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Guatemala as a National Crime Scene: Femicide and Impunity in Contemporary U.S. Detective Novels

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of femicide and impunity in contemporary detective novels set in Guatemala. *The Long Night of White Chickens* by Francisco Goldman (1992), *Body of Truth* (1992) by David Lindsey, and *Grave Secrets* (2002) by Kathy Reichs portray Guatemala in the 1980s and 1990s as a distressing crime scene. The novels depict Guatemala as a dark, frightening place, plagued with inefficient bureaucracy, a chaotic legal system, and a crippled sense of justice where there are dangerous repercussions for searching for and revealing the truth. U.S. journalists, CIA agents, Peace Corps volunteers, forensic scientists, and private investigators navigate the dangerous terrain between lies and truth while grappling to understand the root causes of violence and impunity. By presenting an array of North American characters who travel to Guatemala with complex and often conflicted allegiances, these works of fiction provide a lens through which to view current discussions of gendered violence and impunity. It is my contention that reading these representations of Guatemalan violence in light of our current globalized climate of fear turns a critical eye on the silence and complicity in the U.S. and abroad that allow these grisly murders to remain unpunished – in fiction and in real life.

KEYWORDS: Guatemala, femicide, detective novels, violence

Guatemala as a National Crime Scene: Femicide and Impunity in Contemporary U.S. Detective Novels

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In our country, the truth has been twisted and silenced
Discovering the truth is painful, but it is without doubt a healthy and liberating action.
Msgr. Juan Gerardi, *Never Again*, xxiv.

Terror is a place that occupies memory long after the base has closed.
It is a filter that becomes the lens through which we understand the past and interpret the
present, and upon which we base our hopes for the future.
Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets*, 13.

Violence and terror continue to haunt Guatemala decades after the end of the civil war and the signing of the Peace Accords. Newspaper headlines, as well as distressing book and film titles such as *Guatemala: Getting Away with Murder* and “Killer’s Paradise” draw attention to the country’s climate of fear and impunity. The powerful film “Killer’s Paradise” documents the alarming rise of ‘femicide’ - the brutal killings of women because they are women - in Guatemala. Although the precise number of women killed in Guatemala remains uncertain, police statistics reveal that more than 2,500 women have been violently killed since 2001 (Beltrán and Freeman 2). A Reuters article titled “Guatemala shocked by wave of women’s murders” reports that an estimated 95 percent of all murders go unresolved, partly due to a lack of resources and training for police (July 21, 2004). In fact, investigators laughed at Rosa Elvira Franco when she asked that her daughter’s case be looked in to. Her daughter was raped, tortured and killed in 2001; “They told me to investigate it myself,” she said. “Now I just want

to take my children and start a home in another country.” Sadly, “Killer’s Paradise” shows that countless other families choose not to report a loved one’s disappearance or initiate judicial proceedings for fear of reprisal or simply out of a lack of faith in the Guatemalan judicial system. The shocking crime rates and femicide are only beginning to receive slight media attention abroad. Guatemala’s climate of fear, distrust in its judicial system, and impunity has, however, captured the attention of several contemporary fiction writers in the United States.

The literary crime genre is a particularly powerful means of exploring crime and violence in modern day Guatemala. Given the international obsession with crime and (in)security, this paper explores three novelists’ representations of fear and impunity in Guatemala as a place that embodies fear. The reader becomes an active participant in the fictional investigations while attempting to discern the truth in an atmosphere of lies. The crime genre is a particularly intriguing manner in which to represent the thirty-six year civil war and its aftermath because it exposes the danger involved in uncovering the truth. As Deborah Knight and George McKnight point out in “The Case of the Disappearing Enigma,” detection narratives exploit the generic tendencies of suspense; they feature an investigation of a mystery or crime that requires a search for clues, continual questioning, and interpretation on the part of the detective and reader.

A questioning attitude is certainly required in *The Long Night of the White Chickens* by Francisco Goldman (1992), *Body of Truth* (1992) by David Lindsey, and *Grave Secrets* (2002) by Kathy Reichs. These works of fiction describe grisly murders of women in a culture of fear. The keen eyes of the sleuths urge the reader to reflect on Guatemala’s political climate and determine which characters’ testimony is trustworthy in this atmosphere of deception, where nothing really is as it appears to be.

