

Gender, Waste, and the Uncanny Home in *Única mirando al mar*

Jennifer Abercrombie Foster

University of Kansas

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

Hernández’s short story exemplifies a recurrent manifestation of disenchantment within Central American literature at the turn of the 20th century. Many writers, playwrights, and poets from the region have published work that tells the story

of human beings living in vanquished, filthy, or decaying environments.¹ Defying affluent socio-economic class sensibilities, the portrayal of a community or domesticated space within wretched, hopeless living conditions has served as an evocative literary tool to expose socially constructed understandings of normalcy within Central America's post-revolutionary context. Hernández's "Lluvia en el trópico" hints at a society's collective abandonment of hope for any real or tangible socio-economic change: unable to do anything but resign themselves to their dire situation, the townspeople quickly learn to live with and even desire that which has become "normal."

Just as Hernández irreverently imagines how that which is seen as odd, insufferable, and awful can eventually become expected or even desired, other Central American writers have also used abject and unsettling themes or environments to highlight and challenge social norms. In recent scholarship, Beatriz Cortez, Ileana Rodríguez, Yajaira Padilla, and Magdalena Perkowska have attributed these literary expressions of disillusionment and pessimism to the loss of utopian ideals linked to revolutionary projects as well as to the region's modernizing neoliberal project that has increasingly yielded more social problems and economic disparity over the past 30 years. Cortez, in particular, has outlined a recurrent thematic and expressive sensibility that she calls an "aesthetic of cynicism" in Central American postwar literature that is rooted in the current socio-economic and/or political reality of each country in the region. For Central America, the armed conflicts of the 1980s and 90s ended in political stalemates and, as a result, many revolutionaries felt a deep sense of defeatism especially as social and economic inequalities subsequently intensified.² Seymour Menton called this period the "Post-Revolutionary Age:"³ an era not only marked by skepticism and cynicism, but also by a growing neoliberal environment dominated by transnational interest groups. And while certain countries, like Costa Rica and Honduras, did not directly experience armed struggle or violence within their national borders, they did

¹ See Carmen Naranjo's short story "Y vendimos la lluvia" in *Otro rumbo para la rumba* (1989), many short stories by Jacinta Escudos, including "Biografía de un pequeño indeseable" in *Contra-corriente* (1993), director Ishtar Yasin's film *El camino* (2007), and various short stories by Claudia Hernández, such as "Trampa para cucarachas" in *Mediodía de frontera* (2002).

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

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

feel the overflowing effects of revolution and a growing neoliberal presence in the region by the 1990s to varying degrees (Cortez 2010, 25; Perkowska 2012, 1-2).

The novel *Única mirando al mar* (1993) by the Costa Rican writer Fernando Contreras Castro is an example of Central American literature that entertains themes of waste, excess, and a disillusioned cynicism.⁴ The novel begins with a nameless unemployed and desperate older man who joins a landfill community of *bužos*, or trash “divers,” after he has literally thrown himself away into a garbage truck. At the moment of his metaphorical death, a woman *bužo* named Única Oconitrillo assists the man in his rebirth within the *bužo* community and, from this point forward, the man takes on a new identity and name: Momboñoombo Moñagallo. Paradoxically, the dump in the novel not only serves as a grave for discarded commodities and people, but also as a site for the creation of new identities, opportunities, and communities. Única goes on to create a family with Momboñoombo and her adoptive “boy”—a mentally handicapped 20-year old whom Única also saved from the garbage dump, years earlier. Happiness, however, is short-lived for the “recycled” family: the story ends somberly when el Bácan (the adoptive son) falls ill and passes away, leaving Única in a devastated, comatose state and Momboñoombo fruitlessly trying to revive her.

Several scholars of Central American literature have read Contreras’s novel as a critique of neoliberalism’s effect on the peripheral sectors of Costa Rican society as well as a critique of the nation’s poor ecological practices, excessive consumerism, and inept governmental management of the country.⁵ The novel is set in what many readers would consider an uncanny domestic space: an overflowing garbage dump. Published in 1994, Contreras’s novel appears to respond to the global and neoliberal policies that were earlier implemented in the mid 1980s in Costa Rica. Today, Contreras’s portrayal of the dump serves as a symbolic and foreshadowing consequence of those same policies, which have exacerbated socio-economic disparities in the nation for the last 30 years, especially so for women.⁶ According to a 2014 report from the CATO

⁴ For other examples, see Endnote #1 and Giaconda Belli’s novel *Waslala: Memorial del futuro* (1996).

⁵ See Edgar Cota Torres’s “Reciclaje humano en *Única mirando al mar* de Fernando Contreras” (2015), Ana Patricia Rodríguez’s “Wasted Opportunities” in *Dividing the Isthmus* (2009), Jerry Hoeg’s “The Landscape of the Consumer Society: Fernando Contreras Castro’s *Única mirando al mar*” in *Reading and Writing the Latin American Landscape* (2009), Michael T. Millar’s “Los ciegos ven mejor lo invisible: Visión, ceguera, y crítica social en la literatura contemporánea costarricense” (2013), Minor Calderón Salas’s “Los cronistas de lo urbano en la literatura costarricense” (2009).

