



Space and Language of the Cruel: Interrelational Affectivity and the Material in the Context of Contemporary Gothic Latin American Writing

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I bring together the theoretical frameworks of critical posthumanism, new materialisms and affect theory in an attempt to elucidate the agency of the material, specifically of space, in the new reconfigurations offered by the posthumanist decentring of the Human. Attending to a focus on literary language, the paper explores two short stories by female Latin American authors, therefore exploring critical posthumanism in the context of contemporary Gothic literature rather than the more common themes of the environmental or technological Other. It will be seen that an attention to materiality unveils the porosity characterising the borders between the different ontological categories, thus rendering them subject to the possibility of being infiltrated. Exploring contexts of haunting and the uncanny, instances of intrusion will serve as an illustration of not only the material quality of affect but also the new entanglements where space gains agency as a producer of meaning.

KEYWORDS: Critical posthumanism; New materialism; Affect; Latin American Gothic; Space; Agency



INTRODUCTION

Along with most of the recent scholarship surrounding critical posthumanism and affect theory, this paper aims to enlighten how these two theoretical frameworks complement each other in their decentring of the human away from the Humanist conception of it as “an independent entity that is alienated from its socio-ecological surroundings” (Ibrism 398). It will be seen that the chosen texts feature a web of affective relations in which all the ontological categories are materially embedded, following the theoretical premises of new materialisms which entail “nothing less than a thorough rethinking of the fundamental categories of Western culture” (Alaimo and Hekman 17). In fact, the growing interest in corporeality and the body as ontological categories was brought to the spotlight through authors like Donna Haraway, Karen Barad or Cary Wolfe, who relevantly worked together with the rise of critical posthumanism (Gaard 115). Within this theoretical context, Latin American literature, particularly Gothic texts, prove to linguistically engage with the body in ways these authors were exploring.

As Carmen A. Serrano explores in *Gothic Imagination in Latin American Fiction and Film* (2019), the Gothic mode gains traction during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when foreign Gothic texts became more and more popular (Serrano 2). Latin American authors, who were mostly familiar with the genres of fantasy and magical realism, began to create “a hybrid and subversive mode that combines transnational forms with local anxieties and myths” (Ordiz 262). Therefore, in relation to the theoretical lens of critical posthumanism, it is observed that contemporary Latin American Gothic’s use of corporeality strives away from the technological other (as is the norm in other Gothic modes such as the one found in American science fiction). Instead, the sources of horror can be found in a realist setting where fantastic situations may arise. Consequently, as it will be seen throughout this article, the separation between ontological categories, and between real and fake, becomes almost impossible to discern. The aim of this article, then, is to explore this particular manifestation of posthumanist horror and its exploration in a corporeal language of cruelty. Focusing on Latin American contemporary literature, I will center my analysis in two recently published short story collections by Mariana Enriquez, *Un lugar soleado para gente sombría* (2024), and Samanta Schweblin, *El buen mal* (2025).

The reason why I have chosen these texts is, primarily, their affinity with the Gothic genre and the type of language that these two authors employ. Having extensively studied their writing elsewhere, what transpires the most from their linguistic style is an acute attention to materiality and a recognition that, precisely because materiality is at the foreground, bodies will inevitably affect and be affected. Affectivity, then, is not understood as a feeling, but rather a bodily sensation, as Ben Anderson states, “[th]e emergence and movement of affect, and its corporeal expression in bodily feelings, create the transpersonal life that animates or dampens space-times of experiences” (736-737). In fact, it is an integral part of the recently coined concept of New



Materialisms, as it explores agency and affective links between sentient and non-sentient elements. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost describe it as an “insistence on describing active processes of materialization of which embodied humans are an integral part, rather than the monotonous repetitions of dead matter from which human subjects are apart” (8). Consequently, materiality is proven to serve the posthumanist project of denying the Human category’s isolation from the nonhuman.