Among the key questions we must ask as readers and armchair investigators are: How do the novels portray gendered violence in Guatemala? What conclusions do the investigators draw regarding social justice in an atmosphere dominated by fear? How do the novels explore the political ramifications of state sponsored violence and impunity? Pursuing these and other questions in the work of Francisco Goldman, David Lindsey, and Kathy Reichs also involves asking:

What causes the state-directed political violence that has characterized political culture in much of the Latin American region since the mid-twentieth century? What motivated the campaigns of terror that “disappeared” thousands throughout the region? ... What is the purpose of the most brutal tortures? Are they intended only to establish a generalized climate of fear? Are they meant to keep in place a docile workforce with low wages to benefit the wealthy and multinational corporations? Are they to eliminate the opposition? To extract a confession? To set an example? (Menjívar and Rodríguez 16)

It is my contention that pursuing these vexingly complex issues in fiction sheds light on the silence and complicity in modern day Guatemala and the U.S. that allow such grisly murders to remain unpunished – in fiction and in real life. Although the elements I examine are deeply interrelated, for the sake of clarity I will discuss the representation of murder and impunity in the novels in four separate sections: 1) The fictional representation of Guatemala as one large crime scene, 2) the detectives who risk it all to uncover the truth, 3) the victims of gendered violence and femicide, and lastly, 4) the perpetrators of these gruesome crimes.

1. Yellow Police Tape – DO NOT CROSS: The Representation of Guatemala as a National Crime Scene

Although the crimes and disappearances in the novels are fictitious, they are based in reality. Francisco Goldman’s novel, for example, opens with the following qualification: “The Guatemala that forms the backdrop of a portion of this novel is a fictionalized country –

nonexistent – despite occasional references to actual events, institutions, and prominent personages. Its greatest unreality may lie in its omissions: impossible, through a mere story like this one, to fully convey – or to exaggerate – the actual country’s unrelenting nightmare.” David Lindsey explains, “For years I’d been active in a human rights organization that concentrated on monitoring the political assassinations that plagued the Central American country of Guatemala. Increasingly I had been feeling that I owed that country and that subject a novel. After a series of research trips into Guatemala, it seemed to me that Haydon was the perfect man for this novel.” Aside from her working experience as a forensic anthropologist in Guatemala, Kathy Reichs has testified at the UN Tribunal on genocide in Rwanda and has done forensic work at Ground Zero in New York and in Southeast Asia.

In addition to the authors’ experience and research in Guatemala, the action in the novels reflects the findings of the 1999 CEH Report that provides evidence of massacres in 626 villages and raises the number of documented dead or disappeared to more than 200,000. It identifies 83% of the victims as Maya and attributes blame to the Guatemalan army for 93% of the human rights violations, determining that the army committed acts of genocide against the Maya (Sanford 14). Together, these popular novels span key periods of Guatemalan history – from the years generally referred to as “La Violencia” under the regimes of General Lucas García (1978-82) and General Rios Montt (March 1982-August 1983) – to the decade-long peace process that culminated in December of 1996, underscoring that violence continues to be an instrument wielded by the state to dominate and instill fear in the population.

The action in *Body of Truth* takes place during Vinicio Cerezo’s presidency (1986-1990). David Lindsey blends the mystery of a missing person story with a plot full of twists and turns, ultimately revealing that disappearances and assassinations continued unabated during the

democratic transition. In the first chapters, three Americans disappear within thirty-six hours: a freelance journalist, a private investigator, and a Peace Corps volunteer. The fictionalized investigator narrowly escapes being run off the road and ambushed in the cemetery - a clear sign that he is getting dangerously close to uncovering hidden truths in a maze of deceit.

Body of Truth, *Grave Secrets* and *The Long Night of White Chickens* reflect class and racial divisions mapped by Guatemala City's distinct geographical zones. Zone 1 serves as a microcosm of the country's culture of fear with its slums, sleazy hotels, cemeteries, and morgues: "Here death was literally in the air, and everyone could taste it" (55). Homicide detective Stuart Haydon maneuvers around the capital's "murderous traffic" by day, but it seems that only he dares to bravely navigate its desolate streets after dark. He observes, "no matter that it was a city of well over two million inhabitants. At this hour you were safer inside, though if the death squads wanted you, they didn't care where you were or whether it was day or night" (77). The capital is depicted as a lawless, unpredictable conglomeration of people dominated by fear. The ominous darkness that envelops the city has its roots in political violence:

The country didn't have much to recommend it. It was once known as the Land of the Eternal Spring, but ever since the 1954 coup, initiated and backed by the CIA to overthrow a democratically elected president who was, nevertheless, too liberal in his thinking for U.S. interests, Guatemala had been wracked by a succession of ruling generals who gained their authority through coups and countercoups and established a tradition of political violence that became so entrenched as a way of life that the country would be forever stained by it. Military rule would prove cruel beyond imagining and would engender the concept of death squads, a phenomenon that would eventually spread to the rest of Latin America and become a trademark of twentieth-century Latin American politics (47).

