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**Sentimentality in Unsentimental Times:
Love in Jacinta Escudos and Luis Chaves**

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¿para qué el sentimiento?
(Escudos 117)

This article focuses on the representation of romantic heterosexual relationships in post-conflict Central American literature, specifically in *Crónicas para sentimentales* (2010) by Salvadoran Jacinta Escudos and *Asfalto: un road poem* (2006) by Costa Rican Luis Chaves. Both Escudos' poetic short stories and Chaves' prosaic poems present readers with narrators and characters whose everyday lives are unattached from their local surroundings and the people around them and who use global media to create alternate attachments. While this is a point I argue elsewhere, here I look at how global media, for instance "Killing Me Softly with His Song" in Escudos' title story, serve as sentimental anchors in an unsentimental world that eschews lasting attachments. In my examples, global songs, film and television make

visible and at times assuage the “*distancia sideral*” (Chaves) between romantic partners. These media products fulfill the narrators’ need for love and sentimentality virtually without revealing their *cursi*-ness and thus, keeping in place the tenuous *crónicas*’ chronicling of their unsentimentality.

In the post-conflict context of Escudos’ and Chaves’ protagonists, sentimentality seems out of place. How can there be a space for deep feeling, for *afecto*, for others in homelands that have been torn apart, first by war and then by crime, neoliberalism, and the like? It is a context that some critics of Central American literatures have classified as “cynical.” In her early essay on post-war Central American literature (2001) and later in her book (2010), Beatriz Cortez convincingly argues that cynicism and disenchantment characterize the region’s literature; that the idealism of revolutionary literature, for instance, has been replaced by a focus on violence and base desires. Cortez’s conclusions have led Ana Patricia Rodríguez to assert that “[...] with the end of the wars in Central America, there came an unhinging or coming apart of narratives that had provided solutions to important questions about the quality of life in the isthmus, especially for the dispossessed [...]” (233). In her book, Rodríguez argues, in turn, that Central America’s literature and its cultural production “have concomitantly shaped the imaginary of the isthmus and have been shaped by the material and historic conditions of the isthmus” (234). There does not seem to be a place for sentimentality within this space of cynicism, violence, and loss. It is a world that can be termed “post-emotional” in which “synthetic, quasi-emotions become the basis for widespread manipulation by self, others, and the culture industry as a whole” and despite “feel[ing]” many “quasi-emotions, from indignation to compassion, ... [post-emotionals] are unable to put these feelings into appropriate actions” (Meštrović xi, xii). Meštrović’s conceptualization of “post-emotional types” is concretely tied to the late 1990s and post-modernism’s claims but can shed light on the (post)-emotional lives of the protagonists of contemporary Central American literature such as Escudos’ and Chaves’, who reach out to each other and sentiment in an otherwise threatening sociocultural context. Perhaps, then, *cursi*-ness, which can easily be read as only an act of feeling rather than profound feeling, can ironically offer a path toward “authentic” *afecto*.

Here I focus on sentimentality itself; on the ways sentiment makes its presence or absence felt in narratives dealing with the loss and end of romantic love. In other words, I analyze how texts demonstrate or hide emotional vulnerability; how they make visible the possibility of vulnerability, rather than the hard cynicism of other post-

conflict texts. The danger of showing vulnerability is twofold: the possibility of being “taken” and being tagged as stupidly or naively sentimental, or *cursi*, a Spanish-language term I’ll discuss below. Often sentimentality is seen as a negative characteristic or guilty pleasure in the contemporary Western world, although it clearly sells and is avidly consumed in film, music, fiction, etc. This is the type of sentimentality that may be apprehended as “conventionalizing and reifying” as well as “dogmatic” (Fulweiler 6, 184). In his study of British and US sentimental literature, Fulweiler traces the development of sentimentality, “dwell[ing] upon the emotional aspects of human life” to the 18th and 19th and leading to the 20th centuries, in an “inauthentic manipulation of emotion” (6), not unlike Meštrović’s “post-emotions.” For Fulweiler, this literary sentimentality arises out of the modern lack of connection to the environment and Westerners’ consequent “loneliness and existential *angst*” and ultimately it is a “search for the remnants of belonging” (his italics; 19-21).¹ In Fulweiler’s reading, sentimentality, as in Valis below, fills a need for emotion; it allows for connections to others and belonging, be it “authentically” or “inauthentically.”²

