

◆ Chapter 6

Crime, Women, and Fiction: Narrating Urban Puerto Rican Femicide in Ana Lydia Vega's "Pasión de historia"

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“Wilma and Carola, laughing like crazy,
laughing as only people totally irresponsible
or totally convinced of tragedy do.”
(“Pasión de historia” 36)¹

As the acclaimed Nicaraguan writer Sergio Ramírez reminds us, in Latin American noir novels, detectives, whether they work for the state or on their own, must navigate putrid waters, are aware that institutions are undermined by power, and perceive that everything smells rotten. Those who want to act like heroes know they must do so at their own expense and risk (“Historia negra”). In contrast to the classic detective novel, noir fiction goes beyond investigating a murder, as its articulating gaze examines the reality of society, its evils, and its illnesses. It presents an accusatory questioning that does not trust the justice system or even the state.

Since the nineteenth century, Puerto Rican noir has structurally and thematically developed a hard-boiled framework whose purpose has been to present crime as a universally endemic phenomenon. But it also reflects on the socioeconomic and moral crisis that has politically nurtured the colonialist system on the island and has direct implications for its power structures based on gender representations, violence, sexual practices, ethnicity, and social classes. In this vein, Ana Lydia Vega's short story “Pasión de historia” transforms the detective novel by offering a gothic noir text that superimposes a feminist critique upon cultural machismo.² With this aim, Vega confronts the reader with the terror inflicted by femicide in Puerto Rico in the late 1980s.

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Incorporating studies on crime fiction (José Colmeiro), femicide (Jill Radford, Diana E. H. Russell), Puerto Rican noir fiction (Osvaldo Di Paolo Harrison, Michele C. Dávila Gonçalves,) and urban spaces (Cristina Jiménez-Landi Crick), this essay answers the following questions: How does Ana Lydia Vega expose the crisis of violence faced by Puerto Rican women in her literary work? How is femicide narrated in an urban Puerto Rico? According to the author, what are the social values driving the increase in these murders? What has been the state's participation in the proliferation of this violence against women, and how have women themselves battled but also justified the institutionalization of femicide on the island? In short, this essay argues that "Pasión de historia" is a thriller in which feminist literature unites with crime fiction to expose the crisis of femicide in modern Puerto Rico. With this aim, I analyze how Ana Lydia Vega depicts a female character who imagines herself a detective solving crimes of passion but instead ends up a victim of the very violence she is investigating. Therefore, Vega's story functions as an allegory for an unresolved crisis portrayed through the gaze of noir fiction in the Hispanic Caribbean.

Crime fiction focuses on the story of an investigation and the solving of a murder. Unlike the classic detective novel, however, hard-boiled novels are not limited to the pursuit of a murderer, as they also address social crises. In hard-boiled novels, ethics takes on a leading role in the story's sequence of events. José Colmeiro claims in *La novela policiaca española: Teoría e historia crítica* (1994) that the detective fiction, in its literary essence, proposes an inversion of the order between ethical and aesthetic principles. In this case, ethics is positioned as the articulating axis of the plot with the aim of revealing a social dilemma. As a result, the novel becomes the "armazón para la articulación del problema moral de la actitud del individuo frente a la sociedad" (61) (framework to address the moral concern about the individual's attitude towards society). In this way, crime fiction obliges the detective to acquire a physical and moral strength that will lead him to an unyielding indifference toward the events that unfold before him. Consequently, the detective will fight against the vice and crime resulting from the unethical nature of society. Mostly, his personal status will be marginalized, and therefore he will feel trapped by the system that he is attempting to dismantle. According to Colmeiro, the investigator "se mueve impulsado por un código de honor personal e intransferible, incomprensible por los demás por ser de un orden superior, en el que la causa de la justicia debe triunfar, aunque para ello sea necesario (y casi siempre lo es) saltar por encima de la ley" (63) (moves driven by a personal and nontransferable code of honor, incomprehensible to others as being of a greater order, in which the cause of justice must triumph, even if this requires [and it almost always does] going beyond the law).

Therefore, crime fiction has evolved into a narrative tool well suited to other social contexts beyond its traditional lens. This is reflected in the mobility of the genre, which, for instance, has been incorporated into Latin American and Hispanic Caribbean literature.³ The Cuban writer Leonardo Padura Fuentes asserts that the crime novel written in Spanish assumes the same critical and determinant stances regarding vice and those responsible for it as are found in its English-language counterpart: “Su característica central tal vez sea su ejercicio de crítica social, aun en tiempo de herméticos juegos posmodernos” (156–57) (Its central attribute may be its exercise of social criticism, even in times of hermetic postmodern games). Likewise, Mexican journalist and writer Carlos Monsiváis maintains that, in Latin American noir fiction, “no hay confianza en la justicia y el crimen no posee una connotación expropiable” (Monsiváis qtd. in Di Paolo Harrison, *La novela negra de Puerto Rico* 3) (there is no confidence in justice and crime does not have an expropriating connotation).

