

Casas Tomadas

Monsters and Metaphors on the Periphery of Latin
American Literature and Media

Edited by

Carlos A. González

Harvard University



Bridging Languages and Scholarship

Series in Literary Studies



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Introduction:

Monsters and the Margins

That Latin American literature and media is replete with monsters is not surprising; monsters occur in all cultures across all epochs, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen makes evident in his seminal essay “Monster Culture: Seven Theses.” There were monsters in the folklore of pre-Columbian civilizations that survive today in forms more or less faithful to their forebears, and despite the undeniable influence of Anglophone horror fiction and media, homegrown creatures and creeps are alive and well across the Americas. The beginning of the twentieth century saw Leopoldo Lugones question the limits of ‘humanimal’ personhood (“Un fenómeno inexplicable” or “An Inexplicable Phenomenon,” 1906) while Horacio Quiroga articulated a suspicion that there was something not quite right in the very places where we lay our heads to rest, where we should be safest but in fact are menaced by unseen forces (“El almohadón de plumas” or “The Feather Pillow,” 1917). Today, horror (and its cousin, gothic) films are the bread and butter of Latine and Latin American cinematographers: supernatural horror is seeing success thanks to directors diverse in style, influences, and concerns, such as Guillermo del Toro, Demián Rugna, Michelle Garza Cervera, and Gigi Saul Guerrero. Literature is no different, and fans of the monster are spoiled for options: Samanta Schweblin, Agustina Bazterrica, Mariana Enríquez, Isabel Cañas, Cynthia Pelayo, Silvia Moreno-Garcia, Gerardo Sámano Córdova, Gabino Iglesias, Mónica Ojeda, Fernanda Melchor—and the list literally goes on and on—have all contributed to the rising tide of critically and popularly acclaimed tales of terror within the Americas and abroad. These authors, rich in talent and in promises of new nightmares without an end in sight, might be making Latine horror more visible in the Anglophone world, but they by no means arise out of a vacuum.

In 1946, Julio Cortázar, influenced both by Jorge Luis Borges and Edgar Allan Poe,¹ published “Casa Tomada,” (“House Taken Over”), the story of a brother and sister whose quiet lives are interrupted by *them*, whoever *they* are on the other side of the door. Slowly, room by room, their house is overtaken by this strange force, invisible to the reader because of the lonely pair’s fear of

¹ See p. 106 in Ocasio, Rafael. *Literature of Latin America*. Greenwood Press, 2004.

confronting whatever threatening presence has made its way into their home. I remember reading this story for the first time as an undergrad, already a horror fan but not as well acquainted with Latin American literature. This memory stands out as one of the very few times in my life where I read a story, or indeed watched a movie, that upon finishing made me feel genuinely afraid. I couldn't explain then exactly why, but each time I revisit this story I get a little bit closer. That sense of impending dread, the embodied terror that Cortázar was able to capture, forced me to rethink everything I thought I knew about scary stories and creature features.

The essays in this volume, *Casas Tomadas: Monsters and Metaphors on the Periphery of Latin American Literature*, aim to explore the ways in which Latine artists and others have made the monster their own, and what uncanny metaphors have been unleashed onto the world in their wake. Although I have organized the chapters into sections that make use of the various conceptual frameworks through which monstrosity is depicted, understood, and subverted in Latin American contexts, these sections are only helpful groupings and not in any way delimiting boundaries. After all, what do monsters care for boundaries? The contributors to these pages come from a wide range of backgrounds, including folks from different disciplines, countries, and traditions, all working in different languages, theoretical frameworks, and critical commitments. What unites these chapters is the desire of their authors to put their ears against the thin door to try to listen for what's on the other side, even at the risk of being overtaken. They draw on a diverse array of sources and strategies, including literary criticism, media studies, cultural studies, and folklore, to examine the enduring power of monstrous figures and their subversive potential. Like their monsters, which resist taxonomy and which can only be grouped by family resemblance but never by genus or set categories, I have found it helpful to divide the chapters into four sections more or less defined by the throughlines they share in exploring monstrosity and its metaphors. It is perhaps true that some of the chapters contained herein could have been placed in another section just as easily, but such is the nature of the border-walking and the ungraspable. I encourage you to read freely and in strange combinations where it serves your curiosity.