⁶ Critics like Marlise Matos and Clarisse Paradis (“Los feminismos latinoamericanos y su compleja relación con el Estado”, 2013) and Jennifer Bickham Mendez (“Gender and

Institute, Juan Carlos Hidalgo writes that despite healthy economic growth rates over the past 30 years, Costa Rica has not been able to significantly reduce poverty since the early 1990s.⁷ Ana Patricia Rodríguez notes that Contreras's novel, published in 1994, can be read as an "allegory of the demythologized republic of Costa Rica" (207): while Costa Rica is generally identified as Central America's most prosperous, democratic, and ecologically minded country, in reality, the nation struggles with high rates of poverty as well as maintaining ecological sustainability, thanks in part to the liberalized economic policies that have exacerbated socio-economic disparities in Costa Rica.⁸ Against this national backdrop, Contreras's portrayal of human beings living in poverty, waste, and ruin in *Única mirando al mar* serves as a striking representation of disenchantment.⁹

Within cultures of disenchantment, relationships between the Self, the Other, and broader social expectations are strained and distorted, which is why categories and patterns recognized as part of psychoanalysis are effective interpretive tools for literary texts produced in Post-revolutionary societies. According to Freud, the uncanny addresses how unsettling feelings are triggered when the category of the familiar intermingles with the unfamiliar or when repressed impulses or ideas surface to consciousness.¹⁰ In Contreras's novel, unsettling feelings are triggered when the

Citizenship in a Global Context", 2002) affirm that neoliberal policies have proven especially problematic for women in Latin America, who have borne the brunt of neoliberal structural adjustment. Thanks in part to liberalized markets, globalization, and economic necessity many women have taken on the "double shift" of working in and outside of the traditional home space, making it that much more difficult for women to incorporate themselves into the policy-making positions of power that men have historically and currently dominate.

⁷ Hidalgo argues that poverty in Costa Rica remains constant, not necessarily due to the country's liberalized economic model, but rather, from the strong mercantilist bias that has been maintained since before the 1950s. Hidalgo writes: "Successive administrations adopted monetary, trade, tax, and regulatory regimes that benefited the export-oriented sectors of the economy at the expense of the overall population, particularly the poor" ("Growth without Poverty Reduction", 2014).

⁸ According to Mauricio Herrera-Rodríguez, neoliberal policies have also greatly influenced the nation's approach to ecology. While Costa Rica has been heralded (and commercially advertised) as a natural paradise, the nation's political and economic establishment began promoting a "market-centered conservation" that commodified the nation's natural resources (198). As a result, Costa Rican politicians have sought to preserve resources considered monetarily valuable, while ignoring the country's "other" realities (i.e. those lands or regions not attractive for marketing purposes) (199).

⁹ See Hoeg's "The Landscape of the Consumer Society: Fernando Contreras Castro's *Única mirando al mar*" (2009) and Ana Patricia Rodríguez's "Wasted Opportunities" in *Dividing the Isthmus* (2009).

¹⁰ In his 1919 essay, "The Uncanny," Freud explains that while the German word *heimlich* means "homely" or something "familiar, intimate, and friendly" (222), the word *unheimlich* ("unhomely") is not the opposite of what is familiar, but rather, it is the blending of the familiar with the unfamiliar: "for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but

familiar, domestic space of the home (positively associated with tradition, life, and order) is placed within an unfamiliar grotesque environment (negatively associated with the Other, death, and chaos). In relation to Freud's concept of the uncanny, the abject can be understood as an incarnation of the uncanny. Julia Kristeva describes abjection as a visceral, human reaction to horror, which occurs when normative or familiar boundaries (that define identity, system, and order) are disturbed (4).¹¹ Because existing hierarchies and power relations are based on dualistic oppositions, the abject quality of the Río Azul *botadero* is created in part by blurring or destabilizing those boundaries that have divided and separated dualistic, socially acceptable categories that inform identity and order, such as life/death, cleanliness/filth, and Self/Other.

In this article, I employ psychoanalytic categories to address how Contreras's protagonists, like Hernandez's townspeople, accept the normalization of disaster and decay within a neoliberal, post-revolutionary context. My reading points to one way in which the destabilization of traditional dualisms has evoked a deep uneasiness with the shifting power dynamics between the sexes in contemporary Costa Rican society. Accordingly, I complicate the notion of disenchanting normalcy (or grotesque notions of normalcy) by examining gender's role within the abject space of the Río Azul garbage dump. In particular, I explore how the novel's garbage dump and the waste within it are not just representations of the failings of Costa Rica's economic and political policies, but that they are also symbolic of and speak directly to ideological systems that extend beyond economics or politics to essential cultural ideas, like gender. Enunciated through the abject and the uncanny, normative gender ideologies and roles within an abject domestic space call attention to social and gendered hierarchies that are portrayed in Contreras's novel as internalized, non-negotiable facts of life in contemporary Costa Rican society. Consequently, I contend that the uncanny and the abject operate as unexpected, subversive factors for critiquing as well as re-imagining the traditional gendered spaces and roles in Contreras's novel.

