te engañaron corazón por ser honrado, / entregaste tu querer a un ser malvado... / [...] Te juraron que te amaban locamente, / y hoy te dicen que no te quiero simplemente..." (181-82). These lyrics are, of course, reminiscent of the social and political dynamic where undocumented immigrants are welcome as long as they perform manual and agricultural labor and bear workplace exploitations in relative silence for very low wages, but are perpetual scapegoats for economic troubles and not ever truly accepted by the State due to "legalities" and xenophobic laws, such as restrictions placed on receiving driver's licenses, access to education, and paths to earn legal resident status.

The identity conflict that Juancho and Calixto must deal with in the scene described above demonstrates how relatively fixed concepts like "American" or "Westerner" differ so radically from those of the Other like "native" and "Central American-American," terms that have become so "integral and adaptable" to everyday life in the United States that it becomes

nearly impossible to alter their meanings and subsequent expectations (Said, *Culture* 110).

Likewise, as we witness with Juancho's transformation and reversal, simply re-labeling oneself does not change one's subject position. As Said explains, what these distinctions really boil down to, then, is a differentiation between those who are white and those who are not, a privileged distinction that the politically powerful and the cultural colonizers have had the ability to decide (*Culture* 134). Bencastro's literary work does not ignore these Eurocentric social dynamics at all, but instead shows that identity, in reality, is very fluid and not fixed; that it can and should defy such rigid social categories: "Through literature, Bencastro constructs ethnic identity by preserving myth and the memory of historical events, negotiating cultural politics, recording narratives of nostalgia, and deconstructing old assimilationist myths, following all the while processes of globalization and transnationalism" (Craft 150). What *Odisea del Norte* does, as do the characters in the novel itself, is speak out against the established definitions for Hispanic, immigrant, Central American-American, and so on. Calixto comes to realize while in *El Corralón* that sharing stories and voicing one's own narrative is absolutely fundamental for the repressed and marginalized peoples contained within the prison walls, clearly suggesting that they are imprisoned in large part due to cultural misunderstandings and imperialist hierarchies that devalue and dehumanize them, not because they are violent criminals or innate law-breakers. Calixto reflects further on the matter: "Parecía que todos y cada uno tenía la urgente necesidad de contar algo. El silencio era su peor enemigo, que los consumía internamente y los desesperaba, por lo que la solidaridad y la comprensión eran las más altas expresiones de amistad entre ellos. Todos necesitaban al menos alguien que los escuchara" (186). These thoughts return us to the discussions and analyses of chapter three, where theorists like Said and Linda Tuhiwai Smith comment on the necessity of narrating and telling stories and history from marginalized

perspectives in order to work towards a breakdown of the Eurocentric, hegemonic paradigm, that is, to work towards cultural decolonization. As a reminder, Tuhiwai Smith defines decolonization in the following way: “Decolonization, once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power” (101). As the Central American characters in Bencastro’s work wrestle with countless impositions upon their identities and make great efforts to alter repressive and dominant power structures, it becomes apparent that, as Ranajit Guha points out, the need for self-representation, of speaking out on one’s own terms, is absolutely fundamental to the continuing exploration of identity and, in this case, of what it means to be Central American-American (*Dominance* 201). This need is so profound, according to Hall, due to the fact that such a diasporic identity is (like all identities) unstable, constantly in flux, and expressible in an infinite number of unique ways: “The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (235, emphasis in the original).

Curiously enough, throughout the novel, Calixto does not really converse or interact with many Anglo-Americans, with the obvious exception of those in direct positions of law-related power and authority. These enforcers of the U.S. legal system, who also largely shape the social atmosphere for Central American-Americans, support a plainly hostile environment for the immigrant characters. This social and political oppression results from the words and actions of police officers, judges, immigration officers, lawyers, prison guards, and the military within the

narrative. All of these entities of the law, as we know, reflect the desires and decisions of the U.S. government and court system, the creator and interpreters of the laws. In many cases, we can readily observe anti-immigrant legislation in the narrative as promoting and strengthening the existing power structures. Such anti-immigrant laws are likely ones that “begin with an assumption of native backwardness and general inadequacy to be independent, ‘equal,’ and fit” (Said, *Culture* 80). Native, in this context, refers to those of non-European origin. What’s more, given the intended democratic electoral system in the United States, the general voting public is also intimately tied to the elected and legal officials who in turn create such xenophobic statutes. Among all of these fictional representatives of the law, the most constant threat to Calixto and the other undocumented Central American characters are the police, a daily, physical presence that threatens to unveil their (il)legal status and to ultimately facilitate their deportation. The police officers, for their part, express frustration towards these immigrants, for when the window washer has fallen to his death, one officer comments that, “En el pasado éramos nosotros los que invadíamos sus países, ahora ellos invaden el nuestro. Muy pronto Washington parecerá Latinoamérica” (3). The utilization of the word “invade” bears, of course, negative connotations when applied to the Latinas/os, and it implies that the Hispanic immigrants do not belong in and are not welcome in the United States. Another much more severe conflict has already been mentioned – the events leading up to the Mount Pleasant riots. The encounter is initiated when a language and cultural barrier fuels confusion and ire between Salvadorans and the police, resulting in police officers arresting a Salvadoran immigrant and beating like animals those who try to come to his defense before he is shot by one of the officers (74). Once wounded, even the ambulance takes a long time to arrive to deliver medical attention, suggesting that there is no sense of urgency to care for this undocumented immigrant (75). As the riots unfold over the next

few days and the social tensions rapidly explode, one of Calixto's neighbors observes that the police-on-protester violence is really not that much different than what is occurring in El Salvador, where the government attacks those participating in demonstrations only to be met with bottles and rocks thrown at them in return (96). The police treating Central American immigrants like animals in the novel is a disgusting pattern that continues throughout much of the text. One particularly macabre instance of this abuse is when a police officer near the southwest border discovers an undocumented 16-year-old girl and invites her to be a domestic employee in his home in exchange for not deporting her. However, the officer never pays the girl, and soon thereafter he begins to repeatedly rape her, threaten her with death if she were to tell anyone about the secret, and prevent her from ever receiving any type of education. She survives one and a half years of this abuse before managing to escape, only to be captured by immigration officers and imprisoned in *El Corralón* where she shares her story (151-152).