Detective Haydon's observation, painted with broad strokes, reveals that he has quickly proceeded from surveillance of the territory to interrogating the country's social ills.

This condemning outlook of an outsider looking in is also shared by the other professional and amateur detectives in the novels under review. In *Grave Secrets*, Detective Tempe Brennan exclaims, “It seems there was no escape from violent death, day or night, past or present” (19). The detectives navigate this frenzied crime scene to gather dangerous evidence that the powerful bury deep in the chaos.

2. U.S. Private Eyes Uncovering Not So Hidden Truths

Together with their rejection of Guatemala’s chaos and history of violence, the fictional investigators share an unwavering tenacity to uncover the truth, no matter the consequences. Their authority and legitimacy stems precisely from their status as outsiders without links to the far-reaching arm of Guatemalan corruption.

For example, Lindsey’s novel begins with detective Haydon enjoying an idyllic afternoon with his wife in their beautiful home in Houston, Texas. The serene setting is shattered by a disturbing phone call from Guatemala City. Jim Fossler, a fellow investigator turned private eye, calls to implore Haydon’s help on a case. Fossler asks Haydon to fly to Guatemala for a day or so to help him look into the disappearance of a young American woman named Lena Muller. Audibly distraught, Fossler confesses that he no longer knows whom to trust: “This country, Stuart, it’s full of things that’ll scare the shit out of you. No rules down here. Everything is negotiable – or not” (25). When Haydon arrives at Aurora airport in Guatemala City, Fossler is not there to meet him as promised. This is the first clue that things have already gone terribly wrong. Haydon finds Fossler’s dingy hotel room in downtown Zona Uno covered in blood. To complicate matters, Taylor Cage, an ex-CIA agent turned independent contractor, admits to tailing Fossler’s investigation for his personal benefit. Cage issues a stern warning to the

newcomer - “And keep this in mind: as good as you are, Haydon, and I credit you that, I hope you realize you’re way out on the end of a rope here, and if you don’t watch your ass you’ll end up in the garbage of one of these ravines with your throat cut and your balls in your mouth” (68). Haydon and the reader quickly learn to be on their guard in this eerie place called Guatemala.

Like *Body of Truth, Grave Secrets* by Kathy Reichs describes a grueling and life-threatening investigation. Forensic anthropologist Dr. Temperance Brennan¹ volunteers to work with the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation for one month to locate and identify the remains of those who disappeared during the civil war, which the novel rightly refers to as “one of the bloodiest conflicts in Latin American history” (3). When the novel begins, Tempe has only been in Guatemala one week, yet her outsider status allows the reader to discover the sociopolitical conditions of her new surroundings: “The bulk of the slaughter was carried out by the Guatemalan army and by paramilitary organizations affiliated with the army. Most of those killed were rural peasants. Many were women and children” (4). Reichs’ fictitious exhumation calls to mind Victoria Sanford’s own findings during her fieldwork in Guatemala. In *Buried Secrets*, Sanford affirms that exhumations represent the process of excavating memory and retaking of public space: “The exhumation demands a coming to terms with space: physical space for the excavation, public space for memory, political space created by the exhumation, and the individual and collective giving of testimonies, each of which creates new space” (Sanford 18). The exhumation Brennan undertakes uncovers these important spaces along with a new personal space in which she expresses her outrage over state-sponsored violence. Despite the initial impression of random chaos, Brennan learns that Chupan Ya was a carefully planned massacre that was part of the strategy of genocide, and that the perpetrators continue to hold power.² While Brennan uncovers the bones of twenty-three skeletons from the massacre

committed by soldiers and civil patrollers who raped and killed women and children on an August morning in 1982. Given the legal and political implications of this forensic work, local authorities thwart her case by pressuring her to investigate the disappearances of four young girls in Guatemala City.

Dr. Aris Grajeda, a ladino in *Body of Truth*, is no stranger to conflicted ties. His physical appearance highlights his mixed heritage as a man who negotiates two worlds in constant conflict. He is described as clearly ladino but with the Mayan eyes of his ancestors: “His complexion was dusky and he had the coarse black hair of the Indian as well . . . A straight nose with the pronounced nostrils of a Mayan. His mouth, however, was European, finely sculpted with a dimple in the center of his upper lip” (133). Dr. Grajeda reveals a key piece of information to Detective Haydon:

Let me tell you how it is in Guatemala, the true importance of the relationship between integrity and vocabulary. Words are nothing here . . . nothing . . . less than nothing. Here lying is pervasive; we discount language altogether. Because there are so many lies, because words are so cheap, they are considered little more than static in a system that has lost respect for language. People are judged by what they do, not by what they say. The men who are entrusted with keeping the peace in my poor country are murderers and liars. This is horrible for me to say, but it is the truth” (139).