In the wake of destabilized boundaries and ideologies, the disruption of the status quo can afford literary female protagonists an innocuous space to explore and

something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (217).

¹¹ Kristeva's concept of the abject is similar to Freud's concept of the uncanny. In Freud's concept of the uncanny, a dead body is experienced as foreign (abject), but also strangely familiar (in that it was once a living person). Furthermore, Freud explains that many people experience uncanny feelings "in the highest degree" when confronted with death, dead bodies, or the return of the dead (217).

grapple with self-determination and empowerment. These alternative visions of traditional life can be linked to what feminist and literary scholar Lucie Armitt calls “grotesque utopías:” spaces in literature that embrace social upheaval (16). When domestic spaces become unfamiliar (or their meaning has broken down), readers are prompted to imagine alternatives to a normative, socially accepted order. Strikingly, however, the female protagonist in Contreras’s novel does *not* take advantage of the “utopian” space in which she finds herself. Rather than explore new ways of existing in a destabilized version of contemporary Costa Rican society, Única refuses to imagine social or socio-economic change for her or her community. By examining her complete refusal to see or to take advantage of the alternative “utopia” before her, the novel evinces just how pervasive the forces of internalized cynicism and powerlessness are in Central American culture at the turn of the 21st century. Perhaps most importantly, Única’s strong resignation to her own destruction speaks volumes about a disenchantment that is particular to women in Central America.¹² In a novel where traditional gender and sexual ideologies are especially foregrounded, the abjection produced from mixing and breaking down dualistic boundaries, systems, and identities, calls attention (and thus opens critique) to strict and limiting understandings of the status quo. While Única cannot see the potential for a grotesque utopia, it is within this unlikely and creative space of the uncanny that the reader is provoked to rethink conventional and hierarchical structures of power, especially as they relate to gender in post-revolutionary Central America.

The physical and metaphorical space of the dump functions as one structure of patriarchal power that has traditionally relegated women to the private sphere and excluded them from public places of power. Río Azul—a place (de)composed of unwanted, expelled items and misfits—is set apart from traditional domestic spaces in that it provides a locale where various Othered categories can be identified and united. In this space, socially and culturally instilled gender ideologies (like the traditional, Western notion of the domestic sphere and a woman’s place within it) intermingle and connect with the novel’s overarching themes of trash, death, Otherness, and Woman. This co-mingling works alongside the uncanny, resulting in an inadvertent critique of gender relations in Costa Rican society that reveals hegemonic and internalized cultural

¹² Critics like Yajaira Padilla (*Changing Women, Changing Nation*, 2012), Loraine Bayar de Volo (“A Revolution in the Binary?”, 2012), Maureen Shea (“Narradoras combatientes en la literatura centroamericana”, 2007), and Julia Shayne (*The Revolution Question*, 2004) have specifically examined Central American women’s disenchantment with the failure of revolutionary projects that had promised egalitarian ideals that included gender equality.

values, which denigrate the feminine by associating it with abjection. As the associations between Woman, domesticity, life/death, waste, and abjection become evident, Contreras's novel comments upon the privileging of normative and hierarchical dualisms. The *buzos'* domestic space, where these associations are made and where strict dualisms are challenged, sets the scene for uncanny encounters.

In order to underscore the connections between the *botadero* and gendered ideologies and expectations, it is critical to first establish how the *buzos'* domestic space sets the scene for uncanny encounters. In Contreras's novel, trash becomes excessively uncanny when the familiar culture and setting of the traditional Costa Rican home is discordantly constructed within the unfamiliar space of the *botadero*—unfamiliar, that is, for most readers and anyone who is not a *buzo*. As an unfamiliar entity, John Scanlan sees the uncanny in trash and calls it “a ghostly foe” (160). As a byproduct of consumption, trash is most uncanny when it does not conveniently disappear. It is an unwelcome reminder of our material selves—a sign that we are not immaculate beings and that we do indeed create and expel foulness from our bodies and our homes. Trash, then, comes from us; it is a part of us. Dualistic boundaries are crossed when trash reappears once it has already been rejected, much like a ghost reappearing among the living. Scanlan writes that trash is a “shadow of our supposedly cleansed reality, where its method of disposal [...] ensures that it no longer really comes to light. Instead, it vanishes into a spectral reality that is uncanny” (160). In a common desire to banish trash from view, it is moved from the subjective *here* to an unknown *there*. The novel draws the reader's attention to this socially imbedded dualism of *here/there* by illustrating how the “unfamiliar” *there* (i.e. the dump) can be, in fact, someone else's “familiar” *here*. Initially, as an outsider to the *botadero*, Momboñombo is troubled by the blurring of this dualistic divide between *here/there* when he cannot dispose of his own bodily waste from clear sight. Upon his arrival to Río Azul, Momboñombo must learn to defecate in the open air, “el acto de cagar en cuclillas,” while the other *buzos* move around him, unfazed (22).¹³ Without a space that is set apart from the rest, he has no choice but to perform this private act in public, from where he cannot disassociate himself. With time, Momboñombo not only comes to accept a destabilized concept of *here* vs. *there*, but he also begins to associate himself with the filth that he cannot eliminate (or even notice). Thrown away as if he were trash, the relationship between space and identity is