This search for emotional or sentimental connections in the contemporary Western world can also be seen through other disciplinary lenses. In cultural anthropology, Michelle Z. Rosaldo asserts that “feeling is forever given shape through thought and that thought is laden with emotional meaning” (88). In brief, she posits that emotions are “embodied thoughts”; they function as “social practices” enacted by the narratives people create to understand and communicate their world or surroundings (88, 89). Emotions say “I am involved” (88).³ This emotional involvement is always culturally informed and patterned. Rosaldo’s view challenges the conception of a division between a private self and a social “person” (87). Instead, by understanding affect as culturally and socially embedded, we can read emotions or sentiments within personal or private contexts and also as part of a narrative that is framed by particular social, cultural and political conditions (87, 93). This emotional involvement grates against the chaotic, disconnected sociocultural and sociopolitical experiences shared by contemporary Central American societies. After the disastrous

¹ Fulweiler then opposes this sentimentality to one that would be “fresh and authentic” or “imaginative” and “enlarging” (6, 184).

² Meštrović too sees significance in the “‘real thing’” versus phoniness. He writes, “Our postmodern age is obsessed with the ‘real thing’ versus the phony in politics, leisure, advertisement, education, and other social arenas, even if most people cannot agree on how to make this distinction” (4).

³ Rosaldo illustrates this idea by noting the difference between hearing a child cry and *feeling* the cry and realizing “that danger is involved or that the child is one’s own” (88-89).

end of many of the region's utopian projects, "involvement," political as well as sentimental, seems irrational. But, perhaps, irrationality is what is needed to express sentiments in the contemporary world. Through an analysis of the contradictory relationship between reason and rationality in modernity, Simon Williams argues that modernity "is, at one and the same time, both the antithesis and confirmation of a more sensually based order; one in which the emotions come to the fore and rationality, as traditionally conceived, fight an increasing 'rearguard action' (140). In Williams' analysis emotions are a "bastion of human freedom and spontaneity" (147). These emotions can escape from Meštrović's post-emotional world (147). Ultimately, for Williams "spontaneous emotions" in their defiance, resistance, sensuality and effervescence" defy social conventions and "however troubling their manifestations may be, they none the less express the irrepressible spirit and recalcitrant language of the heart" (152). But is the literary sentimentality of post-conflict Central American literature heartfelt or is it the tired sentimentality that Fulweiler calls "inauthentic" and that Meštrović would see as essentially canned? Can *cursiness* embody the defiant, resistant, "spontaneous," effervescent emotionality Williams hopes for? More specifically, to whom is Escudos speaking and to what is she referring in her short story collection, *Crónicas para sentimentales*? And, how can we describe the forced "intimacy" of Chaves' protagonists' road trip?

Unlike the cynicism clearly ascertainable in much post-conflict Central American literature, sentiment and *cursiness* are difficult to grab a hold of. The term *cursi* in and of itself is not easily translated. It can be described, defined but even in Spanish it is difficult, or impossible, to find synonyms for it, "es inasible, y apenas fronterizo con otros vocablos castellanos. Ni siquiera puede ser traducido, pues no tiene equivalente en otros idiomas" (Holguín 131). Spanish dictionary definitions denote *lo cursi*, as well as those who are deemed *cursis*, as attempting to be "elegant," "in good taste," "refined" and failing famously, falling into the realm of ridiculousness. It is a fraud, a falsification, inauthentic. At the same time, Spanish-English dictionary definitions equate *cursi* with kitsch, a shortcut translation that fails to account for multiple nuanced differences between *cursiness* and kitsch. In his well-known book, *Five Faces of Modernity*, Matei Calinescu also links the two terms. He reviews the etymology and international usage of "kitsch" as "bad taste," one of its synonyms (and one shared with *cursilería*): it "as far as I know, is the only single word that suggests both the deceptive and the self-deceptive aspects of bad taste that are implied in kitsch. The aesthetic paradoxes involved in the notion of *cursi* are very similar to those of kitsch..."

(233). Calinescu further asserts that in kitsch's tight connection to modernization "is indeed so close that one may take the presence of kitsch in countries of 'Second' or 'Third' world as an unmistakable sign of 'modernization'"(226). This disjunction between kitsch's and *cursiness*' denotations, connotations, and contexts lie at the heart of Noël Valis' distinction between these two terms (and also of camp) in her book on Spanish bad taste.