In Puerto Rico, the detective novel began to garner attention toward the end of the twentieth century. It was then that Puerto Rican writers appropriated the crime fiction model and Caribbeanized its formula to reflect the issues that most captured their attention. As a result, they transcended the genre’s traditional geographical and linguistic boundaries, adapting it to the island’s organic reality and stimulating structural changes that allowed them to use it as a platform for grappling with the socioeconomic and political turbulence taking place on the island.⁴ According to Osvaldo Di Paolo Harrison, the Puerto Rican detective novel “[n]o solamente se caracteriza por su valor literario, sino también por la variedad de funciones genéricas, la diversidad de la figura del detective y la pluralidad de expresión sobre los malestares que aquejan a la sociedad puertorriqueña” (*La novela negra* 15) (is not only characterized by its literary value, but also for the variety of generic functions, the diversity of the figure of the detective, and the plurality of expression about the maladies that afflict Puerto Rican society). Puerto Rican writers, like many other authors of crime fiction, have employed the genre as an instrument through which they can depict the effects of the increased violence and social poverty, as well as the lack of ethics of the state and its culture. Puerto Rican writers feel a great responsibility to portray through their literature the historical and political reality that shapes the sociocultural imaginary of the island. They have shown a steadfast commitment to national values and their defense, as well as to giving a voice to the underprivileged and exerting pressure on entities that attack Puerto Rican identity in the middle of the colonial crisis.⁵ For this reason, there is a predilection for the noir novel, which, as a literary genre, offers Puerto Rican writers the ideal arena for setting out their concerns in the context of criminal investigations.

Within the framework of contemporary crime fiction, Puerto Rican writers have favored a hybrid approach that integrates classic and hard-boiled crime novels. In addition, they have also incorporated into this formula a variety of literary genres, such as the chronicle, science fiction, editorial notes, travel journals, and yellow journalism, with its sensationalism. On the one hand, Puerto Rican noir approach requires the intellect and deductions offered by the classic crime novel, while, on the other, it demands a template that illustrates the viciousness of the state. Puerto Rican noir, then, is a hybrid form that takes “el enigma y la investigación del género pero la entretrejen con otros, y técnicas discursivas más posmodernas, para transformarlas en literatura” (Dávila Gonçalves 78) (the enigma and the investigation of the genre but interweaves it with other post-modern discursive techniques, in order to transform them into literature). In this way, the genre presents an infinite number of variations, and these variations have metamorphosed the traditional genres mostly used by the literary canon on the island.

However, as in the case of Spanish and Latin American, Puerto Rican noir has been criticized for the limited female characters active in the plot as well as for the lack of female writers.⁶ Di Paolo Harrison in *Queer Noir Hispano* (2018) amplifies this criticism by claiming that there is “poca visibilidad de la mujer en el ámbito de la novela negra y es un tema de conversación reciente, pero se continua ignorando la homosexualidad en la novela negra” (15) (little visibility of women in the field of crime novels and it is a topic of recent conversation, although homosexuality continues to be ignored in crime novels).⁷ The reason for this is a long literary tradition established by paternalist writers such as Antonio Pedreira and René Marqués, who forged a national literature that marginalizes alternative voices and promotes an all-male discourse that has prolonged heterosexist and paternalistic structures in Puerto Rican culture.⁸

Against this backdrop of gender marginalization in the literary canon, a generation of feminist writers emerged in Puerto Rico during the 1970s. These female writers transgressed the traditional discourse with the aim of involving women’s voices in the island’s sociocultural and political debates. The works of Ana Lydia Vega, Carmen Lugo Filippi, Rosario Ferré, and Olga Nolla, among other writers, break through the fences of the masculine canon.⁹ This new literary body attends to the condition of being a woman, women’s search for identity, and their relationship with society. Therefore, according to María M. Solá, “construyen las escritoras en sus textos personajes callejeros del submundo del vicio o hacen parodia de lo más sacralizado, desde el amor hasta el espiritismo o el patriotismo” (17–18) (in their stories, female writers generate street characters from the crime-filled underworld or parody everything that is held most sacred, from love to spirituality to patriotism).

The female writers of this generation employed parody as an essential tool of transgression against the primacy of the male voice in the island's literary canon. In this respect, parody becomes a subversive response to the peripheral position imposed on women as well as a rejection of the corrupt values inherited from the past that have diminished women's participation in the distribution of power and knowledge.

It is in this scenario of ruptures and transformations that Ana Lydia Vega has established herself as one of Puerto Rico's most outstanding writers.¹⁰ Juan Gelpí reminds us that “con la obra de Ana Lydia Vega se cruza un límite, una frontera: en ella estamos decididamente fuera del canon paternalista” (222) (with the work of Ana Lydia Vega a limit has been crossed, a boundary: in it, we are decidedly outside of paternalistic canon). Her writings take a fundamentally irreverent stance that unveils ongoing sociopolitical, cultural, and gender crises in Puerto Rico. As a result, her feminist literary discourse parodies male-centered genres and privileges urban spaces and popular culture, as well as the experiences of the periphery, of figures such as women, of undocumented immigrants, and of all those voices that the paternalistic canon has marginalized.