¹³ See Gay Hawkins's chapter, “Shit,” in *On Garbage* (2006), where the author looks into the ways in which the public and private binary is established in part thanks to commerce and “shit.”

concretized through the trashpickers' evident "materiality" and, as such, Río Azul not only serves as a *somewhere else* for inanimate, unwanted materials, but also for undesirable, expelled groups of society. For unskilled citizens like Única and Momboño, once they have been "used up" and they no longer productively contribute to the capitalist economy, they are likewise equated with trash and "thrown away" from *here* to *there*.

As another provocation of the uncanny within Río Azul, the *buzos*' emphasized materiality undermines a presumed "absolute boundary" that defines normative identities surrounding the human/nonhuman and that also connects with traditional gender identities. While both Momboño and Única are "discarded" due to their age and inability to be productive citizens; it is Única who comments on the cultural, ideological meaning of garbage and waste—especially as they relate to traditionally feminized or domesticated spaces. Throughout the novel, women are associated with waste and with the uncanny category of Otherness. Within the unproductive (rather than reproductive) space of the home, Única ponders over how both women and waste are eventually disdained and disregarded. In gendered terms, Única signals how waste is intimately linked with the inferior, secondary category within a hierarchical valuable/worthless binary. She states: "Vos sabés que yo he llegado a pensar que la basura también es mujer, mirá, es *La basura*, como *La mujer*, de género femenino...es *La basura* y al principio a todo el mundo le gusta cuando está nuevita y apenas se pone vieja ya nadie la quiere, pero esas son tonterías mías" (52). By linking the common feminine article of the two Spanish words, Única draws attention to the feminized characteristics of trash in dehumanizing terms: women often serve as an object, fetish, or means of reproduction and their material value depends on the newness and novelty of their being. This is a clear critique of global over-consumption as well as a cultural commodification and fetishization of women in patriarchal societies. It is also striking how Única immediately dismisses and denigrates her own insightful thoughts by stating "pero esas son tonterías mías." Única's mistrust in her own intellectual, non-material value is revealed in this statement and it also speaks to her understanding of her "place" within a patriarchal, neoliberal culture that, above all else, values women's materiality and/or intellectual passivity.

In the cultural binary that privileges the (active) human over the (passive) nonhuman—waste (and Woman by association) is condemned to a passive, inferior category. Markedly, however, it is worth noting that both the "passive" categories of Woman *and* waste do indeed exert and exhibit power within the *botadero*: Única actively creates and cultivates the *buzo* community and waste has the powerful ability to

contaminate. In Contreras's novel, garbage's non-animate agency (i.e. emotive and material strength from inanimate objects) helps to destabilize cultural notions about power structures that posit humans as superior to (or more powerful than) nonhumans. As a nonhuman and inanimate object, the *botadero's* ability to impact the lives of human beings disrupts a traditional, hierarchical understanding of power within the human/nonhuman binary. Rather than being a passive entity, trash is framed as an object with material power. It is an entity with agency that threatens the rest of San José, which highlights the blurred boundary between the Western human/nonhuman dualism, a notion that ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo describes in her book *Bodily Natures* (2010). Alaimo points out how a new ethics can be conjured by emphasizing the interconnections between the seemingly separate (and traditional) spheres of human and "more-than-human" nature. By centering on physical materiality, Alaimo claims that we can better envision reality as it is deeply and profoundly connected to both the human and nonhuman world. The idea of a "viscous porosity" between dualisms, to use Alaimo's term, allows for a better understanding of how the human and the nonhuman are inextricably linked. What's more, by showing how human beings are interconnected to material, nonhuman entities, it becomes apparent that these inanimate objects indeed have a material power or agency that impacts human beings, via environmental contamination.¹⁴

In Contreras's novel, Río Azul is indeed invested with agency, but as an Othered being or sphere. As Scanlan suggests, many people would rather not associate trash with the Self, but with a distant, disconnected Other. The narrative voice refers to the *botadero* as *el Más Allá* (the Great Beyond or the Hereafter), which emphasizes distance, difference, and division—a state of Otherness. *El Más Allá* evokes an otherworldly, indefinite place that is completely disconnected from normative notions of the "here and now." It is also strikingly similar to what Freud used to refer to as an afterlife: "Jenseits," which means "the other side," the "hereafter," the "beyond," or the "other world" (Jonte-Pace 2001, 50). Within the novel, various metaphors conjure up deathly, moribund images of the *buzos'* home—so much so that Río Azul becomes a character (with latent powers) in its own right. The narrative voice describes Única as a witness to the trash heap's slow death: "[...] veinte años de estar soportándolo, viéndolo crecer y viéndolo morir en una agonía infinita de cadáver palpitante y

¹⁴ See Jane Bennett's text *Vibrant Matters* (2010), as she calls attention to what she terms "vibrant matter." Rather than being passive objects, Bennett highlights the "vitality" of things, objects, and materials that have traditionally been deemed unresponsive and without agency.

afiebrado que les llenaba las casas con sus estertores nauseabundos...” (68). Not only is waste personified as a dying entity, it also serves as a graveyard when an infant is buried alive and when the dump also swallows el Bacán’s corpse at the end of the novel.