In *The Culture of Cursilería: Bad Taste, Kitsch and Class in Modern Spain* (2002), Valis defines *lo cursi* and *cursilería* in a way that helps read *cursiness* in comparison and in contrast to kitsch as well as in Luis Chaves' and Jacinta Escudos' texts. Valis' study focuses on a "backward" Spain with a "weak sense of nationhood" (8) and in which middle class *cursis* imitate other cultures' ideas and behaviors (9). She argues that *cursilería* reveals that there are insufficient economic, cultural and/or social means to satisfy subjects' ends (11). In short, *lo cursi* is a "form of disempowered desire," it is thus "imitative," "in bad taste," "pretentious," and "cheaply sentimental" (15). Despite the clear contextual differences between a modernizing and post-Franco Spain and post-conflict El Salvador and Costa Rica, Valis' analysis helps describe Escudos' and Chaves' more contemporary take on sentimentality. Valis' assertion that *cursilería* reveals feelings of "inadequacy and insecurity" amid periods of modernizations, for instance, can be easily applied to these two writers' texts. These can be interpreted as ironic acknowledgements of the coexistence and comingling of new "global" identities with "old" local identities; and of the global in the "tropics."

In a line of argument similar to Valis, Carlos Monsiváis situates *cursilería* in a rapidly modernizing post-revolutionary Mexico. Most important for this article, he, too, highlights *cursiness*' contradictory representation of national unity and "lo insoportablemente antiguo" (172-173) within a supposedly modernizing, new Mexican nation. In this context, Monsiváis presents Agustín Lara and his hugely popular *boleros* as an economic boom that profited from the selling and consumption of cheap sentimentality, "De la sinceridad desgarrada al cálculo de taquilla... ¿No es bellissimo hablar de este modo?" (173, 174). For Monsiváis, the Mexican *cursi* aspires to "culture," to something more than base material needs, to beauty, to "Valores Transcendentes" (Monsiváis 178). And this transaction between *cursis* and sentimental solace is "chantaje sentimental," the fulfillment of unfulfilled emotional and cultural needs (186,187). In my analysis, cynical post-conflict Central American society shares this need for sentimental "blackmail" in spite of its broader global economic and cultural literacy.

In post-conflict, post-CAFTA Central America, economic, cultural and social transformations—marked by armed conflicts, massive immigration, a dependence on remittances, and escalating violence—help fuel social and economic insecurity. For example, the receipt or lack of remittances determines (non)-participation in new consumer cultures and shifts class belonging and distinctions among neighbors and towns. And regardless of class status, Central Americans look to US culture and a global mass media as a culture worthy of envy, desire, imitation and aspiration. In this sense, Escudos' and Chaves' protagonists “base[] their difference [from other Salvadorans and Costa Ricans] on the aesthetic institutionalized by middle class pretensions to culture” (Egan paraphrasing Monsiváis on Mexican *cursilería* 190). The expression of the unsatisfied desire to inhabit the US culture they consume in the mass media (including music and film) is a globalized sentimentality, a feeling akin to the overwrought *cursilería* inspired by old *boleros* and more contemporary sugary romantic ballads.

In the title short story from Salvadoran Jacinta Escudos' *Crónicas para sentimentales* (2010), we meet a thirty-something woman who tries to assimilate and narrate the end of a May-December two-day affair she had with a nineteen-year-old man. The story opens with an epigraph from Roberta Flack's “Killing Me Softly With His Song,” “...and there he was, / this young boy, / a stranger to my eyes” and the first line describing “this young boy, ”[t]iene 17 años y su rostro es atterradoramente perfecto” (109). The song, the Flack lyrics (1973) and the Fugees' video of their updated version (1996) of the song (116), frame the narrator's self-conscious retelling of her falling in love with a teenager with whom she has nothing in common and who quickly “looked through [her] / as if [she] wasn't there” (Flack, “Killing Me Softly”):

Palabras. / Releo. / Cursilerías. / ¿Para qué la escritura? / Y luego, ¿para qué el sentimiento? [...] Suena el teléfono y detengo la escritura. / Contengo mi respiración. / Espero. / Deseo que sea él. Espero que sea él. Quiero, deseo tanto que sea él. / Contesto. Pero claro, es un número equivocado. / No es él, el niño. (117-118)

The thirty-something narrator writes her *cursiness*, her invention of her few days' affair as soul-destroying, with the lyrics of “Killing Me Softly with His Song” and the face of Sal Mineo (1939-1976), a US actor and heartthrob and her teenage crush. She doesn't tell her *niño*-lover about his likeness to Mineo, certain that he would have no idea who Mineo is or why he should be flattered that he reminds the narrator of him. In fact, she surmises that her Mineo crush would further date her and that her *niño*-lover would not have the slightest interest in Sal Mineo's or her biography. His assumed disinterest in

Mineo and in the details of the narrator's life emphasizes the superficiality of their affair. Further, it contrasts her emotional involvement to his emotional disconnection, thus, making her *cursiness* all the more painful.