Regarding detective fiction, Ana Lydia Vega is one of the first writers on the island to incorporate the crime novel into her literary discourse. Through the crime novel, she dismantles paternalistic discourses by privileging female experiences over cultural machismo.¹¹ *Pasión de historia y otras historias de pasión* is a collection published in 1987 that brings together twelve short stories of crime fiction. The title story of the volume uses the detective novel to highlight gender violence in Puerto Rico, along with its repercussions for women's bodies and the damage it causes within society. The story revolves around the experiences of Carola Vidal, a young teacher and writer who moves into a small apartment in Río Piedras after breaking up with her ex-boyfriend, Manuel. This shift in her life leads her to start writing a passionate novella that recounts the crime of a woman named Malén who was murdered by her lover while she was having sex with her partner's friend. At the same time, Carola's life is in jeopardy because Manuel stalks her every day, watching her apartment. Under siege, Carola decides to spend her summer holidays in a French village with Vilma, her former college friend, who has moved to the Pyrenees with her French husband, Paul. Carola uses this opportunity as the perfect excuse to escape from her stalker and fully devote herself to her novella. However, her plans are cut short when, midway through her stay, Vilma confesses that Paul is beating her. Overwhelmed by her friend's stories, Carola decides to return to Puerto Rico, where after several days, she reflects on her inaction in the face of her friend's turbulent situation. It is then that Carola decides to write a letter to Vilma. However, she does not obtain any

answers, because, like Malén, both women end up the victims of femicide at the hands of their sexual partners. Thus, Ana Lydia Vega “emplea una estructura modificada de la novela policial clásica o novela enigma (whodunit) para el caso Malén, combinada con la novela de suspenso (novela negra) como estructura del viaje a Francia de Carola” (Torres Caballero 114) (employs a modified structure of the classic detective novel or mystery novel [whodunit] for Malén’s case, combined with a thriller [crime novel] as the structure of Carola’s trip to France).

As a noir story, “Pasión de historia” conforms with José Colmeiro’s theoretical framework because it is a narrative where a crime has been investigated and where the criminal “transgrede las normas sociales de su convivencia” (Colmeiro 59) (transgresses the societal norms of his coexistence). However, as an amateur detective, Carola goes beyond the classic trope in which “el detective es racionalmente impasible, moralmente indiferente, ante la acción criminal. Tampoco hay lugar en él para la compasión por las víctimas; su rivalidad con el criminal es estética, resultado del enfrentamiento racional entre dos genios . . . uno de los cuales usa su ingenio para burlar las leyes de la sociedad y el otro utiliza su genio para desenmascarar a su adversario” (60) (the detective is rationally impassive and morally indifferent to the criminal action. Nor is there room in him for compassion for the victims; his rivalry with the criminal is aesthetic, the result of rational confrontation. . . [He] uses his ingenuity to circumvent the laws of society and the other uses his genius to unmask his adversary).

In the case of “Pasión de historia,” Vega is not limited to the aesthetic contrast between good (detective) and evil (criminal) found in the classic novel. Instead, the author appropriates the detective novel as a narrative form to question the paternalistic patterns that govern and protect the machista practices imposed on women. Unlike the traditional model referred to by Colmeiro, in which the detective is always presented as a male character, Vega develops a hybrid character: a young female writer who also identifies herself as an amateur detective. With this strategy, Vega not only seeks to deconstruct the paternalistic model of the male detective but also aims to expose the out-of-control crisis of intimate partner violence on the island. Although Carola has overcome the stigma of docile womanhood through financial independence, which she has self-realized as a writer and detective, she, like her friend, also becomes a victim of sexual violence. For this reason, the significance of Vega’s work lies not only in the (de)codification of the traditional crime novel but also in the way Vega appropriates the crime novel model to address violence against Puerto Rican women in an era marked by a widespread lack of awareness about the prevention of domestic violence.¹² Through the stories of Carola, Vilma, and Malén, Vega brings to light the

experience of the female victims, depicts the stalking to which they are subjected, and questions those social groups that justify the women's deaths with claims that they endangered their own lives by failing to model their actions after the values supported by patriarchal society.

Consequently, Vega's story becomes a noir-gothic novel.¹³ On the one hand, it responds to the crime novel by establishing a strong critique of femicide, "the killing of women by intimate male partners, that is, current or former legal spouses, common-law partners, and boyfriends" (Dawson and Gartner 383). But also, on the other, "Pasión de historia" follows the model of the gothic novel, which involves the destruction of the protagonist for being a woman: "Female Gothic novelists uncovered the terror of the familiar: the routine brutality and injustice of the patriarchal family, conventional religion, and classist social structures" (Winter 91). Within this context, Carola, Vilma, and Malén experience toxic relationships in which their lovers restrict their lives. In the case of Carola, we see a young writer who is indifferent to her breakup with her boyfriend: "What's even weirder is that I practically wept for joy when I discovered that 'the other woman' was none other than his lawfully wedded wife" (Vega 3). Carola stands out as a lower-middle-class woman who distinguishes herself by being work-oriented and very independent in her decisions. After breaking up with Manuel, she moves into a "closet with delusions of grandeur . . . [where] I had a very Woolfian room of my own where I could finally get some writing done" (3–4). The reference to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) suggests that, within the safe space provided by her minuscule flat, literature becomes the conduit that allows Carola to ponder her self-sufficiency as a woman. In the same fashion, however, it also points out the legitimate right of the female author to insert herself into the noir fiction world through her reflections on Malén's murder.

