



Latin American Literature Today

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The Gothic Feminism of Mariana Enriquez

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ESPAÑOL

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The fourteenth issue of *Latin American Literature Today*

features dossiers dedicated to the dislocated writing of Latin American authors based in the United States and the gothic fiction



March on the Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Photo: Matias Jacobi, Unsplash.

What is it about the fiction of Mariana Enriquez that makes the whole world, book market and academics included, like it so much? Or, even better: what makes readers become addicted to her poetics? This type of phenomena—I can find no better word to describe it—is ever less frequent in world literature. A woman, in this case from Argentina, who writes strange, unsettling horror stories, starting from a political and aesthetic commitment that has had such an international repercussion that it brings to mind the Latin American Boom, in feminist and terrifying form. Her stories of monsters, ghosts, witches, sick people, and crazed women leave the reader with no escape route, as if they were mirrors, warped and out of focus, that show the invisible *Other* in their reflection, just as they illuminate our most sadistic and repressed side. These are stories that speak of fear as the intimate driving force of our lives—and the intimate is always political—of the extreme violence of neoliberal capitalism, of the vulnerability of children, women, the sick, and the lower classes in the disciplinary, hyper-consumerist, normative, and patriarchal society of the twenty-first century. And Enriquez achieves all this with an ambiguous, stark, coarse, and crude language that bombards us with uncomfortable questions: How does the gothic speak to us about the real? How can the well-known and familiar become strange and dangerous? To what extent do neoliberal politics bring about the appalling precarity of social classes and individuals? Does our apathy make us complicit? Is fear political? How many forms of violence run rampant with impunity in the present day? How do they affect women? What is the price of a body? Do all lives have the same worth? And death, how much is death worth?

I will concentrate on two books of short stories by Enriquez, *Los peligros de fumar en la cama* [The dangers of smoking in bed]

of Mariana Enriquez, plus reflections on writing in a second language by Fabio Morábito, an interview with 2019 Alfaguara Prize winner Patricio Pron, and exclusive translation previews from Guadalupe Nettel, Gabriela Wiener, and Luis Alejandro Ordóñez.

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BOOK REVIEWS

La casa de Moravia by Miguel Huevo Mixco (<http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/may/la-casa-de-moravia-miguel-huevo-mixco>)

Lyric Poetry Is Dead by Ezequiel Zaidenweg (<http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/may/lyric-poetry-dead-ezequiel-zaidenweg>)

(2009) and *Things We Lost In the Fire* (2016), in order to explain the singularity of her fiction, which we might synthesize in the militant use of the gothic, permeated by feminism and necropolitics. Indeed, one of the most fertile readings that has yet been undertaken of her fiction starts from the gothic, a genre that has garnered a great deal of visibility and critical appreciation in recent decades (*i.e.* Botting, Ellis, Patrick, Stevens, Williams, Gross, Mighall, Punter, and Byron, among others). The gothic was born in the English language in the eighteenth century, with Walpole, to name tales of mystery and fear that transgress reason, common sense, and the positive order of the world. For a long time, it was considered elitist (protagonized by upper-class characters and set in opulent castles), escapist (appealing to a “beyond” that shuns the present), normative (vindicating a logocentrism that condemns the unknowable and the strange), and barbaric (it is no coincidence that the word “gothic” comes from the people called “Goths,” and cannibalism and violence are two of its recurring themes). Then, starting in the 1970s, the social meaning of the gothic was renewed in view of its political vision, based on the idea that the ominous is integrated—if hidden—in our ideology and everyday existence. But it would not be until the start of the twenty-first century that this new reading would attain global success thanks to TV series, comics, and bestsellers like *Millennium*, *Twilight*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Walking Dead*, *Stranger Things*, and many more, which have filled our imaginations with monsters, zombies, vampires, mutants, ghosts, cyborgs, and other supernatural beings that coexist with us in a sort of global-gothic world. But what is the cause of this resurgence and predominance of the gothic in recent years? Is this enormous symbolic production around evil a response to economic crises and the implementation of ever-more-savage neoliberal policies?

Turning to Latin American literature, we observe that the gothic has borne relatively little fruit, often considered a subgenre within the fantastic, science fiction, or magical realism (see Brescia, Negroni, Braham, Díez Cobo, Casanova-Vizcaíno, and Ordiz). In the specific case of the River Plate tradition, there are important precursors such as Quiroga, Cortázar (who even wrote the famous “Notas sobre lo gótico en el Río de la Plata” [Notes on the gothic in the Río de la Plata]), Onetti, Felisberto Hernández, Silvina Ocampo, and Alejandra Pizarnik. Even so, the genre was almost completely pushed to the margins of the canon, considered minor and a colonial imposition. Nonetheless, in the twentieth and twenty-first century it has called the attention of critics, since many members of the latest generation of Argentine fiction writers (Oliverio Coelho, Selva Almada, Hernán Ronsino, Pedro

zaidenweg)

Luces de emergencia
by Oswaldo Estrada
(<http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/may/luces-de-emergencia-oswaldo-estrada>)