Dr. Grajeda’s admonition urges Haydon to dig deeper to uncover the ugly truths. Haydon’s gender, white privilege, and status as a foreigner allow him to undertake greater risk in this unstable political climate, but he must exercise extreme caution along this fluid border as an expatriate warns: “Americans never know. Sometimes simply being American gives you automatic carte blanche to do just about anything. Other times it’s the only reason needed to kill you on the spot. You never know when you’re at risk and when you aren’t. I’ve lived in this country a long time, but I’ve never seen it like this before. Nothing is what it used to be; I’m never sure anymore about what I’m getting into” (156). This assessment of insecurity and

terror's unpredictability uttered by an American point to an experience endured by countless Guatemalans who remain silenced in the novels as in real life. Menjívar and Rodríguez clarify:

The people the state seeks to affect through generalized terror are usually different from its political targets, which gives terror a somewhat random, unpredictable quality. Fear is engendered by the unpredictability and yet regularity of terror. In the atmosphere of terror, everyone knows that they are at risk of becoming victims because everyday life has become uncertain. This is precisely what state terror is supposed to accomplish, to engender fear in everything people do so that the opposition does not gain sympathizers. In this environment people fear and mistrust many things in their everyday lives, such as a knock on the door, a neighbor's questions or gossip, a child's indiscretion, an unknown person's gaze, even a wrong number on the telephone" (17).

Immersed in this climate of fear and insecurity, Haydon learns that before disappearing, American free-lance journalist John Baine was working on an important story about a general's sister, Vera Beatriz Azcona de Sandoval, who was selling orphans out of the highlands. Haydon's outsider status enables him to surreptitiously combat this overwhelming power structure. He receives confirmation that Lena was also investigating the rumors of stolen babies being sold to certain orphanages with lax adoption rules. Lena planned on exposing Vera Beatriz and had the documents to prove her accusation.

Grippingly, the crime scene in Francisco Goldman's *The Long Night of the White Chickens* also revolves around illicit adoptions. Here, Guatemalan-American Roger Graetz travels to Guatemala in 1983 to investigate the murder of his childhood friend, Flor de Mayo Puac in the capital. Roger/Rogério's inbetweenness is interesting in light of the gringo investigators in *Body of Truth*, *Steal My Heart*, and *Grave Secrets*. Unlike the detectives who travel to Guatemala for the first time and are overwhelmed by its chaos, Roger's bilingualism and biculturalism enable him to reflect on the multiple boundaries that form his identity: growing up with a Catholic, Guatemalan mother and a Jewish father, shuttling between the private Colegio Anne Hunt in Guatemala City and public school in a Boston suburb, speaking English

and Spanish – while investigating and interpreting the complex realities surrounding Flor’s murder.³

Roger’s personal connection to the victim, the 33-year-old director of Los Quetzalitos, a private orphanage and malnutrition clinic in the capital, allow him to reflect on the crime and rumors that spread like wild fire in the local newspapers.⁴ When Rogerio was a child, his grandmother took Flor from an orphanage in Guatemala City and sent her to work as a maid for the Graetz household in a suburb outside of Boston. Flor appeared to skillfully juggle her role as a maid and a student, even winning a full scholarship to Wellesley College before returning to Guatemala. But as in the other novels, the victim’s voice is never heard.

Although only an amateur, Roger connects a series of loose clues like a seasoned detective : a clandestine affair between Flor and Celso Batres, the married newspaper owner of *El Minuto*, lax adoption rules, and rumors of baby stealing for an illicit organ trade - key pieces of a complex puzzle that remain unpunished at the end of the novel. Like the other detectives that act alone, Rogerio chooses not to involve the Guatemalan authorities. He has no faith in the judicial system that appears to be as chaotic and arbitrary as the decision to reverse the direction of all downtown city streets – causing senseless injuries and deaths. This hazardous reversal echoes a sentiment expressed in *Body of Truth*: “Nothing was reliable or dependable because no one paid any attention to the formalities that were necessary for an organized society. That is, rules. Here the rules were uniformly disobeyed or ignored or made exception to ... The big surprise was that, in Guatemala, the errors could cost you our life” (78). Thus, Roger views the country as “an unbelievably sick and evil place” (323) and recommends, “Don’t even confide in your own shadow, vos” (404).

Like Roger Graetz, Tempe Brennan in *Grave Secrets* reflects on her limitations and outsider status in Guatemala. She observes:

I was troubled by thoughts of how far from home I was, geographically and culturally. While I had some understanding of the Guatemalan legal system, I know nothing of the jurisdictional rivalries and personal histories that can impede an investigation. I knew the state, but not the players ... I was an outsider in Guatemala, with a superficial grasp of its inner soul. I knew little of the people ... Their views toward law and authority. I was a stranger to their likes, their dislikes, their trusts, their lusts. Their reasons for murder (62).