Along with the overbearing police presence, the entire framework for Calixto's journey to and subsequent life in the North is shaped by foreign policy decisions that have been made by the U.S. government, such as economic support for the Salvadoran civil war. Nonetheless, the consequences of supporting El Salvador's military and dictatorship are most tangibly represented in the novel through the case of Teresa, a 20-year-old political refugee whose husband, a former Salvadoran soldier, received his military training in the United States (104). However, having deserted the Salvadoran army due to death threats from the guerrillas, Teresa and her husband flee to the North. After various court hearings and proceedings, the judge determines that Teresa's husband is possibly at risk of physical injury or death if he were to return home, but she has not sufficiently proven her impending physical harm, and he thus denies her application for asylum (178). A few pages later, we learn that Teresa voluntarily returned to El Salvador where

she was found murdered, most likely due to “represalias políticas” as she had indicated that she believed would happen in her official court testimony (191). There are, as we clearly see, extremely limited options for legally-recognized Central American immigration within the work, as it is openly pointed out that the U.S. visa is designed to be unobtainable for the poor: “para dar la visa, piden muchos requisitos que la gente pobre como nosotros no reúne. Como tener buen empleo, dinero ahorrado en el banco, buenas referencias personales, boleto de viaje de ida y regreso, constancia de que las personas que uno va a visitar se encuentran en buena situación económica y legal, y otros requisitos más” (24). There is effectively no way for the poor and marginalized of Central America to hold a legal status, much less become legal residents, ultimately implying that Central American-Americans, unless wealthy, white, and educated are not a desirable addition to U.S. society. In *El Corralón*, this same sentiment is evident in the fact that prison guards tend to ignore violence occurring between the prisoners, and they often ignore their pleas for medical attention. One Dominican inmate, for example, even dies due to the guards’ unwillingness to provide timely medical aid (167). Lastly, all of these legal entities, representatives of the U.S. government, to be sure, spill over into mainstream, civilian society, where the antagonistically anti-immigrant “structure of attitude and reference” that Said identifies is continually renewed. One concrete example evident in the general U.S. society is when Calixto realizes that American children don’t play with innocent toys like he did during his childhood, but rather they play with more “indoctrinating” ones: “Aquí los niños quieren esos juguetes que anuncian día y noche por la televisión, como pistolas, rifles, tanques, barcos y aviones de guerra” (171). What these toys ostensibly do is foment an interest in and normalization of violence, as well as foster a tacit support for the military and the police from a



young age, even if they do not understand the implications of what all is happening politically, either overseas or domestically.

Calixto's experiences in the United States have not amounted to the "land of opportunity" that so many immigrants imagine in the narrative. As a result, the novel greatly contributes to the demythification of such a notion. In one instance in the bus station in Mexico City, the narrator observes that the movement of the buses simulates what seems to be "tentáculos de un inmenso pulpo," a creature that, due to the Mexican immigration officers, has the power – just like the "octopus" of the United States – to destroy "sus sueños de llegar al Norte, el paraíso que habían imaginado" (87). This imagined paradise, as Calixto's story and thoughts demonstrate, may be relatively comparable to the violence, hunger, and poverty of El Salvador; at least in El Salvador there are family, friends, and familiarity with the language, culture, land, social dynamics, and so on. The absence of the "American Dream" for Calixto, as literary critic Ana Patricia Rodríguez points out, really represents the circumstances for millions of immigrants from south of the U.S. border, including those of the "big three" Latina/o groups, among many others (*Dividing the Isthmus* 185). Despite this demythification that the novel presents, which is undoubtedly not the first critical instance of it, the "land of opportunity" lives on, both in reality and for those fictional characters in *Odisea del Norte* still clinging to optimism. Calixto offers insight in this regard when he states to Lina, his wife, that he must migrate to the North: "Es la única salida" (30). If, indeed, making the perilous journey to and the difficult re-situation in the United States is the only perceivable option for Calixto, it only makes sense to attempt to think positively, to imagine a *paraíso* (and not an *infierno*) and the success that may come with hard work and dedication. Still, as Calixto soon discovers, the reality of a paradise is non-existent, and we understand that others will ultimately find this out as well.

Bencastro's work drives this last point home, that many will realize that the United States isn't the golden "land of opportunity," in part by incorporating a variety of distinct formal structures into the narrative. This multiplicity of voices is presented not only through Calixto's storyline (both his past in El Salvador and his present in Washington, D.C.), but through the utilization of such diverse mediums as newspaper articles, court transcripts, and letters. The lack of a chronological progression or constant geographic location throughout the text also creates a sensation that blends past, present, and future, suggesting that the ideas presented in the novel are not necessarily restricted to any one time frame, place, or individual's experiences. Likewise, the varying supplemental narrative forms allow Bencastro to achieve another goal reaching beyond that of immigrant fiction that he has explained in an interview: "Las historias paralelas, la estructuración, la disciplina casi geométrica, todas esas cosas las aprendí de la pintura. Uno de los períodos de la pintura que más me entusiasmó fue el cubismo; y cierto período del cubismo aspiraba a mostrar un objeto desde muchos ángulos a un mismo tiempo" (Hood 567). What Bencastro aims to examine from many angles is, without a doubt, the Salvadoran diaspora and its surrounding circumstances, including the Central American-American experience (Toruño-Haensly 10). With all of this insight and understanding regarding the Salvadoran context and political and social history, *Odisea*'s critical commentaries help to define what it means to be a Central American immigrant in the United States, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

***Nunca entres por Miami: Getting Intimate with the "Land of Opportunity"***

In the late 1990s or early 2000s, Elías, a young Honduran sculptor, arrives at Miami's international airport with all of his visa paperwork in order for a prolonged visit in the United States, yet he still fears a rejection from U.S. immigration officials. The humorous and purposefully exaggerated tone of the novel soon becomes evident as Elías explains to the Cuban-

American agent that, as an artist, he is trying to work in New York, sacrificing his life in Honduras and leaving behind Helena, his girlfriend, in the process. But he has no return flight ticket, no proof of prior visits to the United States, and less than one hundred dollars in cash! Despite all of this and after a lengthy interrogation, the immigration official reluctantly lets Elías enter with a 6-month visa out of good faith after he sees some photographs of his sculptures. Once in New York, Elías rooms with Mario, a Honduran friend, since he only has \$10 at this point. Shortly after arriving, Elías communicates with Helena on the phone and relates his “traumatic” experience entering the United States through Miami and, if she is to visit him, he forbids her from entering there due to how dangerous he believes it was. Quesada’s notable humor is apparent throughout the novel, such as when Elías claims, to Mario’s bewilderment, that due to his anxiety at Miami’s airport he has suffered even more than the undocumented immigrants who must cross the desert. Helena, however, begins to suspect that Elías simply doesn’t want her to come see him when he tells her to avoid Miami at all costs. Since her mother, Dina, is obsessed with Miami, Helena absolutely refuses to accept Elías’s demand that she find a connecting flight elsewhere to get to New York. As a result, their relationship begins to seriously fray and Dina turns against him.

In desperate need of money, Elías begins to work as a busboy in a nearby restaurant, soon being promoted to waiter, although he grumbles at his noteworthy underemployment. He soon realizes that most of his co-workers are artists in similar situations, and he soon hits it off with one Chicana in particular, Laura. As Elías calls Helena less and less, Helena and Dina hypothesize that his anxiety has driven him to become a drug addict, or that he has become rich and powerful and that’s why he now neglects them entirely. Still, they recognize that without Elías and his money, they cannot establish their lives in Miami; Dina, for instance, would sell her

soul to the devil in order to get there, and they even joke of killing Elías for his money to live in Miami. In the meantime, Laura draws on a contact that she has in the art world to secure Elías his first art exposition in a small gallery. Amazingly enough, his piece of “modern art” that his roommate Mario claims to be trash (it is a recycled bicycle handlebar with paint on the ends titled “Antes del futuro”) is purchased by a rich eccentric for ten thousand dollars. Celebrating his first major sale, Elías makes love for the first time with Laura, with whom he had intended to wait due to his lingering feelings for Helena. In an ecstatic haze, he also sends Helena three thousand dollars to buy plane tickets to come to the United States. Ironically, Helena interacts with the same Cuban-American immigration agent that allowed Elías to enter in Miami, and the official and Helena end up going on a date later that afternoon in the city. Elías finds out two months later that Helena is now married to the official and that Dina also moved to Miami; they both played him good for his money. At Mario’s insistence, Elías tears up the last letter that Helena had mailed to him, and he decides that he will try to make amends with Laura and eventually see if she is interested in a serious relationship. Mario assures Elías that Laura would likely consider taking the risk to marry him since she has loved him all along.