Before meeting her Sal Mineo look alike, the protagonist-narrator had managed to love men only in her imagination, “Para no tener que odiarlos, no despreciarlos nunca” (114), that is until “en ese clima aparece el niño con cara de Sal Mineo. / Demasiado” (114). The appearance of her future teenage lover overflows the protagonist's carefully built walls against emotional involvement and feeling. Her reaction to him is “too much” for her to contain in the emotionally-empty world she had created for self-preservation. Although her teenage lover reminds her of Mineo, who was typecast as a teenager with emotional issues after the success of his roles in films such as *Rebel Without a Cause*, she endows him with the innocence of a child, “que no puede hacer daño, que no conoce la maldad...” (115). Her misreading and willful blindness of her new lover and his similarity to Mineo's roles allow her to let her guard down even though his body, “lo delat[a]n como un hombre. / Un hombre peligroso” (116). Without doing much other than going to bed with her, this man-boy convinces the narrator that he can help heal her “modorra emocional” and be a “balm” for her pain and “la pólvora” for a new beginning (123). The narrator-protagonist, then, is a walking cliché: the older woman who clings to a younger man as a way to satisfy her sexual and romantic desires and her adolescent dreams: “La pasión, no tanto del cuerpo, como del sentimiento, de la mente, de la razón” (113). But, of course, the song's lyrics and Sal Mineo's biography—he was gay and was killed before he turned 40—and his film roles foretell the inadequacy of the narrator-protagonist's sentimentality, or *cursiness* here, as a way out of her solitude and disenchantment with her small, limited world. Her description of her home, “en estas latitudes” (110) and “esta farsa de ciudad” (119), highlights her city's falseness, its urban inauthenticity and, further, it reflects the love affair's falseness, its reality as only a façade for the romantic connection the narrator yearns for despite herself and idealizes.

In “Crónica para sentimentales,” the narrator speaks to a reader who is sentimental like her. One who can empathize with her fixation on Flack's song and an actor from her youth as well as with her loss when the boy lover she thought she could seduce, and control, is the one who leaves, who doesn't call again (123) and who she later runs into accompanied by women “infinitamente más jóvenes que yo. / Muchachas que también podrían ser mis hijas” (125). The narrator-protagonist's anxiety about her age (35 years) and her inability to capture the boy lover in her “spider web”

(113, 123) turn her into a *cursi*, a *sentimental* person who has to tell someone empathetic about her broken heart from a fling that lasted a few days (123).

A narrator unwilling to reveal his *cursiness* practices his break-up speech in “Sería así.” The narrator, a man in his forties, mentally composes his speech and reviews the “loving” gestures he will perform as he tells his current lover that their relationship is over: “Se lo diría en la playa. Caminarían a la orilla del agua sobre la arena mojada, le tomaría la mano y se lo diría”(99).⁴ He goes on to describe his feet on the sand, the way their hair would blow in the wind, the sound of the waves, etc. (99), all in all a *cursi* setting for a *cursi* goodbye, as if reenacting a scene in a romantic comedy. His hypothetical responses to her hypothetical tears are equally sugary: of course, he will insist that she will meet someone else and he will become “apenas un dulce recuerdo del pasado” and that they can still be friends, “cómo no, si lo más importante era eso” (100). He plans on making all the “appropriate,” fake gestures to somehow mitigate his “authentic” feelings: he is ready to move on because, as usual, he has tired of a live-in lover and simply “feels” like” breaking it off, “sólo porque sí?...porque así le nacía el impulso, porque así lo sentía” (104). The motor for the break-up is the narrator’s sentiment. And his (emotive) performance is simply the finale to a relationship that, according to the narrator, followed the usual script in which the newness and passion of romance eventually became dreary, boring and emotionally perilous:

Una vez descubiertas las vergüenzas del otro, unas tan terribles que eran difíciles de aceptar, ¿para qué ponerse en evidencia? ¿Para qué ponerse uno mismo tan a merced del ridículo, el ridículo de las discusiones de las ofensas, de las degradaciones a través de la palabra dicha sin pensar, colada a través del filtro de la rabia? (103)