Nevertheless, Brennan painstakingly connects fragments to discover larger truths. The shooting of a reporter named Ollie Nordstern on the streets of Montreal by a Guatemalan mercenary provides the missing link to Brennan's investigations. She skillfully links a series of young women's disappearances and murders in Guatemala City to those responsible for the massacre in Chupan Ya upon discovering that the current District Attorney had been an army lieutenant in the early eighties and participated in the rape and killing of women and girls under the command of Alejandro Bastos, who later went on to hold key posts in Rios Montt's administration. Interestingly, in *Body of Truth* and *Grave Secrets*, the detectives discover that U.S. officials want to co-opt the Generals in power, the perpetrators of massacres now holding positions of power in the Guatemalan judicial system. In *Body of Truth*, General Luis Azcona is described as a military hard-liner and

(A)n ardent supporter of former general and dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, who had seized power in a coup in March of 1982. Ríos Montt was a born-again evangelical whose eye-for-an-eye brand of justice led to one of the worst periods of human rights abuses in the country's history. During his brief term of leadership – before he, too, was toppled by a coup – Guatemalans died and disappeared by the thousands. Azcona had been Montt's most aggressive general, his “sword of righteousness,” always unsheathed and always bloody. He had played a key role in a period of brutal repression, a time that was remembered by the people who survived it as *la violencia*. Both Ríos Montt and Luis Azcona had been ardent supporters in the election campaign of the recently elected president. They were once again in favor (176).

This passage highlights the fact that that despite the long-awaited elections, the military continue to exert power behind the scenes, thus further undermining the country's shaky postwar democracy and assuring impunity for their crimes.

Tempe Brennan's ladino partner, detective Galiano, underscores the power of impunity while taking note of her white privilege and outsider status that shield her from the dangers that Guatemalans expose themselves to constantly:

Are you aware that many of those who were involved in atrocities remain in command of the military? [...] Do you know that many of those performing investigative work today were or are direct participants in extrajudicial executions? [...] Although nominally under the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry, the police here remain effectively under army control. The criminal justice system is permeated by fear [...] Everyone's afraid. Witnesses and relatives won't swear out complaints, won't testify for fear of retribution. When evidence leads to the army, a prosecutor or judge has to worry about what will happen to his family [...] Death investigation here ain't day care work [...] Produce an autopsy finding or a police report that implicates the wrong people, life's no longer clean and easy. Reporting results can be hazardous if the recipient of your report happens to be affiliated with the bad guys even through he's holding a prosecutorial office (101-2).

Detective Galiano's words illustrate the climate of fear and impunity that permeate all four novels. More importantly, his warning insists on serious consideration of the socio-political context for the crimes as well as U.S. complicity in the structures of power that benefit from impunity.

3. Exhuming Truths about Femicide in Guatemala's Culture of Fear

Although highly sensationalized, the fictional disappearances and murders ring true given current statistics of femicide in Guatemala. A WOLA Special Report titled "Hidden in Plain Sight: Violence Against Women in Mexico and Guatemala" affirms: "Data on the number of women killed to date differ among the Public Prosecutor's Office, National Civilian Police, the

Judiciary and non-governmental organizations. The Criminal Investigations Division (DINC) of the National Civilian Police (PNC) reports that 2,686 women were murdered from 2001 to 2006. However, statistics given to WOLA by other police units place the number of women killed at over 2,800 for the same period. Notwithstanding, while the statistics differ, they all indicate a continued violent killing of women” (17). The novels under review reflect one of the conclusions of the WOLA report: “Those crimes that are reported are not adequately investigated and generally remain unpunished, confirming citizens’ lack of faith in the system” (4). Furthermore, the report indicates: “In Guatemala, organized crime has successfully infiltrated key public institutions, including the police and justice system . . . Consequently, judges, prosecutors, and justice workers are also constantly the target of death threats and attacks aimed at intimidating them or hindering their work” (4). The report’s findings are reflected in the novels: “The state’s failure to bring to justice those responsible for the atrocities perpetrated during the war or to fully implement the commitments regarding women’s rights contained in the Peace Accords has left a terrible legacy that continues to foster much of the discrimination and violence that threaten the lives of Guatemalan women today” (7).