Like *Odisea del Norte*, Quesada’s novel also explores what it means to be Central American-American in numerous ways, especially how prevalent negative cultural stereotypes help to force identities upon those who identify as such in U.S. society. Such negative ethnic stereotypes, as cultural critic Homi K. Bhabha reminds us, are really part of an imperialist discourse designed to repress the target population by labeling them as “degenerate types on the basis of racial origin,” a task carried out “in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (70). Likewise, as critics Ella Shohat and Robert Stam affirm, “[t]he sensitivity around stereotypes and distortions largely arises...from the powerlessness of

historically marginalized groups to control their own representation” (184). In one particular instance, Elías and Mario are speaking about the machismo label that so many male Spanish speakers are pegged with, and they ultimately conclude that it is a degrading invention that really puts Europeans and *gringos* at an advantage, as they are not classified so negatively in this regard (76). What these two fictional characters allude to in their conversation, then, is – in a way – the “invention of tradition” that Eric Hobsbawm speaks of, where certain repressive cultural elements and notions have been maintained over time by the dominant social groups, even when the notions are untrue and simply imposed through their repetition (4). Despite the seriousness of their discussion, the topic is still approached with humor, as Elías subsequently declares that he isn’t *machista* because a macho man would make demands of Helena, whereas he claims that he allows her to do anything she wants – except for visit Miami, or else they’ll break up (76)! Though we as readers see the irony in Elías’s request, in his mind he is truly trying to protect Helena from the “dangers” of Miami airport’s immigration officers. Along similar lines, the art gallery owner where Elías showcases his sculptures asserts that, when it comes to Latin American men, “Todos son iguales, una manada de borrachos” (111). Ingrained and widespread stereotypes like these, part of the normalized mentality comprising the “structure of attitude and reference” for many people in the United States, undoubtedly categorize the Central American characters in the novel as inappropriately attempting to be patriarchal, strong, and masculine within the pre-established Eurocentric social paradigm, yet they inevitably fall short, in large part, due to their inherently non-white, non-European status. This homogenizing classification that declares certain groups to be inferior and the resulting segmentation of the diverse U.S. population is, as Said asserts, one of imperialism’s most notable features: “[the] worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly,

exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental” (*Culture* 336). Or, I would add, that one is mainly, exclusively, anything but “Latina/o” or “Hispanic,” as these ethnic-based stereotypes in the work demonstrate. Eventually, out of frustration or perhaps desperation, Elías asks Mario why the Latinos are constantly plagued by such demeaning stereotypes in the United States: “¿Por qué será que a los latinos nos cae todo lo que se supone que son defectos? Que borrachos, que bulliciosos, que machistas, que apasionados, en fin” (137). What Elías effectively does with this question is interrogate the dominant power structures that keep him and Mario trapped in repressed social positions due to their status as Central American-Americans. The xenophobic atmosphere that Elías experiences is, just as we see in *Odisea*, undoubtedly fueled by general fear and prejudice from those who do rule, classify others, and establish values, all of which are ultimately tools designed to perpetuate the existing social, economic, political, and cultural hierarchies (Said, *Culture* 336).

The conflicting social expectations that the Central American-Americans must make sense of and negotiate in the novel are constantly compounded by the multiple identities that they must assume, including (at least in this case) Honduran and American. The mediation of these frequently opposing selves manifests in various forms for both Mario and Elías. Mario, for example, was dating an American girl when the United States invaded Panama in 1989 and, in a show of outrage and impotence, he broke up with her, convincing himself that as an American she was somehow directly tied to the military invasion and that she deserved punishment (101). Mario’s seemingly absurd decision, however, actually reflects the underlying rifts and consequences that continued U.S. military intervention in Central America has provoked: “The historical effect of trauma is ultimately the inscription of Central American-Americans in a history always bound to the imperial history of the US” (Arias, “Second Decade” 9).

Nevertheless, now more mature and having lived for more than a decade in the United States, Mario realizes that not every American supports or even understands the foreign policy strategies of their government. Elías also experiences a similar situation when he is torn between Helena (Honduras) and Laura (United States), and, although he desires both, he feels compelled to choose just one woman to love. In this context, opting for what is more or less monogamy may be the correct moral decision for Elías as he does not want to emotionally harm either Laura or Helena, but what seems to be at stake is really a preference for a national identity if each woman is read as an allegory for her homeland. Although Elías intended to be with Helena by bringing her to the United States, the physical and emotional distance diminished his passion for her, and Helena's eventual abandonment ultimately drives him to choose to become more "American" by settling down with Laura, an indication that he is cutting ties to Honduras and to his past; there is no longer anyone with whom he communicates in Honduras, nor does he have plans to return or to continue Honduran traditions and customs in New York. Rather, he will continue on as a Central American-American, with emphasis on the second American (142-147). Helena, for her part, resolves to do the same, for after marrying the immigration official, she signs her last letter to Elías not as Helena but as Helen. This same Anglicization of names is evident in *Odisea* as I mention above, where Juancho Molinos becomes Johnnie Mills, yet Calixto refuses to let anyone call him Cal, an American version of his name, for love of and an identification with his home country, El Salvador (142). Elías and Helena, then, choose to minimize their Honduran origins in an attempt to find happiness and to eventually assimilate into the U.S. culture. Although the novel indicates that things are going well romantically for both characters at its close, we may realize that, even if this is the case, the prevailing social paradigm in the United States will likely

make their pursuit of happiness and social incorporation a bit more challenging than they anticipate.

Allusions throughout the novel to these challenges that lie ahead for Elías and Helena have to do with hostile influences from the general U.S. society as they become Central American-Americans. The antagonistic forces to which I refer begin, of course, at the border in Miami's international airport and leave a particularly indelible impression upon Elías. The first immigration official (who is English-speaking only) with whom he interacts has so many questions for Elías that, despite having his visa pre-approved, he fears that he will be deported right then and there for not meeting other entrance criteria (7). The official also has difficulty understanding Elías, a clear indication that the cultural and language barrier, even in Miami, marginalizes those of Central America upon arrival: "Soy escultor... / ¿Escalator? – Dice en inglés –. Extraño trabajo, no sé qué ser exactamente escalator" (8-9). Eventually Elías manages to speak with the Cuban-American with whom he can communicate, and, out of desperation, he intends to justify his entrance in the United States by drawing on U.S. foreign policy in Honduras before the agent cuts him off:

¿Me van a enviar de regreso a mi país o veré a mi familia en Nueva York? He perdido un vuelo y perderé otro. ¿Qué he hecho para que me tengan aquí? No soy un asesino, no soy ladrón, soy simplemente un artista. Es increíble que esto pueda suceder, ustedes envían a quien les da la gana a mi país. Los hemos dejado que instalen más de veinte bases militares. Han hecho para ustedes y sus guerras tres aeropuertos. Los protegimos de los rojos...y yo que soy un inofensivo artista no puedo entrar aquí. ¿Dónde está la tan afamada democra... (12)

The immigration agent, to this passionate rant, responds calmly that denying passage isn't a question of politics, it's just the law (14). However, it obviously *is* a question of politics, as the Central American characters in the novel meet with greater social, cultural, political, and economic challenges than some of their other Hispanic or Latina/o immigrant counterparts. As



cultural critic Claudia Milian indicates, “Central American-American is the embodiment of marginality and invisibility in a given global north and a global south that exempts such geographies” (138). Additionally, although the double “American” in Central American-American conjures images of Latin America, U.S. Latinas/os, and U.S. American ideas, they do not necessarily “belong” to any of these groups, as Elías quickly discovers as he attempts to enter the country (Milian 139); this situation, where his identity slips between the cracks, leads to extra scrutinizing upon arrival.

Nonetheless, Mario points out to Elías after his traumatic ordeal that it isn’t just in Miami where those from Central and South America and the Caribbean have problems, it’s everywhere: “nos han declarado la guerra” (76). Even Dina in Honduras is aware of California’s anti-immigrant legislation, calling it an “especie de cacería” for undocumented immigrants (107). She is likely referring to California’s Proposition 187, a legal initiative from 1994 that intended to prohibit undocumented immigrants from accessing certain forms of healthcare, public education, and other social services provided by the state. After much reflection, Elías finally concludes that the problem isn’t with the citizens of the United States necessarily, but rather with the Eurocentric government that implements such repressive tendencies and reform: “La gente ama y los gobiernos odian. Un simple ciudadano no tiene ni voz ni voto contra un gobierno que va a cometer una atrocidad dentro o fuera de su país” (113).

Like in Quesada’s earlier novel *Big Banana* (1999), the paradox of a visible invisibility, or the evident marginalization of the Central American immigrant population in the U.S. society, is occurring here as well (Siu 98). In both fictional narratives, Quesada manages to parody the immigrant experience through the utilization of humor, yet the novels do not discount the hardships and the gravity of such situations where hunger, poverty, and identity crises abound

(Siu 99). Regardless of the repressive nature of the U.S. society in which Elías has arrived, though, a return to Honduras, especially after having failed economically, is not a viable option. Perhaps already entrenched in the capitalist and individualistic values of the North, or perhaps driven by the myth of the “land of opportunity,” Elías – like the homeless Salvadoran in *Odisea* who would rather die than return a failure – is unwilling to consider a life in Honduras without first being economically successful in the United States, even if no one else will know about his circumstances: “Tampoco puedo regresar porque qué dirán si vine a la tierra de las oportunidades y voy sin nada y sin nadie que me espere” (39). In response to such nonsense, the much more level-headed Mario shares his rationale: “No todos los que salen de su país triunfan. Es el país de uno y uno puede regresar cuando quiera,” his words helping to slowly erode the myth of the “land of opportunity” (39).

Another part of the novel that addresses the perceived need to remain in the United States despite significant hardships and relatively extreme social pressures that make survival alone a real challenge appears in the form of a seminar on immigration hosted by Central and South American government officials and consulates. This public forum is developed in the novel because the general atmosphere of the United States has become too deportation-heavy, with frequent raids, arrests, and even deaths as immigrants seek less patrolled, more dangerous routes to enter the country (84), not to mention the general “hunting” of undocumented immigrants referenced above (107). These discriminatory and violent policies tied to U.S. law serve once more as a reminder of Said’s claim that such xenophobia is ultimately connected to fear, prejudice, and ignorance. One of the more powerful speakers at the event who intends to combat such ignorance and fear, a consul from Ecuador, reminds the audience that all humans are indeed equal, and that it was us who invented the concepts of borders and property and, thus, we who

consciously choose to exclude others from our geographic spaces (87-89). The consul soon expands this thinking to create an analogy between feudal lords and their slaves and the current industrialized superpowers and the Third World countries that are necessary to support such excessive consumption and production (90). Just as in the Middle Ages, he explains, the “slaves” today are more likely to meet their basic human needs by visiting the “castle,” or the economically powerful nations of the Global North, where they have a greater chance to secure work, healthcare, and education, among other essentials (90). The subsequent northward migration flow is described as a natural process by the consul, an expected consequence of the design of the current economic and political systems in the Western Hemisphere. The consul’s call to consider not only the broader, systemic structure of globalization, but also to contemplate the local manifestations and consequences for the Hispanic community is reminiscent of cultural and literary critic Ariana E. Vigil’s conception of the term *glocal*. That is, Vigil posits that this combination of state and day-to-day level impacts from major events like militarization and war, both of which have enormously affected Central American migration, is necessary to problematize the relationship between the global and the local (5-6). The subsequent exploration of the countless “echoes,” or the multiple yet simultaneous references, allusions, and connections to such pasts as military interventions, means that identity must be considered as a whole in regards to issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and not simply based on one’s geographic origin (Vigil 3). This approach to identity indeed summarizes in explicit terms what this chapter aims to do throughout its analysis.

Furthermore, the consul continues on in order to break down some dated, pervasive, and persistent myths, pointing out that the undocumented Hispanic immigrants in the United States contribute much more to the government via taxes than they withdraw in social services, that

they perform undesirable jobs for the nationals, that they actually help to create jobs and further economic stability, and, ultimately, that the U.S. economy would collapse without their presence (91-92). As such, a reasonable conclusion to this discourse is that a hostile society towards Central American immigrants and Central American-Americans makes no sense, and the consul's speech, therefore, becomes a critique of anti-immigration sentiments so popular in the United States today. The fictional official's thoughts, along with the very publication of the novels explored in this chapter, indicate that speaking out against identity impositions and social repression is crucial for the well-being of the broader Central American(-American) community. Arias explains that this is so because Central American discursivity, as well as that by other marginalized subjects, aids in anchoring a diasporic culture as it seeks to re-formulate its own identity (*Taking Their Word* 198). This idea of a continued production of discursivity is fundamental, especially in the literary context considered here, for the term "Central American-American" is still very much an evolving idea and a constantly shifting, non-static nor homogenous identity that is still being deeply explored (Milian 150).