“Love,” then, can only survive while it is new, exploratory, still shallow and, thus, the “rational,” but simultaneously emotional, the solution (103) is to move out of his lover’s house and escape potentially embarrassing scenes by taking a trip, also as usual. This nonchalant escape from an unsatisfying romantic relationship with a thirty-something woman,⁵ though, is wrapped in *cursilería*, a cheap sentimentality. And, what is more,

⁴ The story further emphasizes the narrator’s and the love relationship’s phoniness by counting down, as in a movie filming, to the beginning of the break up scene: “Esperaría 20 pasos más, los contaba, 1, 2, 3, cuando al llegar al 14, a ella le tomó la mano y le dijo: —Oye, he estado pensando mucho y tengo que decirte algo” (108). The surprise here is only that she, the hypothetically spurned lover, had also planned a break up on the beach.

⁵ The narrator plans to assuage his lover’s (assumed) worries about her age by reminding her he is older than her and that she has always been “tan linda e inteligente, tan dulce y popular, y que todavía no llega a los fatídicos 40” (100). The narrator’s platitudes are yet another sign of his superficial sentiments for his lovers. They also confirm the “Crónicas para sentimentales” narrator’s self-consciousness and paranoia about her age and datedness.

from the narrator's perspective it ironically hides his much more deeply-seeded *cursiness*: his secret desire for "happiness" and lack of "true" or "authentic" cynicism:

...No quería ser tan cursi de pensar en la palabra "feliz", pero en el interior de su mente, y ése era su secreto, podía llamar las cosas por su nombre sin que nadie se burlara de él.

Sí, así era, buscaba algo que le diera una felicidad que añoraba y que no descansaba en ninguna persona, oficio o lugar que conociera aún y no quería morir sin conocerlo, sin encontrarlo, y estar siempre con la misma pareja era una atadura que le impedía ir en pos de esa búsqueda, de ese algo que le aguardaba más adelante del camino y que significaba su plena realización, el estadio final, el sentimiento de "he llegado". (107)

The narrator's rehearsal of how he will break up with his current lover, his assumptions about how she will react and the *mise en scène* itself drip with *cursilería's* characteristic artificiality, its overwrought "inauthentic" sentimentality, or sentimental "blackmail" in Monsiváis' terms, its supposed lyricism. But he does not recognize any of these visible markers of *cursilería*, instead he is ashamed of his search for happiness, an ambivalent happiness that he cannot name but that he believes he will recognize when he comes upon it. Therein lies his great fear: revealing his "authentic" desire and being laughed at. Being laughable, *hacer el ridículo*, lies at the heart of *cursis's* social performance because their sentimentality is ridiculous to others. But, in fact, the narrator's "secret" is much less risible than his repeated, tired performance of canned, imitative romanticism and sentimentality.

Chaves' protagonists share Escudos' fear of being seen as *sentimentaloides*— as patsies— in a Central American context in which cynicism is the socially and culturally appropriate reaction to the isthmus' post-conflict, post-CAFTA condition. In El Salvador and Costa Rica as in the rest of Central America, CAFTA hastened neoliberal privatization, decreased security and increased social isolation and continues to affect a post-emotional search for authenticity in inauthentic relationships. In comparison to Escudos', Chaves' *cursilería* is more ambivalent and difficult to characterize. It is much less tender and naïve and more ironic and self-conscious while simultaneously and contradictorily anti-*feeling*. For instance, in *Historias Polaroid* (2000), the poetic speaker uses a *collage* his partner made to ironically illustrate their alienation from each other and, perhaps, their relationship's emotional failure:

Alguna vez hiciste un *collage*
con fotos de cuando éramos niños
y aún no sabíamos nada el uno del otro
Como ahora. ("Inocencia Polaroid" 21)

The speaker's lover's sentimental gesture reveals their adult relationship's superficiality and disengagement. He converts the collage's *afectividad* into fraudulent or artificial sentiment. It is this sentimental "fraud" that Chaves tracks through the *cursiness* his cheaply lovelorn *tico* road trippers enact in *Asfalto: un road poem* (2006). The road tripping couple performs expected public displays of affection despite these gestures' inauthenticity and *cursiness*. The relationship is clearly void of "authentic" affection; their gestures empty of *afecto*. Instead of eliciting closeness or intimacy, the road trip confirms the couple's emotional isolation from each other.

