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<CT>The Lola Casanova That I Have Longed to Know</>

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A few years ago I was embarking on a project about borderlands culture that grew out of a fascination that I'd developed with Ramona—~~not~~ Helen Hunt Jackson's novel, nor its various adaptations in film or theater or telenovela in the US or Mexico, nor the “real” Ramona promoted by the southern California tourist industry, but the legendary figure that encompasses all those Ramonas. As I researched how Ramona continued to captivate audiences over time and space, I was astounded to see how this beloved character came to take on distinct cultural meanings for different audiences. Ramona, as the story goes, was born to an ~~I~~ndigenous mother and a white father but raised as part of a white elite Californio family, later fell in love with an ~~I~~ndigenous man, discovered her own mixed-~~r~~ace background, got married, and assumed an ~~I~~ndigenous identity, a remarkable choice, taking into account predominant racial ideologies. Her story, with its many romantic and tragic twists and adventures, is too complicated to summarize here. But I can condense some of what Ramona came to signify: the romantic charm of Mexican/Californio/Spanish California, the possibilities of interracial integration in the US ~~W~~est, Mexican American culture's deep roots in the US ~~S~~outhwest, and a challenge to prevailing racial hierarchies.

I found it particularly interesting that the cultural phenomenon of Ramona, as something of a cultural icon of the Mexican American ~~S~~outhwest, was not contained to the southern California region, where her story (her purported birthplace, the ranch where she grew up, the site of her

marriage, etc.) inspired a lively tourist industry, or the United States, where the original novel was a perpetual bestseller for decades and the inspiration for multiple movies and a popular romantic ballad. Instead a Spanish translation by Cuban poet José Martí, a Mexican film, and, much later, a popular Mexican telenovela made Ramona into an iconic figure in Mexico, as well. Ramona, the legend, the character, the icon, was a cross-border phenomenon that provoked passionate adoration among both English- and Spanish-speaking audiences.

Curious as to whether any similar phenomenon could be found in Mexican culture, I soon came across a Mexican borderlands legend that at first seemed to share some fundamental characteristics of the Ramona story. Dolores Casanova, like Ramona, grew up a member of the local white elite, and caused a scandal by giving up her privileged position in Mexican society by going to live with an Indigenous man, bearing his children, and assimilating to his culture. Like Ramona, Lola Casanova, as she was known in popular representations, became a protagonist of both literature and cinema, inspiring a popular fascination that would endure for over a century. However, I soon came to see that beyond the superficial idea of the presumably white girl running off with a brown guy, the two stories had little in common. Casanova was, after all, a real person, who did not have a mixed-race background; nor did she not elope with her Indigenous partner, but was rather taken captive by him.

At the time I conjectured that the Mexican beguilement with Casanova was of important national symbolic importance. A series of representations of the Casanova story arose during the couple of decades immediately following the Mexican Revolution, a period of intense nationalism that sought to create national symbols from regional artifacts, and to integrate groups that had previously been denigrated, marginalized, or excluded into a shared national culture. This was a complicated endeavor as Indigenous groups like the Comcaac (popularly known to outsiders as the Seris) had never been definitively conquered, and could not easily be woven into existing national mythologies of the Aztec or Mayan empires. In any case, I argued that Casanova's union with Coyote Iguana, her captor, could be viewed as a national romance celebrating racial harmony and *mestizaje*, a key component of Mexican national identity. However, the common trope of racial mixing was of a white man seducing (or violating) an Indigenous woman, whose

role as an agent of mestizaje made her a traitor to her own conquered people. The emblematic female symbol of mestizaje was Malintzin, popularly known as la Malinche, a real-life indigenous woman who became interpreter for Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and later gave birth to his son. Lola Casanova's story remarkably inverted the racial hierarchies implicit in the Malinche story. Rather than betray her indigenous roots in favor of white conquerors, she renounced her white privilege, joining the indigenous enemy. Indigenista novelist Francisco Rojas González and Mexican golden-age cinema's greatest female director Mathilde Landeta nonetheless made Casanova into an agent of Seri modernization and assimilation into Mexican national culture. Casanova, represented in the film by blonde rumbera Meche Barba, initiates trade with non-Indigenous neighbors, a gesture that leads the Comcaacs toward cultural integration; this story line culminates in the movie version in a giddy scene in which she barter with some white traders, returning home to the Comcaac village with some colorful dresses for the women to try on, introducing them to the cult of fashion.

While I believe my critical reading of the Casanova figure across a range of representations in literature, film, journalism, art, and historiography draws out insights as provocative as those I had teased out about Ramona, I nonetheless felt my inquiries into the former remained incomplete. The richness of my method of reading across time, space, and culture required a cultural competence equal to addressing the complexities of the borderlands, which sometimes implied crossing not only ethnic or national barriers, but also linguistic ones. I lamented that aside from an unusual oral history recuperated by Edith Lowell during her master's research at the University of Arizona in the 1960s, and despite evidence indicating that Lola Casanova figures prominently in the cultural memory of the Comcaac people, I was unable to get a strong sense of exactly how the Coyote Iguana-Dolores Casanova story figured in, or what it meant to Comcaac culture. I lacked the cultural and linguistic expertise that might have allowed me to attempt to take my research beyond Lowell's lone (if astute) critical article and a few other bits and pieces of knowledge that I was able to find in Spanish-language archives and publications.