Although the novels suffer from some over-generalizations because the observers are outsiders and a degree of paternalism towards locals, the detectives who travel to Guatemala to investigate these crimes make significant inroads in the search for understanding the class, gender, and ethnic complexities that contribute to the dynamics at play. For example, savoring a moment of respite, Detective Haydon experiences a flash of rage and confusion over the socioeconomic disparity that he witnesses:

While he ate, he watched an old man on the opposite side of the street carrying an oversized load of new, terra-cotta *parrillas*, huge, disk-shaped cooking griddles. The old man had them strapped to his back with a cheap but stout grass rope and a leather strap called a *mecapal* that went around his forehead and was attached to either side of the

bundle on his back. His load and his age were so great that he was making torturously slow progress along a bare dirt path under the eucalyptus trees. During the time it took Haydon to eat, the old man managed to travel only a block and a half, even using a staff, his head bend and neck buckled against the *mecapal*, his eyes always on the dust at his feet. Drenched in perspiration, he stopped frequently, once even holding onto the trunk of a eucalyptus and going down on one knee to relieve the strain on his neck. But after a while he rose with a painful force of will and continued on. His was the story of Guatemala. All over the country Haydon and anyone who bothered to notice saw these small people under enormous burdens, each single effort a metaphor for the history of their people. It was this figure, the solitary Indian struggling under grim burdens, that should have been on every piece of currency in the country, rather than the beautiful, emerald-tailed quetzal. Like the quetzal, which could only live and sing in freedom, the carefree peace that the bird symbolized was almost extinct. But *sufrimiento* was everywhere. Ugliness survived where beauty perished. The fact was that the land of eternal spring had vanished, and the land of eternal suffering had taken its place (144).

This extensive reflection puts a human face on the problem of economic disparity and injustice – root causes for violence. Angelina Godoy echoes this reality in *Popular Injustice*:

Guatemala has the seventh highest degree of income inequality in the world, and the highest in Latin America ... Some 83 percent of the population – and 90 percent of the indigenous population – lives in poverty. And although most Guatemalans are poor, regardless of their ethnicity, the socioeconomic exclusion of the country's indigenous – mostly Mayan – majority by the *ladino* minority has led to an especially notable disconnect between the few fairer-skinned elites who control the bulk of the country's resources and the mostly indigenous masses who toil in its fields and factories. Yet just as peasants often cultivate subsistence plots on the sides of volcanoes, the country's social and economic structure is pitched atop these unstable relations of mass exclusion. Like the land that occasionally rumbles beneath Guatemala's feet, the nation they have constructed atop this precarious social scaffolding has been prone to periodic eruptions of brutal violence (42).

The novels, each in their own way, capture the real life uphill battle for justice and the burdensome weight of poverty and silence.

Like Haydon, Tempe Brennan notes the racial and economic inequality that plagues the country as she witnesses the attentions extended to four missing young women in the capital as opposed to the invisibility of the poor disposed of in a mass grave in the highlands. Regrettably,

the fate of the disappeared and murdered women in *Grave Secrets*, *Body of Truth*, and *The Long Night of White Chickens* reflect the shocking trend of contemporary cases of femicide in Guatemala.

There are several disturbing aspects that unite these works of fiction to actual cases of gendered violence and femicide in Guatemala, namely: the cases are not investigated in a timely manner by local authorities; the sexual lives of the victims are openly questioned – with victims often being blamed for their deaths; and the crimes remain unpunished. In *Grave Secrets*, for example, we learn that within a period of ten months, four young women have gone missing in city, but they don't fit the usual pattern. When Tempe Brennan is called to investigate these cases, she digs up two bodies and discovers that two have secretly left the country and locates them in Montreal. Brennan examines a dismembered corpse dumped in a ravine on the edge of the city in Zone 7. After extensive investigation she identifies it as the body of 18-year-old Claudia de la Alda, a homicide victim who worked at the Ixchel Museum and was killed by her family's deranged gardener. In fact, the purpose of leaving a corpse in a public place as a "necrographic map" was to send a powerful statement to the population. Gabriela Torres's important examination of cadaver reports published in *Prensa Libre* during La Violencia (1978-1984) confirms that these murders are not merely the actions of a "sick society" (Torres 165), as a superficial reading of these four novels might presume. Instead, Torres' reading of the cadaver reports reveals planned and systematic violence for the purpose of instilling fear in others:

Through analysis of these data, I have been able to establish that military and quasi-military organizations instituted a series of recognizable, lasting patterns of torture and death. These patterns served multiple purposes: to conceal the individual identities of violence practitioners; to alert violence practitioners of counterinsurgency victims, operations, and potential targets; to allow for a high degree of mobility and flexibility in carrying out counterinsurgency goals; to spread the specter of terror literally across the national territory through the careful use of public and private spaces for torture and

detention; and most important to the state's long-term goals, to foment a fear of the unimaginable combined with tangible consequences for dissent in the general population (153-154).