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

To her detriment, Única is unable to see the dump’s grotesque, utopian potential for social restructuring. While she is a strong and capable woman, Única is far from being a social revolutionary: she is fully resigned to a passive fate already decided by her gender and socio-economic class. Única explains to Momboñoombó when he first arrives how one must come to tolerate the flies and the stench of the dump. She states: “...y no podés hacer nada más que acostumbrarte, porque o te acostumbrás o te jodás” (24). Contrarily, Momboñoombó, who comes to represent the head of the family, resists such passivity and insists on fighting for the garbage pickers’ rights. Unmoved, Única replies: “[e]so ha sido así siempre desde que el mundo es mundo y las cosas no van a cambiar solo porque a vos se te ocurre” (107). Única insists that redemption or relief will only be achieved once she has died, a common sentiment that liberation theologians fought against during Central America’s revolutionary period.¹⁵ She states: “El infierno es aquí, Momboñoombó, y yo de aquí voy derecho para el cielo...pero no vale la pena ponerse a pensar en eso. Más bien, yo le doy gracias a Dios de que todavía

¹⁵ Liberation Theology is a religious movement that began in the 1970s and was led primarily by Roman Catholic priests in Latin America. The movement sought to combine Catholicism and revolutionary socialism.

tenemos dónde vivir y algo para comer, porque hay gente que ni eso” (24). Única is uninterested in restructuring or reimagining an alternate reality; rather, she is resigned and committed to what she sees as the only option available to her—that of a nurturer and caretaker within an established familial structure. The pervasive forces of internalized cynicism and disenchantment hold gender ideologies stubbornly in place in the novel. And, at the end of the novel, rather than re-create what has already been destroyed—or use the uncanny to her advantage—Única’s inaction and silence reveal her response to the unequal power structures at play. Utterly destroyed, she lets Momboñombo act on her behalf as a *príncipe azul*, taking her away from the symbolic sea of trash to the real seaside. This fairytale-like gesture of being rescued from the dump by her prince charming proves to be a useless, inadequate attempt to “fix” Única: despite Momboñombo’s earnest hope, the novel ends with Única “looking into the sea”—unaltered by her physical surroundings, because what is needed is not a change in geography, but something far more complex and elusive: a fundamental reevaluation of the social and cultural norms that have helped to thwart Única’s ability to hope and dream for something “more” for both herself and her community.

Most critics have read Contreras’s novel as a celebration of traditional familial structures and gender roles: one such reading speaks to the way in which the novel advocates for the conventional family structure and social values found within contemporary Costa Rican society. With the recreation of hierarchical gender roles in the dump, the novel mirrors many of the social and cultural values found outside of the *botadero*. It commemorates how a Costa Rican community survives dire situations of economic crisis, maintains dignity in the face of harsh adversity, and keeps traditional family values alive, all despite the grim circumstances surrounding the country. Hoeg argues that Contreras’ rendering of Única as a “faithful portrayal of human nature” has stimulated the novel’s popularity in Costa Rica (172). For Hoeg, Única embodies a monolithic archetype for the idealized Costa Rican woman. She is an innately graceful, kind, and self-sacrificing matriarch and—despite that her name implies her “uniqueness”—Única is portrayed as a strong, independent “every woman.” Literary critic Benedicto Viquez Guzmán further describes Única as representative of the collective lives of trashpickers: “[...] ella no es tan única, es el símbolo de muchas mujeres y hombres, que como ella, representan una sociedad desigual, injusta, corrupta, despiadada. La vida de Única es la misma de miles de seres que viven en los basureros [...]” (“Fernando Contreras Castro”). Along these lines, her fate could also be read as representative of many other Costa Rican women’s fate: one that has rendered some

women both silent and compliant within the traditional familial structures and gender roles found in the country's social framework.

Ana Patricia Rodríguez rightly contends that Contreras's novel is "open to more regenerative, sustainable readings, resolutions, and interpretations of the problem of wasting away of Central America at its human, material, and symbolic levels" (212). While a gendered critique is not immediately evident in Contreras's work, Única's tragic fate (of losing her identity when her son dies) inadvertently delivers a critique of traditional familial and gender structures found within the context of Costa Rica's neoliberal, globalized state. As government regulation decreases in Central American states, privatization and government cutbacks profoundly affect women, who are the primary caretakers of children and the elderly (12). In this sense, neoliberal policies tend to reinforce gender identity. Indeed, Única willingly accepts her role as a maternal archetype, which, according to Misha Kokotovic, is not uncommon in many postwar narratives written by men: "perhaps unwittingly, [many postwar narratives] thematize and in some cases, even seem to endorse the relegation of women to their traditional roles" (18-19). In the novel, Momboñombo praises Única in her instrumental role in founding the Río Azul community. He explains that she began the community as a way to reproduce and preserve what he calls "la vida misma" (127), which is framed as a normative life that follows traditional Western ideals of family and community. As a maternal, unifying figure, Única serves the *buzos* in the most traditional way possible: by perpetuating and bringing together traditional Costa Rican values that are found outside of the *botadero*. As Amy Kaminsky proposes, being a woman creates the obligation to passively reproduce (not to produce) and "to maintain whatever is worth maintaining in the culture," which she argues serves masculinist agendas of preserving a system that favors men (16). Despite the squalor of the dump, Única preserves what is deemed the most important aspects of Costa Rican culture, which include family relations, community ties, and the emotional security of having a protective space to call home.