What is most shocking in Quesada's work concerning the exploration of differing visions of what it means to be Central American-American are the lengths certain characters, namely Dina and Helena, are willing to go in order to fulfill their passionate desire to live in the United States and identify as such. As the two women obsess over every miniscule detail of Miami without ever having set foot there, their senses of morality and reason significantly erode. That is, Dina would sell her soul to the devil just to be in Miami (67), and she would also never speak ill of the United States on her phone because she absurdly believes that it may be tapped by U.S. intelligence agents looking for a reason to reject her visa (38). Nonetheless, even this ridiculous (and humorous) notion does not dissuade her yearning for Miami. Helena, although she

reprimands her mother periodically for such outlandish remarks, isn't all too different herself: "Helena era la copia fiel de su madre" (53); that is, she has "exactamente la misma necesidad espiritual de materializar sus sueños de pisar un día lo que para ellas era casi una copia del Paraíso. De hecho, si se les interrogase, es muy factible que afirmaran que el Paraíso es copia de Miami" (53). It follows without surprise, then, that Dina explains to Helena that their lack of Indigenous or African features means that they were born in the wrong place, that they should have been born in Europe (104). Thus, what Dina and Helena really long for is not necessarily Miami itself, but rather the Eurocentric value system that Miami represents for them, a social structure so prolific and deeply embedded in the United States that they feel will allow them to fit in without any difficulties. Yet their status as Central American-Americans is likely to inhibit them socially and politically despite the fact that both women quickly marry once they have arrived in Miami. The innate desire for the "land of opportunity" that we observe here seems to be, in a way, an intellectual "imperialism;" that is, a certain sense of cultural superiority due to their "whiter" features has been ingrained in the minds of these two characters. Stuart Hall, keeping in mind Foucault's thoughts on power and knowledge, suggests that such "internal knowledge" as this, where marginalized subjectivities perpetuate the dominant hegemonic paradigm, results in a particularly devastating experience culturally as the less dominant culture suffers significant loss (226). Nevertheless, the novel reveals the absurdity of their thought processes and attitudes, showing just how the existing Eurocentric social structures are capable of influencing others. Still, the novel does not support this process at all, but rather insists that, as Said states, this type of mentality is really key to the durability of empire, in this case the persistent, hierarchical power structures that we can readily identify in the narrative (*Culture* 11). These ideas are, of course, exposed through the exaggerated behavior of Dina and Helena and, as

a result, the reader understands that their words and actions make little sense if Central American-Americans are to be more accepted and culturally, socially, and politically visible in the United States.

Quesada's fictional narrative tackles many of these challenging social topics through the employment of humor and sarcasm. Elías's claims, for instance, that his delays in Miami's airport dealing with immigration officers was just as traumatic as what undocumented immigrants face crossing the desert with a *coyote* are laughable (19), and the fact that Dina's response to Elías's plea that Helena not pass through Miami leads her to believe that he has gained economic power by robbing others, and that he has become a cocaine user, is equally as ridiculous (65-66). The absurdity of such remarks is, in part, what makes the novel a lighter, more pleasurable read despite the gravity of the social criticism contained within the text. The playful nature of Quesada's work is also evident in one metafictional scene in particular, where Mario and Elías comment on modern art as they try to fall asleep in their apartment: "Es como si tú y yo fuéramos personajes de una novela. Muy imbécil habría de ser el escritor que quisiera utilizar este diálogo y a la vez intentara describir esta oscuridad [de la habitación]. Es solamente un diálogo" (59). However, like this scene, the dialogue is not simply a dialogue; it's a critique of pretentious and shallow modern art since the two men criticize a theatrical production that basically mirrors their current conversation. Nevertheless, as Quesada explains in an interview, humor like this allows him to get ever closer to what are considered hard or painful subjects. In this way, the goal is that the reader may better understand the Central American immigrant experience through this more inviting and attractive literary approach (Pensel n.p.).

Although Bencastro and Quesada call attention to and criticize the hegemonic social structure that ultimately imposes an identity on Central American-Americans within their

fictional narratives in their own styles (with multiple voices and with humor, respectively), these two novels are not entirely innocent themselves. That is, when we consider the role of the males versus that of the females in the texts, and examine what “masculine” and “feminine” really mean in the works, we discover that they have also been partly subjected to the Eurocentric enterprise. This is not to say that the critical exploration of Central American-American identities in the novels is worth any less, but rather to demonstrate the far-reaching, profoundly embedded nature of Eurocentrism in North American society, the space from which both novelists write.

Literary critic Yajaira M. Padilla reminds us that male-centered societies and neoliberal economic structures have placed limitations on women in the public sphere, simultaneously restricting their access to power while keeping them in marginalized positions (6). To that end, Padilla calls attention to *Odisea del Norte* specifically: “women constitute either disempowered migrants or dependent wives (allegories for the Salvadoran nation left behind)” (12). The same could be argued for *Nunca entres por Miami*, where Elías (like Calixto) migrates to the North and leaves Helena (like Calixto’s wife Lina) behind in Honduras. Similarly, Helena and Dina have already identified their economic dependence on Elías and his money to get them to the United States, less they remain in their more “primitive” homeland. What ultimately happens in each novel, whether considering Calixto and his circle of all male friends or Elías and his closest friend Mario, is that women remain as secondary and obscured figures (wives, girlfriends, lovers, caretakers) with little or no agency (Padilla 94). The patriarchal nature of this social dynamic within the novels is an obstacle to truly equitable change taking place; women’s actual participation in U.S. and Central American societies is thus effaced, exchanging a more progressive reality for a more conservative, traditional gender role perspective (Padilla 98). As another literary critic points out of *Odisea*, so, too, I argue with *Nunca entres*: “las mujeres se

caracterizan por su pasividad, sumisión y conformismo a un destino de violencia y olvido” (Flores Caballero 51). The “olvido” being a powerful part of this last statement, for we do not know if Lina is or will ever be able to join Calixto in the United States (this is not mentioned, even as the novel concludes) and the memory of Helena, after challenging relationship hurdles, has been completely abandoned. Likewise, Laura is at the mercy of Elías when it comes to her heart, her emotions, and her relationship and future with him. We may reflect on what Said has indicated in order to try and explain this discrepancy between supporting and confronting the Eurocentric paradigm in the North. He asserts that many anti-imperialist thinkers have sought better, more humane treatment of the “natives,” but not necessarily true equality (*Culture* 241). When considering the general stance that these two novels have seemingly taken against the imperialist nature of U.S. society, broadly speaking, it is difficult not to remember Said’s words as we ponder the patriarchal perspectives identified here. To that end, it is not difficult to recall other similar narratives that desire humane treatment of the “natives,” but no upheaval or true alteration of the power structure, such as *Aves sin nido* (1889) by Peruvian Clorinda Matto de Turner. This last point where we explore the male-centered aspect of these fictional narratives is indeed where the novels from this chapter radically differ from those in chapter three that do call much more explicitly for equality.