Moreover, affective links between human and nonhuman materialities further demonstrate this embeddedness, that is, the porous limits between them. As I mentioned earlier, it is these two authors’ particular writing style that appropriately conveys the web of affectivities in which the ontological categories participate. I have chosen to name it a ‘language of the cruel’ due to its specificity to the Horror and Gothic genres to which the authors largely belong to, but it is relevant because it highlights corporeality and materiality as permeable. Therefore, in these books’ cases, the focus on the material specifically highlights how easy it is for ‘something’ to get in. In other words, porosity is extensively explored, but mostly as a threat and a source of anxiety for a Human category that is wrongly believed to be isolated from the nonhuman.

More specifically, from the aforementioned collections, I will focus on Schweblin’s “Bienvenida a la comunidad,”¹ and Enriquez’s “Un lugar soleado para gente sombría.”² In “Bienvenida,” affective relations will be explored in the context of the uncanny, as a very familiar space will become uncanny for the protagonist after her suicide. As a result of this shift, the affects moving across bodies and space, will change accordingly, which is explored mostly through the material traces of her inconclusive suicide. Differently, “Un lugar” follows a more classical trope of haunted spaces, as the protagonist goes on to explore a ritual taking place at a haunted hotel in Los Angeles. Additionally, she will also undergo haunting experiences around the city as she deals with the death of her boyfriend, whom she still feels around. Intertwining collective and personal experiences of haunting, both stories feature a web of affectivities where the human and nonhuman meet at a material level. Consequently, space is understood as an example of agentic materiality, as it is both a locus where affectivities flow and a producer of such affectivity.

“BIENVENIDA A LA COMUNIDAD” – THE POSTHUMAN UNCANNY

The concept of the uncanny has been extensively explored by authors, starting from Todorov and Freud as some of the firsts (Landais 237), to contemporary studies of Gothic literature. It has become one of the most accurate terms to describe the tension between reality and fiction (Landais 238) within the setting of Horror, as it depicts the intrusion of ‘something else’ in the normal reality of the characters, rendering it both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. The concept of uncanny is an appropriate way to describe this story’s plot, because the protagonist will start to feel estranged from her

¹ From now on, “Bienvenida.”

² From now on, “Un lugar.”



surroundings when she somehow comes back to life after she commits suicide by drowning herself on the lake. As a result, the limits between life and death, as well as human and non-human, are destabilised as she tries to navigate what was once familiar through new types of affectivities resulting from her 'death.' Starting from the negation of her suicide's effectiveness, the blurred limits that are consequent to the event directly attack the separation between the human and the other, therefore questioning Humanism's proclaimed exclusivity. In other words, what should be underwater is now walking on the surface and therefore space is no longer what it was before this new subjectivity's emergence and the new consciousness attached to its presence.

For the purpose of this paper, however, the transgression of boundaries will be observed as it is represented through a language of the cruel and in relation to space due to the relations of affectivity between the human and the non-human. Therefore, it presents an analysis of the posthuman uncanny that does not focus so much on the limits between reality and fiction, but on the porous borders between the different ontological categories. Taking a look at language, it is important to note its link to affectivity as it uses an emphasis on materiality to describe negative affects, thus enhancing the story's Gothic and Horror elements. Consequently, it also contributes to the blurring of the Human category as it spills into and is therefore affected by other ontological categories.

In "Bienvenida a la comunidad," the protagonist commits a suicide that goes, surprisingly, unfinished. After she purposely makes herself drown, she reopens her eyes to realise that she has not faded into quiet oblivion, as she expected, but is instead able to go back to the real world as if nothing happened. Except, she does not feel the same as before and, consequently, neither does the world around her. It will be seen that the protagonist acquires a new type of subjectivity characterised by its posthumanly relational nature signalled by the constant material signs of what occurred still hanging on to her body, as well as her new affecting relations with a previously familiar space. The main characteristic of this new subject that has emerged is its material embeddedness, as it affects and is consequently affected. It aligns with Rosi Braidotti's recognition of the posthuman subject as one that is primarily relational, which is backed up by her previous studies on new materialisms. She defines it as one that rests "on an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the nonhuman" (Braidotti 44), a theory she will later develop further with the concept of nomadic subjectivity. As for this new subjectivity, the protagonist's new becoming is better comprehended after her conversation with her neighbour, after which she is able to understand their condition. Once again returning to a posthuman language, the protagonist uses a metaphor where limits between the human and nonhuman are transgressed in order to define the new subjectivity that has emerged after her suicide, "somos dos simios vestidos, las manos cuelgan dentro de los baldes" (Schweblin 24). Able to participate in her own life but with the awareness of being something else, the new posthuman subject is forced to deal with new affectivities with other people as well as with space.