Alongside Única, Momboñombo happily participates in and endorses the recreation of a traditional Costa Rican family unit, one that places him as the head of the house. As a result, his survival, new identity, and sense of masculinity are all contingent upon his inclusion in the traditional familial unit fostered by Única. As he becomes his own "dueño," the traditional familial structure gives stability and purpose to Momboñombo's new life as well as an identity that is still connected to the conventional social institutions found outside of the *botadero*. Momboñombo's

welcomed presence in this newly “completed” familial unit serves as a recognizable vestige from the outside world, a continuation of stable human connections and normalized sensibilities. The *botadero* gives both Única and Momboñoombo a family, but also a sense of normative identity and self-purpose that follows traditional gender roles and expectations within highly untraditional parameters.

While both Momboñoombo and Única find happiness in the “modelos aburguesados” (125), it is only temporary. With the tragic death of *el Bacán*, the familial structure that Única strove to create is suddenly destroyed and her reason for living is nulled. Without the identity that defined her, Única stops speaking and remains in a comatose state for the remainder of the novel. As the self-sacrificial Virgin Mother, Única has truly given all of herself by the end of the novel; she is completely used up, docile, and silent. As an older, penniless woman weathered by perpetual disappointment and struggle, Única’s exhaustion is not only related to her age but also to her disillusionment and apparent lack of hope for a new beginning. By the end of the novel, it becomes bitterly evident that Única has recreated *and* been beaten by the same system that defeated her in her previous life outside of the *botadero*, as a motherless, unskilled woman. Finally giving up on making the best of her situation, Única shuts down and abandons her maternal identity—evidently the only identity available to her—as she surrenders herself to complete silence.

Dismayed by Única’s inert state, Momboñoombo rebukes his wife in sorrow, reproaching her for having lived a lie: “Te mentiste durante veinte años de tu vida para no morir de tristeza, te trajiste todo para acá, la tradición familiar, las buenas costumbres, la maternidad, el horario de las comidas, todo, todo para no volverte loca. Pero, ¿qué locura era esa?, ¡Única, por Dios!” (124). Momboñoombo’s accusation that Única lied to herself is at odds with what she professes throughout the novel: “te acostumbrás o te jodás” (27). In fact, Única is the one character best rooted in reality, despite Momboñoombo’s sudden belief that what she constructed in the *botadero* was all a lie: “todo era falso” (124). Momboñoombo’s accusation against Única also hints at the question of whether or not the outside world is equally a “lie” or invention—that, perhaps, the world beyond the dump is simply a gratuitous and mindless recreation of the same cultural and social norms.

In the last pages of the novel, Momboñoombo takes Única away from the *botadero* “sea” of trash to the real seaside and the two pass their time looking out at the ocean. The novel closes with Momboñoombo hoping that, one day, Única will return from her silent, absent state—but, there is no indication or guarantee that she will ever

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

While Hoeg initially calls Única a “classic version of *Marianismo*” (i.e. a self-sacrificing, moral representation of the Virgin Mother), he states that the stereotype “breaks down” by the end of the novel when Única abandons all hope (172). I contend, however, that the end of the novel achieves the opposite effect in that—despite her loss of hope—Única’s embodiment of *Marianismo* is played out to its limit: Única willingly sacrifices her own life and all of her energies to her maternal identity and duty. To be clear, the problem for Única is not her commitment or desire to be a traditional mother and wife, but rather, it is her inability to imagine an alternate identity for herself. From this perspective, the novel evinces the limits and flaws of *Marianismo* as Única’s story inadvertently opens up questions about the social and psychological impact of certain traditional ideals and expectations on women’s lives. Despite that Momboño, Única, and *el Bacán* all form “la vida misma” within the grotesque utopian space of the *botadero*, it is worth underscoring that it is Única who is left completely hopeless, ruined, and disenchanting. Via her martyred end, the novel points to the frailty of the familial system and its influence on female identity and agency. Millar writes: “La debilidad de este sistema ilusorio, no obstante, está claramente ilustrado por el proceso destructivo que experimenta Única al final de la novela” (2013, 37). Única is utterly silenced and undone once she can no longer embody the feminine ideal that she has internalized as her only option, even within the uncanny, creative space of the *botadero*. In essence, Única’s fate is linked to the perpetuation of traditional gender ideologies in the dump.