As an investigator, Carola is an amateur detective who does not belong to any police force. She investigates on her own and takes advantage of her surroundings to gather the information she needs. In this case, the character's hybridity contributes to a reimagining of the classic figure of the detective. Carola fuses the scientific method in criminal investigations with the freedom that literature offers her. She is therefore able to establish new perspectives on the case and, above all, to challenge the social values that doom the murdered woman. Her quest focuses on the victim rather than on the murderer. She investigates what happened to Malén and why her death had been justified. This interest in Malén reflects a twist on the detective novel model, as the protagonist is not concerned with finding the perpetrator of the murder. Sara Rosell claims that this tendency is rooted in the premise that "la narrativa detectivesca, cuyo protagonista es una mujer, representa una exploración (y una transgresión) tanto del género de ficción como de las relaciones de género

sexual” (95) (detective narrative, whose protagonist is a woman, represents an exploration [and transgression] of both fiction as a genre and gender relations). This tendency toward exploration and transgression is constantly observed in Vega’s character, who is depicted in opposition to representations of the traditional woman (i.e., married, silent, passive, and obedient). In this way, Carola explores “la subjetividad femenina, los mecanismos de resistencia y las diferentes maneras en que se agencia el poder” (Rosell 95) (feminine subjectivity, mechanisms of resistance, and the different ways in which power comes into play).

As a self-sufficient woman, Carola moves fearlessly through the city. This action on the character’s part embodies a subversive strategy by the author, who transforms the traditional notion of the man as the *caballero* who navigates the city freely. Carola adopts the trope of the flaneur and positions herself as an urban woman. She moves to Río Piedras and into a miniature apartment with “its own entrance and a separate bathroom. It wasn’t too bad for the price, and considering my miserable per-annum as a school teacher, it would have to do. . . . It was on Humacao Street, which is a no-woman’s land of insurgent university students and the fragrance of overflowing sewers” (Vega 3–4).¹⁴ In this way, Carola connects herself to the urban masses while maintaining her status as a self-sufficient woman who is capable of preserving her own autonomy in the face of the overbearing forces of the city. Within this environment, she seems to feel comfortable with her surroundings and what the city can offer according to her economic status. As a college town, Río Piedras is characterized by small bookstores that welcome both intellectuals and students. But, also, “en ese Río Piedras quincallero” (Rodríguez Juliá 27) (in that Río Piedras quincallero,” the streets are contrasted between the intellect provided by the university and the poverty of many of its residents.¹⁵ Its streets are crowded with student residences, but they are also marked by violence, crime, and drugs.

Taking into consideration the evolution of Carola as an urban female character within the framework of crime fiction, it is important to highlight that, in the hard-boiled novel tradition, the city plays a pivotal role. In the entrails of the city, the tribulations of the story will be forged. According to Cristina Jiménez-Landi Crick, it is in the city “donde se dan las relaciones sociales que han favorecido que éste tenga lugar. Como espacio corrupto y plagado de violencia, la ciudad es el escenario propio a la novela negra, que descubre la cercanía entre las altas esferas del poder y el mundo criminal en una ciudad corrupta, fruto del capitalismo industrial descontrolado” (57) (where social relations have favored [the city’s] privileged place in narrative. As a corrupt space plagued by violence, the city is the setting for the crime novel, which reveals the closeness between the high spheres of power and the

criminal world in a corrupt city, the fruit of uncontrolled industrial capitalism). In “Pasión de historia,” Río Piedras, besides being the cosmos through which Carola transits, is the birthplace of her friendship with Vilma. Furthermore, is very close to Hato Rey, where Malén is murdered. Río Piedras is also the scenario for different verdicts. On the one hand, it is where the crimes are committed, while, on the other, it is the jurisdiction where both the neighbors and the media prosecute the victims for being irreverent.

However, it is there, in that city transited by “[l]os cuerpos de sus transeúntes, que la recorren por sus venas y por sus arterias” (Ríos Ávila 278) (the bodies of the passersby, who cross it through its veins and arteries), where Carola acquires her feminine independence. It is in her “Woolfian” room where she transforms herself into a literary detective of passional tales devoted to intrigue and terror: “During this time, I was working on a sort of semi documentary, semi-detective novel about a crime of passion that had taken place not long before in a middle-class condominium in Hato Rey” (Vega 4). Carola combines her investigation on oral testimony with neighbors’ gossip about the case of the hot-blooded Malén: “Little by little I collected a respectable stack of clippings and ‘statements.’ I would interrogate the gossipers every time I went over to my mother’s ill-starred condominium to torture some more clothes in the laundry room. . . . [T]he world was full of vengeful men and forbidden women” (Vega 7). It is within these spaces that Carola becomes even more intrigued with Malén’s case. The crime tabloids capture her attention, not because of the morbidity of the stabbing, but rather because of the implications in the reporting that continually challenge the victim’s integrity. In her story, Carola disputes both the puritans of yellow journalism as well as their justification of the crime, as if the perpetrator were a state avenger.¹⁶ The Malén case takes over the front pages of the newspapers, described as the murder of a young woman by Salvador—her former lover—in a condominium in Hato Rey while she was enjoying sexual intercourse with her murderer’s friend. Right before the crime, Malén and her ex-lover’s best friend were listening to very loud music when Salvador suddenly burst into the apartment without permission and found the couple naked on the sofa bed in the living room:

[They were] drinking beer and eating *chicarrones*—the post-coital munchies. . . . [T]he newly arrived guest did not come unaccompanied. With him he brought a six-inch switchblade. . . . From the ex: Insults, a little slapping around, then the shower scene from *Psycho* again right there in the living room. . . . The killer then goes after the Other Man. Malén manages to get up and stagger down the dimly lit hall, painting the

stairs red down the floor below. Returning from his frustrated search for his erstwhile buddy, Salvador picks up the trail of Malén while the future deceased finds strength to bang on the deaf door all along the hallway. –Knock, knock. Nobody’s home says Death. (5–6)

The crime takes place in the same building where Carola’s mother lives, who complains endlessly about the events that took place there: “all she ever did was moan that somebody had put a spell on the building, because first there’d been that baby that fell down the elevator shaft, and then the couple that did abortions and flushed the fetuses down the toilet, and now this indecent woman” (5). In this manner, Vega not only exposes the crisis of violence faced by Puerto Rican woman in her literary discourse. She also portrays the social values driving the increase in these murders and how women themselves battle with the justification of femicide on the island.

Thus, the mother embodies paternalism. Her criticism of the victim feeds off the authoritarian and normative discourse embedded within the social machinery. As a woman, she assumes a role that distances her from Malén. She does not feel any sorrow over her death. On the contrary, she condemns Malén and blames her lifestyle as being responsible for the tragic events: “Roaming the halls stark naked at night, a-different-man-every-day, no wonder what happened to her happened to her” (5).¹⁷ In addition, she uses negative neologisms as a justification for her punishment. Carola’s mother labels Malén a “chochicaliente,” showcasing the patriarchal discourse that condemns women for a presumed unrestrained sexuality that drives them to constantly switch sexual partners.¹⁸ Likewise, she defines her as a vulgar and immoral woman who shows no respect for her neighbors. Carola’s mother insinuates that the crime had to do with loud music and also comments to her daughter that “it wasn’t for staying home and saying her rosary” (11). Thus, Malén’s case becomes a controversial subject for the yellow press as it unveils a society divided by “the Condominated Wives’ Club, [and] the Real Men’s Society, San Juan Chapter” (6). According to Rosell, Malén’s case reveals how patriarchal values, disseminated and exercised by men and women, result in an absence of sensitivity toward femicide. Rosell writes, “La investigación de los hechos, deviene así en una investigación de las relaciones de género sexuales y de las manifestaciones culturales y sociales donde la violencia hacia la mujer puede llegar a ser justificable” (99) (The search for facts then turns into an investigation of sexual gender relations and cultural and social manifestations where violence against women can be justified).

Likewise, it seems that Malén’s murderer, Salvador, appears in the story to symbolize precisely the same paternalistic values, which are based on the male voice but also endorsed by certain feminine groups. These paternalistic

values seek to punish those insubordinate women who refuse traditional norms. Of this paternalism, Torres Caballero writes, “las mujeres convencionalmente buenas son usadas domesticadamente y son idealizadas; las malas, las mujeres sexuales “chochicalientes” son brutalmente usadas y asesinadas” (120) (the traditionally decent women are domesticated and idealized, while the dirty ones, the ‘chochicalientes,’ are brutally exploited and even murdered). In this way, “Pasión de historia” uncovers the contradictions of social values by revealing the complicity of certain women with the forces of oppression. The neighbors who refuse to open the door to the moribund Malén deflect blame from the killer to the victim. They are also executioners, as they justify the crime by alleging that women who turn out to be “chochicalientes” are women who “ask for it, enjoy it, or provoke it in how [they] dress, what [they] say, how [they] behave” (Radford 5).

On the other hand, Vega’s story turns into a Russian doll in which female characters end up being predestined to suffer from the same fate. For example, Malén’s case becomes the plot for Carola’s writing. However, at the same time, it is the hook that leads the protagonist to raise awareness about the ramifications of gender violence because, without knowing it, she will be the next victim. Vega writes,

That was how I started knitting together the story of Malén, and then the novel of Malén, because the skein of loose ends and ravels got more and more tangled every day, and something was always missing, the decisive stitch, the warp that would pull all this woof together. So there I was, knitting away, when another true-crime story, this time brought to me by a neighbor of mine, a housewife with bloodhound genes, temporarily made me drop my needles. (7)

After Manuel’s unexpected return, Doña Finí, Carola’s neighbor, positions herself as the antithesis of Carola’s mother. On the one hand, she becomes the second detective in the story, while, on the other, she transgresses paternalistic norms by protecting the new victim. In this way, Doña Finí commits herself to being vigilant to expose the villain who is tormenting her female neighbors. While Carola’s mother lives in a middle-class building in Hato Rey and is flourishing with her higher socioeconomic status, a battle against sexual violence emerges on the outskirts of Río Piedras. This is shown by Finí, who “had gone on red alert, her optical cannons trained on what she called a ‘bum’ that was roaming the neighborhood, on the prowl for rapable maidens” (7). Just like Carola, the new female detective feels driven to resolve her enigma.