As in *Grave Secrets*, Flor's sexuality becomes an issue after her murder. Not only are Flor's relationships in the U.S. scrutinized but so is her brief affair with Roger's childhood friend, Luis Moya Martínez, which ended one month before her stabbing. Roger suspects that Moya might have unwittingly provoked Flor's death while boasting to his boss about his sexual encounters with her. Unbeknownst to Moya, Celso Batres, the owner of El *Minuto* is Flor's secret lover and a married man. Roger's theory seems to be confirmed by the fact that the day after Flor is found with a deep knife gash in the throat, other newspapers run unsubstantiated stories on an illicit baby trade: "(T)he National Police had uncovered a clandestine safe house for hiding babies – casa de engordes – many of them not even orphans but illegally purchased and even stolen babies, and that they were being kept there until their illegal adoptions could be arranged. That is, until they could be sold to childless couples in Europe and the U.S., this apparently being a highly profitable and widespread business in Guatemala and elsewhere in Central America, 'a business angle to civil war and violent repression'."

Like Flor de Mayo's unsolved murder, Lena Muller's disappearance is the driving force behind *Body of Truth*. Six months after graduating from Rice University, 21-year-old Lena joins the Peace Corps, spending two and a half years among the Ixil Indians in northwestern Guatemala gathering crop production data for an agricultural program. After completing her service she returns home and mysteriously disappears within six weeks. Haydon believes that her disappearance has all the signs of flight, not abduction. In fact, he learns that she was working with USAID in the highlands of Huehuetenango. Given her absence and silence, Haydon must rely on contradictory accounts of her actions and allegiances. Among the array of

conflicting opinions that surface during Haydon's investigation, the only point of agreement is that Lena Muller was uniquely different. She is remembered as unpretentious and unassuming, able to move comfortably with the embassy crowd and wealthy foreigners residing in Guatemala City, and with the Mayan women she worked with in the highlands. Her ability to move across multiple borders in conjunction with her sexual encounters with a CIA agent, an independent contractor, a young journalist, and a ladino doctor with ties to the guerrillas point to her complex relations and political commitments in Guatemala. Was she using these men to her advantage? Was she using her sexuality, white privilege and status as a foreigner to aid the disenfranchised in the highlands? This remains a mystery, but one thing is certain – when Lena's body is finally shipped to the U.S., the autopsy reveals that Dr. Grajeda placed a small plastic envelope beneath her sternum. Her corpse becomes a transnational body of truth that transports secret and dangerous information out of Guatemala.

4. Pointing Fingers: Denouncing Institutional Impunity

Outraged by the racialized and gendered violence they witness first hand, the investigators in these novels risk it all to uncover the identities of the culprits. For example, crouching over a mass grave and scraping dirt off a series of corpses, Tempe Brennan refuses to return home to the U.S. until Señora Ch'i'p recovers her loved ones. She goes one step further and identifies the culprits, but this revelation never makes the headlines. Likewise, Haydon's investigations also end in frustrating silence. Upon returning home, Haydon sends the proof Lena uncovered to “the most respected journalists and specialists interested in Central American affairs in every branch of the media” (464). But Guatemala's time has passed:

The focus was on the maelstrom of Eastern Europe, the upheaval in the Soviet Union, the firestorms of hatred in the Middle East. The sins of General Luiz Azcona Contrera were

washed away by the blood of other horrors in other places, where the United States had invested far more money and had far more at risk. Besides, Guatemala had already been converted from its heathen ways. It was a democracy (464).

Similarly, Goldman's novel also ends without accountability for the generals who profit from the violence. Like Roger, the reader is urged to stay attentive: "Memory is like a long conversation during which, at any moment, Flor might tell me something unexpected – as long as I, despite many other preoccupations, go on keeping up my end well enough, and listening" (448).

Clearly the investigators have uncovered damning evidence, but ultimately they are powerless against larger hidden forces. According to Menjívar and Rodriguez, "Guatemalan politicians passed a decree that freed from prosecution all officers and other state personnel for crimes committed between 1982 and 1986, one of the worst periods of political violence in that country" (338). Having unlocked a series of deadly secrets, the detectives return home while the culprits remain safely sheltered behind a wall of impunity. Yet these novels appeal to U.S. readers to investigate the reasons behind so many killings, given that the exhumations have opened a transnational space for accessing the truth, if we dare to seek it out.