In her description of her own house as now a simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar space, she uses a posthuman language in order to explore its role in the web of affectivities between the family. She uses the term 'porosity' to explain the house's agency, "me gusta esta casa por su porosa capacidad de absorbernos en sus cuartos" (Schweblin 14). Later on, she furtherly expands on the house's relevance in the family's relations, "pronto la casa reabsorbe a sus habitantes en los cuartos, nos suelta de a turnos y nos vuelve a atrapar" (Schweblin 21). It is, therefore, understood that the space takes effective part in how the family members interact and affect each other, being able to separate or reconvene them. Once the agentic role of space has been stated, taking into account the mother's state of in-betweenness, the house acts as an appropriate bridge. Not only between life and death, but also between the human and non-human, which has become more relevant after her recent suicide and her becoming something other than human.

In fact, it is struggling to navigate this in-between state between life and death that she starts to feel estranged in her own home and in her own town. When she gets back to the house, right after her suicide, she starts listing all of the things that apparently look the same, "encuentro la orilla de piedras tan vacía como siempre [...] Las ojotas están todavía en el pasto, tal y como las dejé" (Schweblin 11). Nonetheless, this sense of familiarity soon proves itself to be fake, especially when she interacts with objects related to her act of suicide and therefore stir a certainty type of affectivity related to its incompleteness, "no estoy segura de si tomar esas cartas es una buena decisión, ni siquiera estoy segura de si tomarlas de esta mesa es tomarlas de la misma mesa en la que las dejé un rato atrás" (Schweblin 12). The aftermath of the event has caused her to question the objects within her own house, as she doubts this space being the same as it was before. Her own status as intruder in her own home affects the familiar space she navigates, as the limits between life and death, human and nonhuman, are blurred across shared materialities.

Another way in which this porosity has consequences on a material level, is the finding of certain physical traces of her death. Through these instances of intrusive materiality, the protagonist is not fully allowed to go back to her human life as it was before. These traces are indeed there to continue to defy the objective of separating herself from what she did and therefore maintaining her Human identity. The tension caused by interconnectedness between the human and the nonhuman is what creates the effect of the uncanny, particularly in the way language focuses on materiality when describing the web of affectivities as it shifts by means of intrusion. For example, when the protagonist is speaking to her daughters, they cannot help but notice their mother's smell of putrid (Schweblin 12), obviously due to her recent drowning in the lake. Similarly, she finds herself out of place as she performs actions which used to be regular and normal. Cooking breakfast for her family is now a challenge to her humanness, as even this seemingly simple task questions whether she is alive or not, "me acuerdo del miedo que tengo de dejar de batir" (Schweblin 13). The uncanniness felt inside the home brings her to think of this reality as an illusion which could shatter at any point



thus returning her at the bottom of the lake, drowned. However, despite her changed affectivity and consequent consideration of space, the day seems to run its normal course, “el silencio de las nenas dando sus primeros bocados [le] ayuda a calmar[se]” (Schweblin 13). A familiar scene, such as the family eating in silence, helps her calm down and ease herself back into this new reality. It is this tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar matches the previously provided definition of the uncanny.

Moreover, given the posthuman nature of her estrangement, it is possible to undertake a deeper analysis of how language creates a posthuman uncanny where the human is no longer at the center but rather physically embedded in a web of affective relations. In fact, the way she describes her new self is definitely tied to space as she says, “Si Tonel es un viajero experto en nuevos territorios, yo soy esa mujer anclada siempre en el mismo lugar” (Schweblin 13). The house seems to be an entrapping place according to this description but, simultaneously, her material link to the house is also what is keeping her ‘alive.’ After her suicide, the way she made her way back to her humanity was by returning to her previous life and learning to navigate this in-between situation by anchoring herself to her house and neighbourhood.