For this reason, it is urgent for Doña Finí to identify the wrongdoer who is stalking her community: “Doña Finí was driving me crazy: That guy ought to get a life, I tell you. Today he was around here so much the beans burned on me, because I had to keep going to check the clock, you know, the police the way they are you got to keep records on these guys” (7–8).

On the other hand, the portrayal of Carola as a potential victim is central to the story. Once again, Vega introduces a subversive strategy as she moves away significantly from the male crime fiction model, in which the detective stands out for his ability to trace the culprit’s identity without becoming the casualty of a crime. In this way, Vega situates Carola in a position that is just as precarious as Malén’s. Here, the detective is not superior to the victim. On the contrary, her safety is also at risk, and, because of this, it is very likely that the crime will not be solved. Certainly, Manuel’s reappearance as the “mysterious stalker, who to make matters worse was motorized” (7), brings new hardships into Carola’s life: “I was more annoyed than disappointed by this turn of events. How the fuck had he found out where I’d made my new nest? What right did he have to spy on me this way? Next thing he’d be rummaging around in my trashcan at midnight looking for icky condoms to paste in his album” (9). Manuel’s persistence has led Carola to reflect on her autonomy as a woman. Like Malén, she defends her intimacy, and it is irritating that her obsessive ex-boyfriend has been digging into her privacy without her consent. Despite this, however, it is ironic that she feels flattered by Manuel’s sexual harassment: “All week I lived in pleasant suspense, waiting for my clockwork satyr to make his rounds” (8). This attitude on her part suggests that Carola does not consider herself capable of seducing men the way Vilma does: “I’d never exactly been overstocked in the boyfriend department, if you know what I mean. In college the *femme fatale* was my friend Vilma” (8).

It is clear that Carola doesn’t position herself as a target. Her attitude seems to imply that “this problem” belongs to other women but not to her. Apparently, she is unaware of the risk sexual harassment poses to her life. On the contrary, she acts as if Manuel’s stalking has been a diversion that helps her escape from her overwhelming routine in Río Piedras. Manuel’s presence justifies Carola’s decision to accept Vilma’s invitation, presumably to seek refuge in the French Pyrenees. In this way, Carola will be able to distance herself from her psychopathic ex-boyfriend and fully devote time to writing her novella. Meanwhile, Vilma is a Puerto Rican woman who has been away from her island for the past five years and suffers from a great sense of nostalgia. On a superficial level, both characters share very simple college memories; at a much deeper level, however, it is obvious that both have been struck by the violence imposed on them by their partners.

Upon her arrival in France, Carola gets a new lease on things, rediscovering her own world. However, it seems that Carola has left behind her detective skills and deductive curiosity, as she fails to notice that Vilma's invitation was a plea for help. This is evidenced from the very first sign of danger: "The only hair in the soup, she said, is that we're staying at Paul's parents' house" (9). Vilma tries to provide insight about her subordinate status, but Carola perceives her comments to be "simple complaints" about her marriage. As soon as Carola settles in Paul's parents' house, however, her friend reveals that both her husband and her parents-in-law have been harassing her. According to Vilma, her husband refuses to allow her to work and beats her: "The first time he hit me I thought he was playing, so I hit him back. So he hit me harder. That scared me. I tried to get out of the room, but he grabbed me and dragged me over the bed" (18). Despite Vilma's persistent efforts to verbalize how dreadful her life alongside Paul is, Carola is indifferent to what she has to say. According to Carola's diary, she seems incredulous about Vilma's claims to the point that she perceives Vilma's testimony to be a fictional story: "I didn't know whether to be appalled or to congratulate her, because she did tell this with a certain dubious grace, and with the weird enthusiasm of a grown-up that wants to scare a child that wants to be scared" (18). Also, she cannot conceive that Paul and his parents are dangerous people: "It was hard for me to connect the tales of volcanic passions that Vilma wove with Third-World patience (or like some soap-opera-for-life from a cable company with a single channel) with those pleasant, hospitable people that were bending over backward to be nice to me" (20).

Ironically, Carola models a similar behavior as that of her mother's following Malén's death. She does not issue insults against the victim, but she questions her testimony as if it were insufficient to validate that she was in fact a victim of domestic violence. Her apathy nullifies Vilma's voice but also deprives her of an opportunity to initiate a second investigation. It seems that the safety that comes with her stay in France makes Carola less vigilant. As a result, she betrays her duties as a detective and disregards the vulnerability her friend is suffering. From day one, she is exposed to a series of enigmas that call into question Vilma's marriage, her warning letter, and Paul's persistent silence: "[He] hardly talked, whether out of shyness or standoffishness I couldn't say, but he did seem to enjoy racing down that dark road covered with fog" (10). It is not until the end of her visit that Carola begins to feel the stirring of certain suspicions about the incidents. Paul approaches her to tell her that Vilma had changed: "she acts as though she's reliving her adolescence. She tells lies, he says, she makes things up" (29). However, Carola does not react differently to the situation. At that point, a few days before her departure, Vilma disappears, and Carola does not even question it. Having no

contact with her friend, Carola has no choice but to ask Paul about his wife's whereabouts. Paul alerts her that Vilma is indisposed in her room. Nevertheless, Carola continues as if nothing were happening and leaves a note under Vilma's door: "I folded the piece of paper and went and slid it under Vilma's door, with a soft knock to announce the publication of thus most limited edition of my least work. From *Sleeping Beauty*, not a peep" (35).