To be sure, Lina and Helena are not the only women that face marginalization within the novels. Another salient example comes from Teresa, the 20-year-old Salvadoran political refugee struggling for political asylum in the U.S. court system. The judge, however, denies her application request and, upon return to El Salvador, she is murdered. Despite Teresa’s periodic inclusion throughout the novel in the form of court transcripts, her true inclusion in society only comes with the newspaper article written about her death. The fact that she apparently does not



belong in the United States, as the judge makes clear, along with the fact that she apparently does not belong in El Salvador either, as her murderers demonstrate, pair with the brevity of the informing newspaper article to give the sense that she has been utterly discarded by society in general. The short publication that notifies of her demise does not even mention her by name in its title, and her subjectivity is ultimately made to seem irrelevant due to her status as included (written about publicly) through exclusion (someone with no “home” or place of belonging) (Siu 97). Literary critic Padilla also picks up on Teresa’s case, affirming the U.S. court system’s bias against female immigrants and refugees, for Calixto and the men largely succeed, even with emotional and economic stressors, while Teresa does not despite her impending death sentence (106). The conclusion to which Padilla arrives, and with which I largely agree as applicable to Bencastro’s and Quesada’s texts alike, states the following: “As the representations of women in this novel of Salvadoran migration disclose, the Salvadoran transnational community being forged is permeated by a patriarchal social order that excludes women and affirms oppressive gendered binaries” (108). Unfortunately, these patriarchal structures within the novels do perpetuate traditional gender roles to a certain extent, though they also offer room for critique, especially after considering the damaging Eurocentric and imperialist hierarchies that impinge upon Central American-American identity in these two works. The novels still clearly support the belief that men make the rules and women uphold them, a problematic notion that cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa connects with cultural production itself: “Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power – men” (38). Nevertheless, with the identification of the social criticism made available in the two narratives analyzed in this chapter, we as readers may reshape and

redefine our beliefs as we reconsider the dominant paradigms and predefined concepts that Anzaldúa references in order to reject this part of the narratives. Since the novels each criticize, generally speaking, the hegemonic power structures within U.S. society as a significant detriment to the Central American-Americans in the narratives, the male-centered nature of the immigrant literature studied here also stands out in contrast to the overall message of the works. As such, its problematic nature is likely to be more readily questioned by the reader.

The novels are ultimately designed to help further the critical conversation of what it means to be Central American-American in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to cultural critic Kency Cornejo: “The term ‘Central American-American,’ coined by Guatemalan poet [Maya] Chinchilla and theorized by scholars, is intended not to define a fixed category but to provoke questions by members of the Central American diaspora as they engage in collective efforts to document, historicize, and debate new epistemological and ontological bodies of knowledge” (208). Not only are members of the Central American diaspora engaged by these two particular narratives, however, but so is the general reading public of both Hispanic and non-Hispanic origin since they are invited by the texts to participate in the critical conversation as well. This is evident from the fact that each novel was published in the United States and almost immediately available in both Spanish and English, in addition to the didactic nature of both of the novels. That is, the works, with relative frequency, take the time to explain general historical and cultural information that most academics or other experts in the field would be quite familiar with, such as the basic socio-political context leading to the Salvadoran civil war and the U.S. military exploitation of Honduras as an anti-revolutionary “launching pad” during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This extra information may largely serve those not of Hispanic or Central American descent, yet we know that the texts are meant to be widely read by these groups as well because at various times

in the works we find that even the fictional Central American-American characters are criticized for not being as intimately familiar with their own histories and circumstances as we may expect. One instance of this type of cultural ignorance being criticized is when Calixto and his friends in *Odisea* admit that all they know about El Salvador's Independence Day is that the country gained its freedom from Spain, yet even this isn't assumed common knowledge since one Salvadoran character confesses that he believed that they gained their independence from Germany (108-09)! As a result of these various didactic textual markers throughout each narrative along with each novel's criticism of the detrimental, imperialist U.S. society in which they each take place, it would seem, then, that the works indeed not only problematize, but also invite a broad segment of the general U.S. reading public to (re)consider the term "Central American-American" after accompanying Calixto and Elías on their enlightening and entertaining adventures. Additionally, although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, the texts certainly provide a footing to begin another critical conversation on what it means to be a "citizen" (in both the literal and figurative senses) in such a globalized society, a discussion that undeniably ties back into questions of social hierarchies, diaspora, immigration, human rights, equality, and discrimination (Mignolo, "Citizenship" 324).

What allows for these and other critical considerations in the narratives is, in large part, the immigrant fiction genre of these novels that concentrates almost exclusively on the difficulties of migrating and reestablishing elsewhere. Bencastro and Quesada, as literary critic Nicolás Kanellos has described their works, offer "tales about greenhorn immigrants who come to the big city to improve their lives – that is, to seek their fortunes in the land of opportunity – but who in the end become disillusioned by what the authors or their narrators see as the ills of American society: oppression of the working class, racial discrimination, the underworld and the

underclass culture, and a capitalism that erodes Hispanic identity and values, including family, religion, machismo, language, and culture” (2-3). The social resistance against which the Central American-American characters struggle in the novels not only leads to a reconsideration of their negative experiences, but also to where they belong (and find inclusion) socially, geographically, and emotionally, a discussion fundamental to the immigrant literature genre. Although Kanellos goes on to propose that Hispanic immigrant literature is intimately tied to the homeland of the author or protagonist, and that it is useful for “solidifying and furthering national identity” (7), we must take into consideration the duality (or, for some, the plurality) of the fictional characters’ “national” identities, now located somewhere along the continuum stretching between, at a minimum, the extremes of a homeland and the United States. This reformulation of one’s identity undoubtedly expands the definition of Central America and the notion of home. However, “home” is also a “sentimental, psychological place to inhabit, to defend, to love” (Aparicio 6). As such, Calixto and Elías do not necessarily find “home” in the United States, although they are more or less obligated to stay despite their nostalgia or longing for a return to their countries of origin. The hostility of the U.S. social structure in the works effectively eliminates the easy transition to a new home, and it also thwarts the characters’ intents to quickly adapt by making it readily apparent that these immigrants are not necessarily welcome – they do not really belong in the North, regardless of their legal status. Ultimately, the immigrant literature genre that both novels employ is a straightforward yet crucial framework for the exposition and questioning of what it means to be Central American-American. It is this genre in particular that provides steady ground for the problematizing of impositions upon Central American-American identity, for “the very process of asserting creative voices through literature allows for wounded subjects and silenced societies to reclaim a sense of dignity in the face of

impotence, to value their complex subjectivities upon being forced into marginal and abject positions, and to reassert their multifaceted humanity on their own terms” (Caso 2). In this way, literary critic Nicole Caso clearly coincides with Ranajit Guha’s claim that the need for self-representation is essential to breaking from outside impositions and forced histories (*Dominance* 201).

Not surprisingly, immigrant literature involving the United States means that the U.S. border is a relatively significant feature of the novels. The physical barrier of the border, though threatening and looming in the works, also represents, more importantly I would argue, a cultural and psychological obstacle, where “social death” becomes the norm for Central American immigrants even once the physical border has been negotiated. This is so due to xenophobic U.S. laws and a frequently xenophobic public that is oftentimes ignorant of the true motivations for migration to the North and ill-informed regarding the positive cultural and economic effects that these peoples have upon the United States (Oliva Alvarado 81-83).<sup>6</sup> The novels manage to constantly incorporate this metaphorical wall, or sense of impending “social death,” in a number of different cultural contexts. This has the effect of allowing the narratives to focus more so on systemic and social discrimination within the United States, calling attention to the big picture connections between immigrant experiences and dominant power structures. To that end, the fictional texts studied in this chapter also minimize the presence of U.S. characters, consequently eliminating the easy possibility that the reader may choose to blame certain, misguided individuals in the narratives for the hardships of the recent immigrants. Instead, the general lack of U.S. characters forces a confrontation with the broader social parameters and hierarchies that work against the fictional Central American-American population in the texts.

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<sup>6</sup> See also my analysis in chapter three relating to the U.S. border.