The economic pressures in Costa Rica around the 1990s have helped evince deep-seated gender ideologies, especially in regards to traditionally assigned gender roles. While Única’s fate is generally representative of the struggle and suffering endured by peripheral communities, a closer examination additionally reveals striking intersectional challenges that women from those communities confront every day.

Even as Costa Rica has been exemplary in its progressive steps to bolstering women's representation in party politics¹⁶ and its commitment to social-welfare programs,¹⁷ Costa Rican women (especially of the working class) struggle with high levels of unemployment, wage discrimination, and the unending responsibilities of a “double shift” (i.e. working both inside and outside of the home),¹⁸ obliging many women to take on more than their lion's share of domestic and caretaking duties, which, in turn, limits their access to public sphere. It is no wonder that Única is used up by the end of the novel, similar to the trash in the dump. Única sacrificially gives everything she has to a system that not only favors male interests, but also associates traditional feminine categories with waste, trash, and Otherness.

For better or worse, abject circumstances and gendered ideologies—like the rain of dog feces in Hernández's short story—eventually become invisible due to their “naturalness” for the *buzos*. It is through the reader's perspective that we can begin to see and reconsider the value or harm of these ideologies. In an overflowing garbage dump, Única complies with the role of the “ángel del hogar,” despite the atypical environment in which she finds herself. As the *botadero* reveals the social constructedness of traditional spaces, roles, and dualisms, the novel provokes a critical reexamination of the perpetuation of those traditions—not just for women, but for society as a whole. The blending of abject categories within the domestic space helps to reveal ideological and physical relationships between women, domesticity, death, and Otherness. These relationships point to constructed beliefs about underprivileged categories that are perpetuated by the privileging of dualistic thinking. The uncanny therefore plays a crucial role in Contreras's novel, evoking visceral, unconscious anxieties about disturbing the status quo through unsettling representations of abject domestic spaces. And, although this kind of abject domestic space is dehumanizing in many ways, the novel hints at the ways in which the uncanny has the potential to

¹⁶ In 1997, a feminist movement helped pass legislation that requires political parties to fill at least 40% of their eligible seats with women. Nevertheless, the nation's feminist movements have in large part avoided involvement in the systemic defense of working women's rights, which some scholars have attributed to a general disengagement in class culture (Molina and Palmer 207, 172-173).

¹⁷ See Marrieta Morrissey's “Neoliberalism, Development, and the Costa Rican State” (2017).

¹⁸ See Endnote #6. Also see Sylva Chant's “The ‘Feminisation of Poverty’ in Costa Rica: To What Extent a Conundrum?” (2009); González Villegas and Josué Ulate Chinchilla Braulio's “Análisis dinámico del desempleo en Costa Rica para el período 2010-2011” (2013); and Roslyn Jiménez Cordero and Natalia Morales Aguilar's “Discriminación salarial en el mercado de trabajo en los noventa” (2012); and Alejandro del Valle and Daniel Boga “Familia, Género, Protección Social” (2017).

redefine traditional spaces by erasing or blurring boundaries that are supposedly irrevocable, like life/death, cleanliness/filth, and man/woman. Indeed, it is the imagining of the “grotesque” or uncanny utopia that offers a creative escape not only from restrictive identities or ideologies, but perhaps from disenchantment, as well.

Bibliography

- Agarwal, Gina. “Gender and Environmental Debate”, *Feminist Studies* 18, 1 (1992): 119-158.
- Alaimo, Stacey. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.
- Armitt, Lucie. 2001. *Contemporary Women’s Fiction and the Fantastic*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Bayar de Volo, Lorraine. “A Revolution in the Binary? Gender and the Oxymoron of Revolutionary War in Cuba and Nicaragua”, *Signs* 37.2 (2012): 413-39.
- Belli, Gioconda. *Waslala: Memorial del futuro*. Managua, Nicaragua: Anama Ediciones Centroamericanas, 1996.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Berger, Susan A. *Guatemaltecas: The Women’s Movement, 1986-2003*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006.
- Bickham Mendez, Jennifer. “Gender and Citizenship in a Global Context: The Struggle for Maquila Workers’ Rights in Nicaragua.” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 9, 1 (2002): 7-38.
- Calderón Salas, Minor. “Los cronistas de lo urbano en la literatura costarricense”, *Káñina: Revista de artes y letras de la Universidad de Costa Rica* 33, 2 (2009): 11-21.
- Carrillo, Ana Lorena. “Otras palabras de fuego: Notas sobre ensayo y compromiso político en Centroamérica”, *Istmo* (2007): 15.
- Chant, Sylvia. “The ‘Feminisation of Poverty’ in Costa Rica: To What Extent a Conundrum?” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 28, 1 (2009): 19-43.
- Contreras Castro, Fernando. *Única mirando al mar*. San José, Costa Rica: Farben Grupo Editorial Norma, 2009.
- Cortez, Beatriz. *La estética de cinismo: Pasión y desencanto en la literatura centroamericana de posguerra*. Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2010.