The first section, "Night Lights: A Review of Monstrous Fiction in Latin America," provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of monster studies within the context of Latin American literature and culture. Jorge Antonio Sánchez Rivera's "Mermaids, Werewolves, 'Humanimals' and Unnamable Monsters: A Review of Monsters in Contemporary Literature of the Latin

American Southern Cone” offers a broad survey of monstrous figures in the literature of the Southern Cone, highlighting their enduring cultural significance through its focus on specific creatures that stalk the South American continent. The essay brings to the forefront the question of monsters and/as metaphors, and sets us up for more focused conversations later in the volume. Olivia Holloway’s chapter, “Monsters, Mirrors of Ourselves: Liminalities of Knowledge in Contemporary Adaptations of Brazilian Mythology,” explores how contemporary adaptations of Brazilian folklore serve to reflect the impulses of those who encounter the monstrous, which she demonstrates to be as alluring and attractive as it is repulsive. She provides a close look at the way monsters are refracted through the prisms of illustrated children’s literature (*Contos do folclore brasileiro* by Heloísa Prieto and *Lendas brasileiras* by Maurício de Sousa) and television (*Cidade invisível*). These chapters expand and simultaneously hone the definition of the monster, both broadening and bringing into focus the subject of inquiry in this volume.

The second section, “In the Grip of Monsters,” examines how monstrosity is used to critique power structures and explore dynamics of authority, power, and resistance. Lina Angulo Amaya’s “Reformulaciones de la monstruosidad: *La malas* como contra-activismo” delves into the reimagining of bodily limits within the novel *Las malas* by Camila Sosa Villada to challenge traditional narratives of *travesti** embodiment, making the shifting borders of *cuir* bodies and experiences more than just texts in service of political aim. Lisa Viviani’s “El vampirismo en *Las cosas que perdimos en el fuego* de Mariana Enríquez” explores the terrible restoration of vampirism in Enríquez’s work, highlighting its implications for understanding social decay and resistance. In Viviani’s readings of Enríquez, the vampire is both more faithful to traditional conceptualizations and also deeply subversive, pointing at the way that structures of oppression (and, importantly, the people who make them up) are also parasites and monsters. Fabio Andrade’s “Disturbing the Real: Reclaiming the monstrous in contemporary Brazilian cinema” analyzes a handful of films to discuss how contemporary Brazilian filmmakers use monstrous imagery to blur the lines between reality and fiction, between narration and documentation, in order to destabilize the spectator and ask us to see, to *really see*, the processes of violence and dispossession before us.

The third section, “Echoes in the Darkness,” focuses on the representation of monstrosity as a means to process and respond to trauma. Andrea Garza Erdmann’s “The Revenant and Reality: Postmortem Politics and Horror Vérité in Issa Lopez’s *Vuelven* (2012)” examines how conventional horror tropes are

used in Issa Lopez's acclaimed film (in English titled *Tigers Are Not Afraid*), highlighting how the monstrous maternal is employed to address issues of violence and power through the lens of child protagonists. Andrea Tinnemeyer's "'They'd Talk in Circles': Discursive and (In)visible Monsters in Mariana Enríquez's *The Dangers of Smoking in Bed*" revisits Enríquez (and it is no wonder, as she is a giant of contemporary Latin American horror in and out of translation). It analyzes her body of work as it uses the figure of the monster to comment on how Argentina wrestles with the collective trauma of despotism and disappearance under the authoritarian regime of *El Proceso*. Elisabetta Rodio's "Comala, Capitaloceno, y Comunidad: los monstruos de Pedro Paramo" uses the monstrous community in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo* to explore similar themes, eschewing an easy reading of ghostly memory and instead insisting on seeing with a clear eye the material, lingering effects of capitalism on the land and on culture, which must be shared if we are to survive.