Cuentos de ida y vuelta: 17 narradores peruanos en Estados Unidos by Luis Hernán Castañeda and Carlos Villacorta
(<http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/may/cuentos-de-ida-y-vuelta-17-narradores-peruanos-en-estados-unidos-luis-hernan-casta%C3%A1n-casta%C3%B1eda-and>)

Diario en ruinas (1998-2017) by Ana Teresa Torres
(<http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/may/diario-en-ruinas-19982017-ana-teresa-torres>)

Americana by Pedro Medina León
(<http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/may/americana-pedro-medina-le%C3%B3n>)

Una casa llena de gente by Mariana Sáñez
(<http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/may/una-casa-llena-de-gente-mariana-s%C3%A1nchez>)

Ojo de agua by Verónica Zondek
(<http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/may/ojo-de-agua-ver%C3%B3nica>)

Mairal, Luciano Lamberti, and Samanta Schweblin) have revitalized literary horror as a critique of Argentine politics: of the military dictatorship, of the State's abuses, of the ecological apocalypse, of femicides, of the uncontrolled power of cartels and drug traffickers, etc.

Among them all, Mariana Enriquez stands out with her own flickering light. Influenced by the works of Stevenson, Poe, James, Lovecraft, Bradbury, Silvina Ocampo, and Stephen King, she takes up the North American gothic and deterritorializes it toward an Argentine setting and toward Argentina's history, drawing on a feminist perspective that revises and broadens its meaning. Already in 1976, Ellen Moers had coined the term "female gothic" to refer to women writers who cultivated this genre as a subversive space in which to display the social and political oppression of women, the confinement of their bodies, the marginalization of their work, and the impossibility of their expressing their sexual freedom. The rejection of maternity, approached via the supernatural (i.e. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, 1818), as well as the image of the young woman who is simultaneously a victim and a monstrous killer, became tropes in the works of well known women authors such as Ann Radcliffe, Kate Chopin, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose tutelary shadows fall over the poetics of Mariana Enriquez. But, in my opinion, she goes further, developing what we might call a "gothic feminism" that proclaims the empowerment of women, building upon the sinister, as a process of subjectivization. That is to say: the disturbing is within subjects, within ideology (not outside the house, not under the bed: inside) and within bodies divided and marked by social class, ethnicity, and gender. Enriquez places feminism's struggle against capitalism in the foreground, given the impossibility of gender equality without class equality, through a gothic that opens up to more complex interpretations, in which women and marginalized classes, rendered ghostly, become dangerous harbingers of horror, even while being the most vulnerable and castigated subjects under capitalism.

In effect, Enriquez's short fiction is populated by women suppressed by patriarchal necropolitics: lesbian teenagers ("The Inn"), girls both sexual and cruel ("The Intoxicated Years"), sufferers of anorexia ("No Flesh over Our Bones"), self-mutilated schoolgirls ("End of Term"), women who are raped, satanic, etc. All represent "nomadic subjects" (Braidotti), rendered precarious and placed in crisis, who find in the practice of violence a path to emancipation and protest against the true enemy: capitalism and the middle-class neoliberal family that reproduces it. So, the articulation of a univocal female community is an *ecporia*

zondek)

Memorias de un basilisco by Gonzalo Lizardo

(<http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/may/memorias-de-un-basilisco-gonzalo-lizardo>)

Derrota de mar by

Marco Antonio Murillo

(<http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/may/derrota-de-mar-marco-antonio-murillo>)

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because—as if positioned within a materialist feminism—the problem of class permeates the problems of women, preventing a true sisterhood, as is illustrated in “La Virgen de la tosquera” [The virgin of the pit], a story in which bourgeois teenage girls seem to fight over a man when what is really at stake is class struggle: the war against his girlfriend, Silvia, a vulgar, common, dark-skinned girl. All of this is added to the deconstruction of subjugating courtly love, and to the sacralization and sublimation of sex, crystallized in the many women who dominate, objectify, and consume men in her stories.

That being said, the plot that offers the most radical feminist reading is, without a doubt, “Things We Lost in the Fire.” The motivation behind the story is a series of femicides whose victims are burned with alcohol, which leads a group of “burning women” to set their own bodies alight, subverting beauty standards and fighting back against the discipline imposed upon their bodies by patriarchal society: they are no longer burnt up by men, but rather by themselves. The women who immolate themselves in the purifying ritual of fire draw attention to their own scars as a feminist victory, standing up to chauvinist violence, stepping up and publicly displaying their deformed and mutilated bodies: “They have always burned us. Now we burn ourselves. But we won’t die: we will show our scars.” The female body no longer disappears; rather, it (over)exposes its anormal materiality as proof of the distinct “pedagogies of cruelty” (Segato) it has suffered. Thus, resistance is body politics, and its goal is empowerment through control of the body, which becomes a dissident political subject (an allegory of movements like NiUnaMenos or the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) in order to articulate women’s sovereignty: a new ideology, a new way to fix the value of the body, of life, and of death.