Just when Carola is about to leave, Vilma reappears as if nothing had happened. While the reader becomes ever more disturbed, the detective returns to the island without any concerns. Nevertheless, it is in her Woolfian room, in the middle of her own immediate reality of Río Piedras, "from school to my room back to school again" (39), that Carola suddenly steps out of her seasonal lethargy and begins to think deductively about the events that have haunted her friend:

In spite of the hectic back-to-school rat race I was in, I couldn't stop thinking about Vilma. The stylized image of the Latin Madonna I'd brought back with me made my sleep martyrdom. I finally found a few minutes to write a long letter full of questions, advice, all the things I hadn't had the ovaries to say face to face. I thought the letter would exorcise that nagging and all-too-intrusive guilt complex that had been haunting me since we said good-bye at the train station. (39–40)

Carola's behavior leads the reader to think once more about women's daily struggles against hegemonic practices and how society acts indifferently in the face of the violence that women may confront. Carola's inertia turns her into the stalker's accomplice, as she fails to take any steps to prevent her friend's deadly fate. "There, among the bills, was the battered envelope, tattooed with self-contradictory stamps. The words *DESTINATAIRE INCONNU*, smeared in red across Vilma's name, made my heart stop" (38).¹⁹ At the end of Vega's story, it seems that Vilma has no other option than to remain with Paul. Her silence in response to Carola's letters presages her death and corroborates Carola's irresponsibility as a detective and her failure to acknowledge her friend's distress or do anything to guarantee her safety, as Doña Finín had done for her.

The editor's note at the end of the story attests to what had been foreshadowed by the beginning of the story.²⁰ Carola makes her final transformation in a series of metamorphoses, from a city girl to a teacher, from a writer to an amateur detective, from a stalked woman to a traveler, and from an accomplice to a dead body alongside Malén. "In early December, 1982, the author brought us this manuscript, which we are proud to publish. . . . On the thirty-first

of that month, while celebrating New Year's Eve [Carola] was killed by a bullet fired through the window of her living room, striking her in the head. The murderer has not been apprehended" (38).

The open ending of "Pasión de historia" highlights how femicide terrorizes Puerto Rico. The author portrays three different female characters, each of whom experiences sexual violence. The noir-gothic story concludes silently, the same way that the sociopolitical machinery of the island has constantly responded to the victims of femicide. Likewise, Ana Lydia Vega uncovers the hypocrisy of a machista society whose actions undermine efforts to safeguard women's lives. Thereby, such crimes "de ser un secreto a voces [para formar] parte de una discusión pública informada sobre la situación de la mujer en la sociedad puertorriqueña" (Torres Caballero 122) (cease to be openly secret [and become] an integral part of an informed public discussion on women's rights in Puerto Rican society).

According to the experiences of Malén, Vilma, and Carola, it is certainly true that the aggressor employs multiple strategies to intimidate the woman with whom he has become obsessed. When his tactics fail, the stalker resorts to lethal violence, which he feels in full disposition to administer. As a noir-gothic novel, "Pasión de historia" establishes a direct and forceful critique against femicide, asserting that the most fatal type of stalking occurs as a result of a personal or romantic relationship. Through her literary text, Ana Lydia Vega moves from the Puerto Rican metropolitan area of Río Piedras to the French Pyrenees to emphasize the fact that femicide is not a local crisis but a global one, one that violates the dignity and respect of individuals, especially women, who are the most prone to perishing in the face of gender-based violence. As a result, Puerto Rican crime fiction makes visible the menace against women's safety and their lives, while also depicting how some women can forge and conspire with such criminal acts. Ana Lydia Vega's detective story does not solve Malén's case, Vilma's disappearance, or even Carola's own murder. From its morbidly silent stance, however, the story claims that femicide is capital punishment applied to a woman with no ability to defend herself. Therefore, it is the reader's responsibility to avenge her in the face of the absolute certainty of her death.

Notes

1. All quotations from "Pasión de historia" belong to the English edition *True and False Romances: Stories and a Novella* (1994) translated by Andrew Hurley.
2. Awarded the Juan Rulfo International Prize in 1984, this short story is included in the Spanish literary collection *Pasión de historia*, published by Ediciones de la Flor (1987).