- Cota Torres, Edgar. "Reciclaje humano en *Única mirando al mar* de Fernando Contreras." *Káñina: Revista de artes y letras de la Universidad de Costa Rica* 39, 1 (2015): 119-127.
- Covino, Deborah C. *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2004.
- Del Valle, Alejandro and Daniel Boga. "Familia, género, protección social: Transformaciones y feminización de las Políticas Sociales", *Nómadas. Revista Crítica de Ciencias Sociales y Jurídicas* 50, 1 (2017).
- Escudos, Jacinta. *Contra-corriente*. San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores, 1993.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." *Writings on Art and Literature*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1997. 193-233
- Hawkins, Gay. *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish*. Lanham Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.
- Heard, Catherine. "The Persistence of Monsters". Ed. Corrado Federici, Leslie A. Boldt-Irons, and Ernesto Virgulti. *Beauty and the Abject: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. New York: P. Lang, 2007. 29-39
- Hernández, Claudia. *Mediodía de frontera*. San Salvador: Dirección de Publicaciones e Impresos, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y el Arte, 2002.
- Herrera-Rodríguez, Mauricio. "Sustainable Development in Costa Rica: A Geographic Critique". Diss. Kansas State University, 2004.
- Hidalgo, Juan Carlos. "Growth without Poverty Reduction: The Case of Costa Rica". *Cato Institute*. Retrieved from <https://www.cato.org>. 2014, January 23.
- Hoeg, Jerry. "The Landscape of the Consumer Society: Fernando Contreras Castro's *Única mirando al mar*". Ed. Beatriz Rivera-Barnes and Jerry Hoeg. *Reading and Writing the Latin American Landscape*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 177-186
- Jiménez Cordero, Roslyn and Natalia Morales Aguilar. "Discriminación salarial en el mercado de trabajo en los noventas", *Ciencias Económicas* 30, 2 (2012): 31-51.
- Jonte-Pace, Diane E. *Speaking the Unspeakable: Religion, Misogyny, and the Uncanny Mother in Freud's Cultural Texts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- Kaminsky, Amy. *Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Kokotovic, Misha. "Neoliberal Noir: Contemporary Central American Crime Fiction as Social Criticism", *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 24, 3 (2006): 15-29.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

- Marois, Thomas. "From Economic Crisis to a 'State' of Crisis?: The Emergence of Neoliberalism in Costa Rica", *Historical Materialism* 13, 3 (2002): 101-134.
- Matos, Marlise and Clarisse Paradis. "Los feminismos latinoamericanos y su compleja relación con el Estado: Debates actuales", *Íconos: Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 45 (2013): 91-107.
- Menton, Seymour. "Rey del albor: *Madrugada* de Julio Escoto, una nueva novela nacional en la época posrevolucionaria: 1989-2000". Ed. Patrick Collard and Rita Maeseneer. *Murales, figuras, fronteras: Narrativa e historia en el Caribe y Centroamérica*. Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2003.
- Millar, Michael T. "Los ciegos ven mejor lo invisible: Visión, ceguera, y crítica social en la literatura contemporánea costarricense". *Kañina: Revista de artes y letras de la Universidad de Costa Rica* 37, 1 (2013): 33-45.
- Molina, Jiménez Iván and Steven P. Palmer. *The History of Costa Rica: Brief, Up-to-Date and Illustrated*. San José, C.R: Editorial UCR, 2007.
- Morrissey, Marietta. "Neoliberalism, Development, and the Costa Rican State", *Latin American Policy* 8, 2 (2017): 278-294.
- Naranjo, Claudia. *Otro rumbo para la rumba*. San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1989.
- Padilla, Yajaira. *Changing Women, Changing Nation: Female Agency, Nationhood, and Identity in Trans-Salvadoran Narratives*. Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2012.
- Perkowska, Magdalena. "La infamia de las historias y la ética de la escritura en la novela centroamericana contemporánea", *Istmo: Revista virtual de estudios literarios y culturales centroamericanos*, 2012. 22
- Robinson, William. *Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change, and Globalization*. London: Verso, 2003.
- Rodríguez, Ana Patricia. *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009.
- Scanlan, John. *On Garbage*. London: Reaktion, 2005.
- Shayne, Julie D. *The Revolution Question: Feminisms in El Salvador, Chile, and Cuba*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2004.
- Shea, Maureen E. "Narradoras combatientes en la literatura centroamericana: De la ilusión al desengaño." *Istmo: Revista virtual de estudios literarios y culturales centroamericanos*, 2007. 15

- Villegas González, Braulio and Josué Ulate Chinchilla. “Análisis dinámico del desempleo en Costa Rica para el período 2010-2011”, *Ciencias Económicas* 31, 1 (2013): 31-66.
- Viquez Guzmán, Benedicto. “Fernando Contreras Castro 1”. *El arte literario y su teoría*. Retrieved from <http://heredia-costarica.zonalibre.org>. 2009, September 14.
- Yasin, Ishtar. *El camino*. San Jose, Costa Rica: [publisher not identified], 2011.