Through a diverse cast of investigators, victims, and perpetrators of violence, *Body of Truth* by David Lindsey, *The Long Night of the White Chickens* by Francisco Goldman, and *Grave Secrets* by Kathy Reichs reflect the complex history of U.S.-Guatemalan relations. These narratives of terror offer sharp criticism and urge the reader to consider the continual need for social change abroad and at home. The novels, after all, coincide with Sanford's assertion that impunity is antidemocratic because it's an exemption from punishment. The crimes and impunity that come to life in these pages represent an opportunity to reflect on Guatemala's violent past that U.S. Cold War policy helped to create, along with current economic treaties and

policies it currently imposes. The severed body parts and shattered bones in these crime and mystery novels point to bodies of evidence crying out for justice as loudly as real-life victims.

Conclusion: Crying out for Justice

Ultimately, the power of fiction lies in its ability to transport the reader to remote locations while challenging us to reflect on matters that we might not otherwise consider. In our examination of four detective novels by U.S. authors, we become immersed in the climate of fear in Guatemala – from a safe and comfortable distance.⁵ Yet in my view, the real danger for the crime and mystery reader lies not in Guatemala but in settling into the cozy role of armchair detective or distant observer, ignoring the call to dig more deeply into the daunting horrors represented in this body of work.

The investigators in the novels constantly interrogate their surroundings and the institutional powers that orchestrate the violence and injustice. Although they paint a discouraging picture by providing proof against the perpetrators shrouded by impunity, their mission is nevertheless accomplished by exposing the culprits and their accomplices; and shedding light on these buried truths is an important first step in the search for justice.

Moreover, the novels illustrate facts gathered by human rights organizations and truth commissions. They point to the root causes of these crimes that urge us to address these important matters that democracy was supposed to achieve. We see how gender violence and terror represented in the novels affect the entire society. Not surprisingly, we never hear from the victims, yet their silenced, shattered bodies are a loud call to action. In the BBC documentary “A Killer’s Paradise,” protesters chant “Por la vida de las Mujeres – Ni una Muerte Más” and place yellow police tape around the Crime Scene of Inaction – namely, the Ministry of

Justice, the Prosecutor's Office, and the National Police Headquarters, symbolically placing the blame where it belongs, given the lack of political will to take concrete action. The outrage and indignation that the fictionalized detectives express for the victims of violence and their families remind us of Victoria's Sanford's assertion that terror is a filter and a lens. Likewise, Godoy underscores that the use of violence and repressive authority is waged to maintain class power and masculinist control, enacting "mano dura" policies. Like the brave Tempe Brennan, readers in solidarity must dig for the truth, patiently and methodically, speaking truth to power in a climate of fear. The novels highlight that Guatemalans are qualified and able to investigate for themselves, yet they come up against a lack of political will on the part of the authorities, and this guarantees a culture of impunity that put those below them at grave risk. Peacock and Beltrán declare, "The hidden powers protect themselves from prosecution through their political connections, through corruption, and when necessary through intimidation and violence. Their activities undermine the justice system and perpetuate a climate of citizen insecurity, which in turn creates fertile ground for the further spread of corruption, drug trafficking and organized crime. The result is a self-perpetuating, downward spiral of violence that jeopardizes the rule of law and the functioning of democracy in Guatemala" (1). Having witnessed this for themselves, the fictionalized U.S. investigators return to the safety of home with new awareness of their own country's complicity in the atrocities.

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Notes:

¹ Dr. Temperance Brennan also appears in *Deja Dead* (1997), *Death du Jour* (1999), *Deadly Decisions* (2000), *Fatal Voyage* (2001), *Bare Bones* (2003), *Monday Mourning* (2004), and *Cross Bones* (2005), *Break No Bones* (2007), *Bones to Ashes* (2007), and *Devil Bones* (2008).

² The fictitious massacre at Chupan Ya mirrors the methodical and merciless slaughter in Santa María Tzejá, an isolated village in the rain forest of northern Guatemala described by anthropologist Beatriz Manz in *Paradise in Ashes*.

³ In a footnote, Guatemalan novelist and cultural critic Arturo Arias states, "Some critics have noted that Francisco Goldman's *The Long Night of White Chickens* (1992) is the first Central American Latino text. However, Goldman's identity is that of a bi-national writer: Goldman was the son of an American citizen

living in Guatemala, who acquired his knowledge of the country while attending an American school there for some years" (169).

⁴ The role of sensationalism in the press in Goldman's novel is interesting, particularly in light of the assassinations, rapes, and disappearances that were not reported during the civil war. M. Gabriela Torres states: "Broken down by presidential terms of office: in the period 1978-1981, 67.9 percent of cases were not reported in the press; in the period 1982-1983, 80.2 percent of cases were not reported in the press; and in 1984, 55.1 percent were not reported in the press. The lack of coverage reinforces the suggestion that throughout la Violencia the press was constrained from publishing the effects of counterinsurgency. The press appears to have been particularly constrained in this regard during the period in office of General Ephraín Ríos Montt (March 1982-August 1983)."