At the same time that the novels focus on systemic discrimination against Central American immigrants, they also make an effort to humanize these characters by explaining much more of their historical contexts and respective cultures than is necessary to simply advance the plots. Returning to the didactic nature of the novels for just a moment, I refer here to Bencastro's inclusion of newspaper articles, like "Un millón de refugiados" that briefly summarizes El Salvador's political and economic turmoil and reasons for migration (18-20), the explanation of holidays such as Día de la Cruz (44) and Día de los Muertos (153), and details surrounding the Mount Pleasant riots in Washington, D.C. in 1991 (134-35). Similarly, Quesada's novel describes the historical figure of Francisco Morazán (15) and explicitly enumerates U.S. military involvement in Honduras, citing the installation of "más de veinte bases militares...[y] tres aeropuertos" during the Cold War era (12).<sup>7</sup> Close to the narrative's ending, Elías also makes the comment that, "A lo mejor no hay arte, sólo pretextos" (140). Though Elías is a sculptor, this remark also begs the reader to reflect further upon the novel: is it merely meant for entertainment, or are the underlying messages, the humanization of the immigrant characters, and a critical consideration of the text what are most important?

The novels in this chapter formulate their critiques to be most heavily dedicated to Central American-American matters, yet *Odisea del Norte* and *Nunca entres por Miami* at times also sustain a certain anonymity that leads the reader to believe that the issues raised for one immigrant community are indeed applicable to other immigrant and minority groups as well. For instance, during a telephone conversation between Elías and Helena, they are not identified by name but rather by their telephonic area codes: Elías as 718 for New York and Helena as 504 for Honduras. In a similar manner, Bencastro's story of Teresa and her deportation in the form of a

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<sup>7</sup> To be sure, Honduran Francisco Morazán (1792-1842), among other political and military positions, held the presidency of the Federal Republic of Central America from 1830 to 1839.

court transcript results in a cold, almost theatrical (or scripted) dialogue. In each of these two examples, the intimacy of individuality has been voided and it is as if any other immigrant story could easily fill these ready-made spaces, hence the latent anonymity intertwined throughout parts of the texts. Additionally, once Calixto and his fellow immigrants find themselves jailed in *El Corralón*, the U.S. immigration prison in El Paso, Texas, it becomes immediately apparent that the immigrant stories, struggles, and stereotypes of the narratives extend well beyond the confines of the Central American-American context: “Los que no hablaban español sufrían el rigor de la incomunicación, como los que procedían de las islas del Caribe, Jamaica y Haití, o de China, India, Corea y Vietnam” (174). Though many migrants have arrived from all over the globe, it is evident that the repressive Eurocentric society in which they attempted to try their lot still holds the most sway; that is, the overwhelmingly capitalist, militaristic, Christian, patriarchal, white, heterosexual, and masculine U.S. society, in this case, excludes all of these other peoples from around the globe to the point of not even allowing their entrance into the country.

Even so, it is important to recognize that Calixto’s and Elías’s stories are essentially ones of success, ultimately supporting Central American immigration and Central American-Americans generally. Literary critic Rafael Lara-Martínez says of *Odisea* that, “Es un homenaje y exaltación del inmigrante, quien alza su figura y se reviste de un carácter heroico” (29). And, of Quesada’s *Nunca entres*, we observe the following: “Con éxito, este escritor despoja de toda tristeza y angustia la experiencia inmigrante, que en sus páginas deja de ser una sucesión de atropellos y sometimientos y se convierte en una serie de proezas heroicas” (Pensel n.p.). The protagonist heroes of the novels, then, along with the works’ social criticism, help to guide readers’ thoughts to a position that questions the existing social structures in the United States.

Nonetheless, what likely needs to be considered as well is the message that Contreras Castro and Galich present, and that I explore, in chapter three – cultural decolonization. Bencastro and Quesada identify significant social and cultural problems, yet an appropriate resolution evades both texts. Without true cultural and social autonomy, along with a general respect for Central American-Americans, the risk of remaining ideologically, morally, and intellectually connected to the once-colonizers is great (Said, *Culture* 25). Still, these novels further the critical conversation on what it means to become and to be Central American-American in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially regarding the hardships involved, the repressive social structures that constantly operate behind the scenes, and the demythification of persistent misconceptions such as the “land of opportunity” and the “land of the free.”



## CONCLUSION

Throughout this project I have argued that an analysis of the fictional representations of the United States between 1996 and 2012 reveals how select Central American writers not only engage with global capitalism and U.S. economic and cultural influences in the region during the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, but also how these authors respond to the fact that many revolutionary projects and ideals did not come to fruition as they may have hoped. Consequently, this study sheds significant light on how Central America's post-war literary and cultural production from 1996 on radically differs from the poetry and *testimonios* of the armed struggle period and, likewise, from earlier, Cold War-era politically committed works. In the preceding chapters, I show that the United States and its foreign policies, at once antagonistic to the Central American revolutions while also a major protagonist of economic and cultural globalization in the Isthmus today, continue to have dramatic impacts and impositions on Central American(-American) identities, values, and literary production. The various, fictionalized "tentacular" influences stretching from the North, as we have seen, manifest within the region's most recent narratives in distinct ways, touching on all types of relationships from broader economic and cultural trends to more personal, social, and individual decisions. The three literary tendencies that I identify in this project as a result of my close readings of the eight novels that I explore are undoubtedly not the only fictional trends of the post-war period. Nevertheless, the social criticism contained within these works is enough to make some broader conclusions about the nature of the region's post-war literature.

The first literary tendency that I identify comes from the spy and detective fiction discussed in chapters one and two. As I argue in these chapters, the four novels that I analyze (*Cascabel* by Arturo Arias, *La carta* by María Lourdes Pallais, *El cielo llora por mí* by Sergio Ramírez, and *Lobos al anochecer* by Gloria Guardia) express general disillusion towards the Central American governments as well as the guerrilla and revolutionary movements, and instead seek social, cultural, economic, and political advances in unison with the project of global capitalism. The positive representations of U.S. characters and foreign policies, along with the notable affinity for U.S. goods and values within the works, are indicative of the ideological stance that these novels take. Generally speaking, this type of complicity coinciding with the North's imperialist agenda is quite rare in contemporary Central American literature. To be sure, making an effort to utilize the current economic and social structures within the region in order to seek more equitable changes in society is not necessarily an idea that should be entirely discarded. Yet, as I indicate in these first two chapters, the underlying social tensions that provoked the revolutionary struggles in the first place still remain largely unresolved by the neoliberal economic and social model. As such, it is very likely, then, that social and political marginalization will continue if global capitalism is embraced as a means of moving forwards. This also implies that minority literary and cultural production, as with Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous peoples, for instance, will continue to face significant challenges in terms of gaining visibility and recognition. Subsequently, the plurality of voices as expressed through fictional writing would ultimately be limited during the post-war period. The primary issue with supporting U.S. influence within the region, then, along with the economic and cultural globalization that it implies, is precisely the fact that the current circumstances for most Central Americans will not improve, as many critics like William I. Robinson have pointed out.