3. Dávila Gonçalves affirms that the Hispanic detective novel is a literary paradigm that has seen numerous examples in the past century of Spanish literature, including the prolific output of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán. The same phenomenon has taken place in Argentina, where the tradition ranges from Jorge Luis Borges to Mempo Giardinelli; in Mexico, with Paco Ignacio Taibo II as a classic example; and also in Cuba, with Leonardo Padura Fuentes (77).
4. The most representative Puerto Rican writers in this police genre have been Arturo Echavarría (*Como el aire de abril*, 1994), José Curet (*Crimen en la Calle Tetuán*, 1996), Mayra Santos Febres (*Cualquier miércoles soy tuya*, 2002), Rafael Acevedo (*Exquisito cadáver*, 2002), Mayra Montero (*Son de almendra*, 2005), Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá (*Mujer con sombrero Panamá*, 2006), Luis López Nieves (*El corazón de Voltaire*, 2006), and Wilfredo Mattos Cintrón (*El cerro de los buitres*, 1984; *El cuerpo bajo el puente*, 1989; *Las dos caras de Jano*, 1995; *Las puertas de San Juan*, 1997; *Bailando al derecho y al revés*, 2007; and *Letramuerto: asesinato en La Tertulia*, 2010).
5. For a compelling discussion on the effects of US colonialism and Puerto Rican identity, see Rivera Ramos; Duany; and Malavet.
6. Regarding the representativeness of the female corpse in crime fictions from a transatlantic perspective, see Aramburu; Close; and Braham, *Crimes against the State*.
7. For an interesting discussion of portrayals of homosexuality in the detective novel, see Di Paolo Harrison, *Queer Noir Hispano*, which examines queer representations in detective novels from Spain and Latin America.
8. On paternalism, see Gelpí, especially page 12. Gelpí claims that the rhetoric of *paternalismo* often evokes family relationships, and its fundamental metaphor is to equate the nation with a large family.
9. With regard to women's and queer literary discourses that began to flourish in Puerto Rico during the 1970s, see Carrasquillo Hernández, especially pages 90–93.
10. Over the course of her career, Vega has been awarded various international recognitions, among them the Casa de las Américas Prize (1982), the Premio Juan Rulfo (1984), and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1989). Her literary works include *Virgenes y mártires* (in conjunction with Carmen Lugo Filippi, 1983), *Encancaranublado y otros cuentos de naufragio* (1987), *Pasión de historia y otras historias de pasión* (1987), *Tramo Ancla* (1988), *Falsas crónicas del sur* (1991), *Ciertas crónicas del norte* (1992), and *Esperando a Loló y otros delirios generacionales* (1995).
11. See Dávila Gonçalves, especially page 79.
12. By the 1980s, many of the investigations conducted in Puerto Rico on domestic violence were carried out on the margins of the State (Silva Bonilla, et al.). It was not until 1989 that Bill no. 54, known as the “Ley para la Prevención e Intervención con la Violencia Doméstica,” was adopted, providing civil and criminal remedies to eradicate this pernicious problem in Puerto Rican society. Likewise, it was not until 1990 that local governmental statistics on gender-based violence began to be disseminated. For instance, in 1990 the Puerto Rican government reported that 12,774 women suffered some type of domestic violence, a figure that rose to 19,278 in 2006, according

to the statistics of the Oficina de la Procuradora de las Mujeres de Puerto Rico (<http://www.mujer.pr.gov>).

13. See Braham, “Ana Lydia Vega y el género negrogótico.” Braham alludes to the term *negrogótico* to refer to Carola’s character as an amateur investigator who takes a stand against patriarchal society but in turn becomes a victim: “El *negrogótico* subraya las equivalencias formales y temáticas entre negro y gótico al plantear la tesis de que una mujer que se atreve a imaginarse como detective [lector científico e intérprete de una historia] pero corre fatalmente el riesgo de terminar muerta de su propia narrativa” (444) (The *negrogótico* underscores the formal and thematic equivalences between hard-boiled and gothic by positing the thesis that a woman who dares to imagine herself as a detective [a scientific reader and interpreter of a story] but fatally runs the risk of ending up dead from her own narrative).
14. Río Piedras is a former municipality consolidated with San Juan and the home of the University of Puerto Rico’s main campus since 1903.
15. In this case, the term “quincallero” refers to the Dominican community, composed mostly of undocumented immigrants who settled in that region during the 1980s.
16. Radford argues that “misogyny not only motivates violence against women but distorts the press coverage of such crimes as well. Femicide, rape, and battery are variously ignored or sensationalized in the media, depending on the victim’s race, class, and attractiveness by male standards” (15).
17. Radford asserts that “when it is the victim who is blamed, the dead woman’s lifestyle, behavior, and personality are subject to public scrutiny. . . . Through the interactive processes of individualization and women blaming, the existence of femicide is masked, and men and masculinity are protected as responsibility is shifted onto women, who are then defined variously as inadequate or provocative” (352).
18. “Chochicaliente” is a culturally derogatory term used in Puerto Rico to accuse a woman of being a “slut” in light of her sexual practices.
19. Ewing claims that “most battered women killed by their batterers are those who . . . not only tried but succeeded in leaving their batterers. Their mates . . . could not accept the loss of control they experienced when ‘their’ women left them. Unable to regain that control by any other means, they resorted to the ultimate form of control: murder” (36).
20. See Dávila Gonçalves, p. 80.

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