I published my book on iconic figures of Mexico's northwest borderlands in 2007 hoping that others might be inspired—and better equipped—to take my inquiries further than I could. But that didn't happen. While my book was well received (it won an award from the Western Literature Association), and some readers were indeed intrigued by the Lola Casanova story, which until then was barely known in the US, no one came forward to challenge or expand my interpretations from a well-informed Comcaac perspective. At least so it was for a dozen years or so—until renowned ethnobotanist Gary Nabhan contacted me to inform me that he was assembling a new collection of testimonial narratives that would capture the story of Lola Casanova from the perspective of Comcaac cultural memory, including oral histories recounted by descendants of Casanova. I was startled at this unexpected news, and as the accounts started coming in, I was increasingly drawn in. It turned out that this was just the material that was missing from my otherwise intricate reading of the multiple vectors of meaning generated by over a century and a half of renderings of this story across different layers of national, regional, and local cultures.

I admit to feeling somewhat ashamed that as a cultural studies scholar I couldn't have figured out how to get done what an ethnobotanist ultimately made happen with a flourish. My modest book chapter on Lola Casanova makes an educated guess at what Lola Casanova may have meant, or may continue to signify, for the Comcaac people. I argued that “Seri accounts focused principally on the history of Coyote Iguana, with the Lola Casanova story inserted as a brief anecdote” in his biography (135), and that “when Lola opts to stay among the Seris, no Seri finds her choice illogical” (136). Questions of racial or cultural hierarchies that underlie the Mexican fascination with the Casanova legend are absent from these versions, as is the element of her wielding any influence on Comcaac culture, as they “make no mention of the transculturation brought on by having a white woman living among them” (136). But I lacked the confidence to claim that I had captured Comcaac perspectives with the authority that I felt I could assume regarding Spanish- or English-language sources. The oral histories documented in this [portfolio issue of \*Journal of the Southwest\*](#) fill an important gap, and make it much easier to draw assertive conclusions about the full range of implications that emerged from this story, which persists across diverse segments of cultural memory in northwestern Mexico.

These Comcaac histories, as Nabhan asserts, ~~produce~~ not only produce different meanings, but also “have an entirely different [...] moral force” than those recorded or created by Spanish-speaking Mexicans. They make clear several details about Coyote Iguana that have been misrepresented or remain murky in Spanish-language sources: for the Comcaac people, Coyote Iguana, whom they prefer to remember as Jesús Ávila Sánchez, was of pure Comcaac heritage, and ~~that~~ he was not a “king” but did have some shamanistic powers, and ~~that~~ he never exhibited cowardice toward Mexican intruders. His role in the Comcaac historical memory is perhaps not as tremendous as it comes across in Mexican representations, perhaps because there are so few Comcaacs who figure in Mexican history or folklore; Coyote Iguana not only carries out a seduction that flies in the face of national racial hierarchies, but he also may be the only Comcaac that many Mexicans can name, a population itself composed of a very limited number who have read or otherwise learned of the Lola Casanova legend. However, as some of the accounts included in this portfolio-issue show, he does play a role in the Comcaac’s resistance to Mexican armed hostilities.

Likewise, for the Comcaac he is not necessarily the exotically seductive lover or romantic hero that he may have seemed on the silver screen. However, nor was he a kidnapper or rapist as stated or implied among Sonoran sources in the aftermath of the armed skirmish in which Ávila and Casanova encountered each other presumably for the first time. According to Comcaac accounts collected here, Jesús Ávila assumed a protective and loving relationship with Lola Casanova, who left his side only when she was forcibly removed. Moreover, her final gesture of insisting that he not be taken captive or otherwise punished by Mexican authorities underscores the mutual care that characterized her relationship with him. Comcaac oral histories do not incorporate melodramatic or romantic tropes appreciated by some Mexican audiences, but they do portray a relationship that was much more affectionate and serene than what might be expected to occur across a cultural divide characterized by mutual hostility.

For her part, Lola Casanova also assumes a lower profile in Comcaac retellings of her story than in Mexican renditions. For example, while Comcaac versions certainly recognize her racial

difference they do not seem to play up her whiteness as, for example, the casting of Meche Barba, dark hair dyed blonde, as Lola in the 1949 Mexican film. Since, according to most Comcaac recollections, she lived only a few years among them, her impact on their collective history was small, and her cultural influence was negligible. If Lola Casanova, in Comcaac recollections and reconstructions, did not actively promote Comcaac assimilation into Mexican national culture, nor did she represent a threat to Comcaac cultural autonomy. Her difference might have been seen as a curiosity, and a possible concern given Mexican antagonism toward the Comcaacs, but was not a factor in major cultural change. Moreover, a Comcaac interpretation of the story might conclude that such a cross-ethnic relationship, although an anomaly, was acceptable, but only so long as the outsider did not have the power to impose their culture whether within the household, or on the community at large. The remarkable influence of Casanova on the Comcaacs made her suitable as a Mexican romantic heroine; the absence of that impact from Comcaac perspectives casts her in a much more inconsequential and innocuous role in their history.

It has been fascinating to read the texts compiled here in this [dossier](#), which has allowed me to fill in gaps in my critical readings of the multiple renditions of the Lola Casanova legend; and ~~to allow me~~ to feel a closure that I had not expected to find. I congratulate Gary Nabhan on his ability to bring these materials together, and express my gratitude to the custodians of Comcaac culture. </>

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