The fourth section, "Sinister Spaces," examines embodied manifestations of monstrosity and their connection to spatiality. My own chapter "Misfits and Mouthfuls: Samanta Schweblin's Uncanny Embodiments" delves into the uncanny representations of the body in Schweblin's works *Fever Dream*, "Breath From the Depths," and "Mouthful of Birds," to analyze how the monstrous disrupts conventional (mis)perception of disability. Velebita Koričančić's "Home as a Death Trap: Narrating Monstrosity of the House in Guadalupe Dueñas's 'Historia de Mariquita'" argues that in Dueñas's text the house becomes a site of monstrosity and entrapment through the gendering of the domestic sphere. Elzbieta Sklodowska's "Monsters at home: Post-Soviet Subversions of the Caribbean Gothic in Cuban Women's Literature and Art" also examines the interplay between monstrous bodies within the sphere of domestic spaces, though this time in post-Soviet Cuban women's literature and art. Monstrosity is, in this way, rendered as something quite near, like Quiroga's pillow, like the underside of your bed.

This interdisciplinary and transcultural volume contributes to the field of monster studies by offering a uniquely Latin American focus, highlighting the region's multifaceted and diverse engagement with the monstrous across media. The chapters collectively demonstrate how monsters, far from being mere objects of fear, are potent symbols for critiquing and reimagining the social order. They are not *only* metaphors, but neither are they ever illegible. This volume is intended for scholars and students of Latin American literature, cultural studies, and horror studies, as well as for general readers interested in the intersections of monstrosity, identity, and society. It aims to broaden the

discourse surrounding the monstrous by pointing out the immensely fruitful, living tradition of Latin American engagement with the monster. The explorations of monstrosity in *Casas Tomadas: Monsters and Metaphors on the Periphery of Latin American Literature* offers a multifaceted and nuanced understanding of how monsters serve as metaphors for displacement, power, trauma, and bodily transformation, and by examining these themes through a Latin American lens, this collection provides valuable scholarly insights as the nascent field of monster studies continues to grow, with Latin American artists and art enjoyers at the forefront of the conversation.

I want to extend my sincere and deep gratitude to the people who made this volume possible, not least of all the contributors whose tireless effort—and email vigilance—made my experience as editor enjoyable. I feel honored and grateful to have my name included alongside theirs in a collection that brings real value to the fields of monster studies and Latin American literary studies. I am also exceedingly grateful to the editors at Vernon Press, in particular to Blanca Caro Duran and Irene Benavides, for believing in this project and helping me to see it through. I am most of all grateful to my longsuffering soulmate, Arielle, and to my best friend and work companion, Klaus: the world is less scary because of your love and friendship. A book of any sort, and surely of any worth, is always a collective effort. It has been an immense privilege to bring this volume to light with the help, optimism, and grace of those involved.

Part One:
Night Lights

Chapter 1

**Mermaids, Werewolves, ‘Humanimals’
and Unnamable Monsters:
A Review of Monsters in Contemporary
Literature of the Latin American
Southern Cone**

Jorge Antonio Sánchez Rivera

Boston University

Abstract: Monsters, though marginal characters that are seen as the “abnormal Other” in the arts have become axial in contemporary literature, for they connote much more than what they typically denote. In other words, monsters can be read as metaphors of “something” that is more directly related to the reader and their interpretations than to the image itself. They are ambiguous beings and literary tropes capable of revealing extraliterary topics that are central to Latin American cultures and societies. Historically, from Fuentes’s *Vlad* to Donoso’s *Boy*, multiple monsters have allowed us to explore reality through the perspective of the Other, particularly in gothic, fantastic or uncanny literary genres. In this chapter I will consider contemporary literature of the Southern Cone to discuss various portrayals of the monster. Is monster as metaphor still an effective literary tool that prompts a new way of approaching life? Do these entities open space for criticizing normative ideologies of the human being and their world? What issues in our current society are unveiled and addressed through the presence of the monster in contemporary literature? These are some of the questions that will be dealt with by examining and analyzing the topics of local legends, androcentrism, sexual violence, entities who defy scientific categories, and anthropocentric knowledge

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Jorge Antonio Sánchez Rivera is originally from San Juan, Puerto Rico. He is a PhD candidate of Hispanic Language and Literatures at the Romance Studies Department of Boston University. Jorge's research interests include contemporary Latin American literature, the fantastic, gothic, and uncanny genres, and Latin American narratives that explore violence, feminism, animal studies and posthumanism.