On the other hand, Enriquez’s fiction also enters into dialogue with the deeply rooted tradition relating “illness and literature” (Foucault, Sontag, Guerrero, Giorgi), with stories of necrophilia, cannibalism, satanic rites, anorexia, social phobias, etc. Her women protagonists are sick (or sickened) by the yoke of motherhood (“An Invocation of the Big-Eared Runt”), social conventions (“El mirador” [The overlook], “Ni cumpleaños ni bautismos” [Neither birthdays nor baptisms], “The Neighbor’s Courtyard”), deformity (“Adela’s House”), or modern-day witchcraft (“El aljibe” [The cistern], “Spiderweb”), appearing not only as victims but also as victimizers in a blatantly “necropolitical” system. I adopt this term from Achille Mbembe, who uses it to define the way in which states regulate death in the Third World (femicides, the sex trade, disappearances,

kidnappings, drug trafficking, etc.). For her part, the Mexican activist Sayak Valencia proposes the category of “gore capitalism” to interpret the modes in which Latin American subjects and their bodies are disciplined: especially the working classes, which are allowed both to die and to kill. This process thereby generates a violence, both symbolic and material, that produces disease, precarity, and death.

Since Esteban Echeverría’s foundational 1871 work “The Slaughter Yard,” Argentine literature has offered plentiful examples—Arlt, Lamborghini, Chejfec, etc.—of the representation of forms of violence. However, not until the expansion of global capitalism did Argentine literature reveal the new horrors placed before us by necropolitics. With Enriquez, literature invokes social ghosts that recall recent Argentine history—immigrants, homeless children, slum-dwellers, and others who lead excluded, precarious lives that don’t matter—aestheticized in tales of true political horror like “Under the Black Water,” “El desentierro de la angelita” [The little angel’s disinterment], “Rambla Triste” [Sad Rambla], “Chicos que vuelven” [Kids who come back], “Cuando hablábamos con los muertos” [When we talked to the dead], and the particularly biting “The Dirty Kid,” which tells of the effects of both drug trafficking and witchcraft (a pregnant addict sacrifices her children to “San La Muerte”) in harsh urban neighborhoods, like the Constitución barrio of Buenos Aires.

In this way, her stories—kafkaesquely prophetic—function as revisions of systems like neoliberalism, positivism, and the society of reason, not only through their subject matter, but also through their form, with the use of two highly Jamesian narrative techniques: secrecy and mystery. That which is unseen and unsaid constitutes the story’s meaning, an opaque truth that each reader (re)assembles in their own way.

Enriquez’s writing is therefore often in the first person, both singular and plural, and extraordinary elements enter into this fiction through the sense of smell (“El carrito” [The cart]), hearing (“Dónde estás corazón” [Where are you, darling]), taste (“Carne” [Meat]), sight (“Ni cumpleaños ni bautismos”), and touch (“Los peligros de fumar en la cama” [The dangers of smoking in bed]). Enriquez seems to imply that the feminine/feminized sixth sense is the only one capable of revealing the “invisible” (Merleau-Ponty) in a bodily and ideologically disciplined social mass that does not realize that the true horror is within the real: within the self.

In short, Mariana Enriquez reads Argentine society with a feminist lens that evinces the structural violence imposed by necropolitics,

class inequality, and gender. Virgilio Piñera said that Kafka was a *costumbrista* writer in Havana; we might suggest, with Enriquez in mind, that the gothic is a *costumbrista* genre in Argentina. And in the rest of the ever-more gothified and gorified world. This type of story-action creates enlightened, involved readers, and this, in my view, makes her fiction necessary.

Translated by Arthur Dixon

Visit our Bookshop page to buy books by Mariana Enriquez and support local bookstores. (<https://bookshop.org/lists/number-14>)



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Arthur Dixon works as a translator and as Managing Editor of *Latin American Literature Today*. His translation of Andrés Felipe Solano's "The Nameless Saints" (*WLT*, Sept. 2014) was nominated for a 2014 Pushcart Prize, and his most recent project is a book-length translation of Arturo Gutiérrez Plaza's *Cuidados intensivos* (see *WLT*, Sept. 2016).

Recommended Reading:

"I See Myself as a Latin American Writer": An Interview with Mariana Enriquez ([/en/2020/may/%E2%80%99Ci-see-myself-latin-american-writer%E2%80%9D-interview-mariana-enriquez](http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/may/%E2%80%99Ci-see-myself-latin-american-writer%E2%80%9D-interview-mariana-enriquez))

"Nuestra parte de noche: Reading Mariana Enriquez and the Problems of the Political" by Marcelo Riosco ([/en/2020/may/nuestra-parte-de-noche-reading-mariana-enriquez-and-problems-political-marcelo-riosco](http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/may/nuestra-parte-de-noche-reading-mariana-enriquez-and-problems-political-marcelo-riosco))

"Building Mariana Enriquez: Ten Theses" by Pablo Brescia ([/en/2020/may/building-mariana-enriquez-ten-theses-pablo-brescia](http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/may/building-mariana-enriquez-ten-theses-pablo-brescia))

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"The Exorcisms of Mariana Enriquez" by Pablo Brescia (/en/2020

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"Skopos: The Inexistence of Coherence and the Impossibility of Defining

Fidelity: A Theory of Translation of the Work of Mario Bellatin" by David Shook

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