As is Escudos' thirty-five-year old narrator, the couple at the center of Luis Chaves' *Asfalto: un road poem* is broken-hearted. But in contrast to her, the *ticos* do not despair about their loss of "love" or of emotional involvement if they were in love once, or muse about ending a failed relationship. Instead, on a road trip through Costa Rica, they silently dwell on their dissatisfaction with the other without apparent sentimentality—as it turns out at the end of "Será así"—and use global media to mediate their feelings and personal interactions. From the opening prose poem, "Macrocosmos a 90 kilómetros por hora," and the beginning of the road trip, the couple travels together in solitude, disconnected, and with only occasional moments of "stupid" physical or other contact. Further, these gestures as well as their experience of the countryside and of their love relationship is framed by screens or monitors distancing them from their surroundings, or involvement (Rosaldo) and participation (Fulweiler): "miraba las imágenes que fluían por el techo corredizo como si ese agujero rectangular fuera un televisor: la pantalla horizontal donde se transmitía un largometraje diferente del parabrisas [...] Los dos en silencio. Cada uno en su propia película" (5).

Like Escudos' protagonist's use of Roberta Flack and Sal Mineo to create a narrative about her love and loss of her erstwhile teenage lover, Chaves' protagonists imagine themselves playing parts in a film and watching televised narratives. In both of these scenarios they place themselves outside the road trip on which they have embarked. The trip itself, which might be able to create a new sentimental narrative for their supposed love, ironically reinforces the lack of affection they feel for each other.

Sin desviar la mirada de ese símbolo de prestigio y juventud que representa el sun roof, colocó su mano sobre la pierna derecha de la conductora. Un reflejo, un acto ajeno a cualquier premeditación. Un movimiento solitario, casi estúpido, que no perturbó el silencio cósmico de la cabina... Sólo quienes han convivido aceptan la muda compañía de una existencia perfectamente desconocida. (5)

The presentation of physical contact as “stupid” and “solitary,” and of silence as an example of unfamiliarity in long term couples turns upside down perceptions of more “mature,” less *cursi* romantic relationships as those in which silence, for example, can communicate intimacy. This poem substantiates the poetic speaker’s assertion in “Inocencia Polaroid,” that romantic relationships do not necessarily lead to emotional intimacy or knowledge of each other. Here, small signs of affection such as the man’s hand on his female companion’s leg, or hand holding (“Viento fresco por la ventanilla” 11), could stand as expressions of love, but in Chaves’ couple they are even less than *cursilería*’s “cheaply sentimental” or “imitative” (Valis 15) gestures. Rather they highlight an environment in which lovers have lost all sentimental connection. And, although both lovers remember past sexual encounters and imagine future ones—he by musing about a strip club [“Show de Bim Bam Bum” (“Intereses” 35)] and she about being a porn actress (“Onomástica y proyecciones...” 55)—these are without emotional links and highlight the couple’s practice of searching out “love” affairs without affective entanglements.⁶ In effect, in Chaves’ text past romantic and/or sexual encounters can be reduced to being “Todo en pasado, recuerdos, como video clips extranjeros” (“Tres tripping tigers” 26), only images of experiences without depth.

Chaves’ protagonists in *Asfalto*, as do Escudos’ in “Crónicas para sentimentales” and “Sería así” also have a “banda sonora,” populated with global popular music (including Tom Waits, post-punk, and a compilation CD a hitchhiking *dillei* gives them) and images (romantic films, films from their youth). Unsurprisingly perhaps, the soundtrack does not loop back to the same song(s) and thus to memories the lyrics could elicit in the listeners’ minds, instead it is background noise to their silence and acceptance of their inexistent loving bonds. Their empty physical gestures function as attempts at an ironic sentimentality—aware of its emptiness but still enacted. In Escudos’ “Crónicas sentimentales,” the *cursi* protagonist uses sentimentality differently. She basks in it, in its cheapness and superficiality, in order to try to get to something deeper; to see herself as a woman of substance despite her *cursiness*. Sentimentality is a way to feel alive, to get past her “inmensa pereza” (126) to love again. Meanwhile in “Sería así” the narrator unconsciously uses it to break up “softly” with successive lovers and misjudges his “authentic” search for happiness and belonging as *cursi*. All these texts’ sentimentality highlights the unsentimentality (and failure) of love

⁶ Fulweiler, reading Foucault, notes that sexuality can represent inauthenticity and demonstrate the “lost experience of participation” (27).

in post-conflict Central America: as Escudos' narrator asserts at the end of "Sería así," "pobres ell[o]s, siempre pensando que el amor es todo, que solamente el amor puede llenar el espíritu de un hombre" (107).

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