Therefore, it isn't the exploration of more equitable advances in conjunction with global capitalism or the United States and its foreign presence that comes to be especially problematic in these novels, but rather how the works present their ideas. That is, we largely find that there are no alterations or substantial changes suggested in regards to the existing social structures and hierarchies, nor are modifications proposed that would indeed alter the circumstances enough to truly celebrate diversity throughout the Isthmus. Instead, the texts display a certain adherence to the existing neoliberal system while avoiding criticism for past and continuing U.S. intervention (whether physical via military or political means, or virtual through social and cultural ones) and without calling attention to the numerous and negative ramifications of global capitalism for the majority of Central Americans.

Nonetheless, I would like to return to one of the original research questions that I pose in the introduction: How probable is it that future literary and social criticism towards the United States will be predominantly positive as read here in a number of narratives from the Isthmus? My response to this inquiry, despite the criticism that I offer for the novels by Arias, Pallais, Ramírez, and Guardia in the first two chapters of my study, is that it is unlikely that this vein of social criticism and commentary will continue in the region's post-war literature. I believe this to be so because the ideas presented in chapter one, for example, are intimately tied to a disillusion with the armed struggles and the overall lack of materialization of strong and successful revolutionary projects. As I explained previously, this notion is supported by theoretical and literary critics like Beatriz Cortez and John Beverley who, when detailing the "aesthetics of cynicism" and the "paradigm of disillusion," respectively, point out that the proximity to the armed struggles is fundamental to their critical ideas. With more time and distance from the revolutions and the accompanying disenchantment, then, we are able to see how writers like

Arturo Arias, in his 2007 study *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America*, have already changed their ideological stance in noticeable ways regarding U.S. influence and global capitalism in the region. Additionally, the works in chapter two that were published a decade after those in chapter one still inevitably support, albeit subconsciously, the U.S. foreign agenda in the region, yet they have made a more marked effort to incorporate some critiques of the North. This aspect of the narratives may indicate a slow return to more traditional criticism and cultural friction between Central America and the United States as expressed in the region's narrative production. Although some tacit acceptance of U.S. cultural and economic influence in the Isthmus still certainly underlies some beliefs, values, and practices in the region, it would seem that contemporary Central American writers are more likely to return to negative and critical representations of the North than they are to continue a positive imagining of the United States and its foreign policies.

The second literary tendency that I identify in this project comes from the novels in chapter three that promote cultural and mental decolonization in order to seek more equitable social shifts and structures in the region. Again returning to one of the research questions that I pose at the beginning of this study, we might consider: How likely is positive change across the region in the next few decades, and are the cultural decolonization projects explored in some of the literary works here actually viable? Historically speaking, widespread positive changes throughout Central America that truly alter the dominant power structures are still unlikely in the next few decades. However, the projects of intellectual and cultural decolonization that Franz Galich and Fernando Contreras Castro present to us as readers are indeed viable and have the potential to ensure significant social change as history is rewritten and recuperated, educational systems are thoroughly revised, and social values evolve over time. Furthermore, the authors in

chapter three call attention to the plethora of faults that globalization and U.S. economic and cultural influence in particular have had and continue to have in the Isthmus. The social criticism, as I point out in the chapter, could also be easily applicable to other repressive, imperialistic, and dominant nations, attitudes, and policies – not just the United States.

A radical shift in mentality and perspective like these literary works suggest is indeed how social change and a move towards equality will take place, albeit over a long period of time. The clear push away from physical and violent methods, such as armed struggles, *coups*, and protests, means that the social and intellectual advances as proposed by these projects cannot easily be stopped or prevented with military intervention, foreign aid, or even political meddling as we witnessed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rewriting “official” history, narrating one’s own stories from below, and creating a diverse and balanced educational curriculum, among countless other forms of breaking down hegemonic hierarchies, can still flourish and circulate regardless of the dominant social paradigm. Still, these types of ideas that urgently must be considered and implemented do require some alterations. That is, the ongoing processes of cultural and mental decolonization will likely not occur as currently envisioned by these two writers. One of the notable flaws in their conceptions of cultural decolonization is that there is a clear need for more input from subaltern, Indigenous, minority, and marginalized voices, for without their presence, participation in, and contributions to these major social projects, we may otherwise face a return similar to the practices of Indigenismo that simply desire a more sympathetic stance towards minority and marginalized peoples without experiencing any real or significant social change. Although social and cultural development of this nature will undoubtedly be a long, slow process, it has the true potential to happen with time. As this process occurs, however, there must be dramatic shifts in cultural understanding and social values that support the fact that people

truly are equals. The consequent breakdown of lingering notions of exclusive national identities and imaginaries will therefore be a large obstacle to these projects.

The third tendency that this project identifies comes from the Central American-American writing produced from within the United States. The true significance of this literary and cultural production within this project is the fact that it responds to the need to create a space that allows Central American-American voices to be heard within the larger domain of U.S. Latin@ literature. In essence, the processes and strategies of self-effacement for Central American-Americans that critics like Arturo Arias and Claudia Milian call attention to, in addition to the overwhelming social and cultural presence of the “big three” Latin@ groups, is combated through the explicit narration of Salvadoran-American and Honduran-American stories that offer insight into their particular cultural and social perspectives and experiences. Of importance, then, is that the novels explored in chapter four are available in both English and Spanish, a clear effort to make these perspectives available to a wide reading public. Consequently, the works may help shift broader U.S. society’s understanding and values regarding the Hispanic immigrant community and the immigration process as well given the accessibility of the literature. Along with the stories of immigration that these novels convey, however, their criticism of U.S. society and the repressive social structures that ensure certain forms of marginalization call attention to problematic, Eurocentric, and exclusive imaginings of national identity. As a result, this reflective literature slowly erodes the dominant values and hegemonic structures that exist today, especially when we consider the fact that more and more Central American-American writers are publishing and seeking recognition as an underrepresented sub-group of the U.S. Latin@ population.

The social criticism that Mario Bencastro and Roberto Quesada propose, then, although not nearly as explicit or developed as the works from chapter three, essentially promote a similar project of cultural decolonization. That is, their literary contributions are part of what Said has termed the “ideological resistance” and, as such, they desire a shift in intellect, education, writing, values, mentalities, and so on; they do not promote egalitarian social shifts through more physical or violent means either. The similar social criticism found in both chapters three and four, then, seems to be the answer to another question that I pose in the introduction: How can we expect U.S.-Central American relations and fictional representations to continue to develop over the next decade? To be sure, a significant push by Central American(-American) authors to change society through their fictional works that address questions of social values and dominant hierarchies is likely to be the most prominent and longest lasting literary tendency of the post-war period for Central America.

My study, which identifies and explores three distinct literary tendencies of the Isthmus’s post-war cultural production, thus deepens our understanding of recent Central American narrative writing, building on what other critics like Beatriz Cortez, Misha Kokotovic, and Ana Patricia Rodríguez, among many others, have already written. The ongoing legacies of both the armed struggles and U.S. cultural, economic, and social influences in the region remain of utmost importance even as the representations and fictional manifestations of these concepts continue to develop over time. Much more exploration and analysis of the Isthmus’s 21<sup>st</sup>-century literary, cultural, and cinematic production still remains to be done if we are to continue to deepen our understanding of Central American literature generally and to respond even more thoroughly to the ongoing question of just where are the octopus’s tentacles today.

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