Olivia Holloway is Assistant Professor of Portuguese at the U.S. Military Academy (USMA, West Point, NY). In addition to teaching at USMA, she serves as an academic advisor, study abroad coordinator, and Officer in Charge of the Portuguese Forum. Her research interests include embodied activism through capoeira, as well as learners; resilience in second language acquisition. She coordinated the inaugural West Point Conference on Language, Culture, and Military in 2023.

Lina Angulo Amaya is a PhD student in Spanish Literature and Cultural Studies. Their research focuses on transfeminist anti-racist activism and the metaphor of the monster in Colombia, where they were born and raised. They've been working non-stop as a Spanish teacher, first at Universidad de los Andes and now at Georgetown University. With a commitment to Disability Justice, their ethic is one of community care, rest, and work boundaries.

Lisa Viviani is a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at Western University, Canada. Her dissertation explores the Bad Boy archetype in American and Italian adolescent romances. Fascinated by the literary portrayal of evil, her research interests range from vampire evolution in horror fiction to Latin American detective novels. Born and raised in Italy, she is a hopeless romantic, a cat lover with a soft spot for dogs, and an addict to sugar and karaoke nights.

Fabio Andrade is an Assistant Professor of Film at Vassar College, with a PhD in Cinema Studies from New York University, and an MFA in Filmmaking from

Columbia University, with a CAPES/Fulbright fellowship. He specializes in Latin American and Afro-Luso-Brazilian cinema and video art. He is also an artist, with works in sound, music, and video for theatrical projection and gallery exhibition.

Andrea Garza Erdmann is a PhD candidate in the Romance Languages and Literatures Department at Harvard University. Her dissertation focuses on contemporary Mexican literature pertaining to violence and human rights. She is interested in the modes in which quotidian violence is displayed and perceived through literary texts and other media. Andrea's research interests also include oral histories, Cuir theory, testimonio, decolonial theory, immigration, media studies, and horror.

Andrea Tinnemeyer teaches courses in Latinx literature, magical realism, detective fiction, and the Harlem Renaissance at The College Preparatory School in Oakland, California, USA. Dr. Tinnemeyer was an assistant professor at Utah State University. Among her publications are a recent chapter on Gabriel García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* as detective fiction, articles on early Black detective fiction (published in *Mean Streets and Clue*), and *Identity Politics and the Captivity Narrative after 1848*.

Elisabetta Rodio is a PhD student in the Romance Studies Department at Cornell University, and her interests include animal studies, ecocriticism, horror-literature and posthumanism. Her current research aims to analyze the representation of animal labor in Latin American literature and arts, to discuss the ethical claims proposed by literary works in relation to the political regulations of the time in regard to animal welfare, and ultimately to reconsider the implication of non-human workforce and labor.

Carlos A. González is a PhD candidate in the Romance Languages and Literatures Department at Harvard University. They specialize in Spanish and French literature, concentrating on Disability and Queer narratives within global horror, Weird, and other speculative fictions, such as in their recent chapter "Goremands: Human Cannibalism and Eating the Other in Contemporary Fiction." They live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, with their partner, their shih tzu, and the creature that lives under their bed.

Velebita Koričančić is an Assistant Professor at Anahuac Mexico University's School of Communication and an Adjunct Professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, focusing on Latin American Studies. She worked at the Ministry of Culture for the Government of Mexico City (2016-2018) as a liaison with international authors and a content editor for the Zócalo International Book Fair. A candidate in Mexico's National Research System since 2023; she is also a literary translator (Croatian/Spanish).

Elzbieta Skłodowska is the Randolph Family Endowed Professor of Spanish. A native of Poland, she specializes in contemporary Latin American literature and culture, with a focus on Cuba. Her book in progress is titled *Alternative Lineages: Contemporary Cuban Women Writers and Artists*. She is also at work on various projects dealing with the representations of the sugar plantation in Caribbean literary and visual arts.

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