Consequently, by the end of the story it can be seen that a new type of subjectivity emerges through the porosity across the material borders between ontological categories, one that is able to exist in a posthuman framework of thinking. It is not dead nor alive, in the traditional Humanist sense of the word. The subject’s deeper connection with the nonhuman defies strict limits between ontological categories through instances of flowing affectivity that manifest themselves in shared materiality. It is affected by the space it inhabits as much as it affects it in turn, thus making it uncanny. Uncanniness springs from the new reconfigurations emerging from the suddenly unavoidable interconnectedness between categories, providing space and the material with an agency to affect and produce meaning. This has been identified in the story through a language of the cruel that focuses on materiality to describe the uncanniness of the house after the protagonist’s suicide, thus making it complicit to its intrusion.

“UN LUGAR SOLEADO PARA GENTE SOMBRÍA” – THE POSTHUMAN HAUNTED

Moving on to the context of Gothic hauntings, critical posthumanism offers a materialist view on the nonhuman’s intrusion within other ontological categories. Thinking of this experience as one of porosity, not only is the Human declared an embodied and embedded category but also succeeds at placing a threat to its identity as possibly within. In “Un lugar,” haunting is explored both as a collective and a personal experience, therefore offering different instances of haunted affectivity as it flows across the human and the nonhuman. The protagonist undertakes an investigation of a haunted space, the Cecil Hotel, where a serial killer was believed to perform his last crime. However, whilst doing this, she is forced to also visit other places where she spent some time with her now deceased lover, therefore experiencing other instances of a much more personal haunting. Therefore, the notion of haunting will help illuminate



how these webs of affectivity, in the Gothic narrative, agentially involve space and the material.

Starting with the collective haunting related to the alleged murder of Elisa, it will be seen that space's agentic materiality renders borders between ontological categories porous and therefore ready to be affected. Elisa's murder together with previous others, have rendered the Cecil Hotel a 'haunted space.' It is described as "conocido no solo por tragedias, suicidios, crímenes y demás, sino porque ahí se alojó durante un tiempo el asesino serial Richard Ramirez" (Enriquez 103). The space's identity, therefore, is affectively tied to what has happened in it. A space acquires the identity of haunted when something that was meant to be gone, instead, comes back. As Ayesha Ejaz Khan describes it regarding *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), it is simultaneously related to the subject and to the space, "this woman is haunted by the idea of a place and is threatened by the fact that what she was buried in has returned with a spectral existence" (48). According to this description, haunted spaces align with critical posthumanism in the blurring of limits, between alive and death, or between human and nonhuman. More importantly, the main event allowing the haunting is the act of intrusion, as observed in "Bienvenida" in relation to the uncanny space. Considering the different ontological categories as materially embedded in a web of affectivity, the consequences of the haunting will then undeniably have a physical impact across bodies.

This is most clearly represented by the episode of the water in the hotel. Not only is the space presumably haunted by the ghosts of the victims, but after Elisa's death, it is discovered that the guests have also consumed water contaminated with biological remains from the victim. The water tank where her body laid, undiscovered for two months, was the source of the all the running water in the hotel, "Elisa se pudo flotar en el tanque y los huéspedes la bebieron" (Enriquez 103). That is, the separation between the alive and the dead is completely denied through conditions of material porosity which are clearly localised in space. Therefore, a certain agency is given to the material, understanding agency as "an enactment, a matter of possibilities [...] for reconfiguring entanglements" (Ibrisim 235). This reconfiguration is seen in the porosity and flowing affectivity along its material consequences, reiterating the fact that the Human is not safely isolated from the nonhuman as its permeable materiality betrays it.

Apart from this, however, the material also plays a role in creating new relations of affectivity by using space as an agentic element. Every year since Elisa's death, a group of fanatics reunites at the water tank to perform a ritual and try to contact Elisa, which is the act that the protagonist is there to investigate. They believe Elisa's spirit to be trapped in the water (Enriquez 105), and therefore want to communicate with her occupying the very space where she was last seen alive. In this case, the haunting space does not produce affects of fear and anxiety. Instead, for most of these visitors, it is seen as an opportunity to communicate, a door that has not quite been closed yet. Space, then, is both an affected and affecting agent, acquiring the capability to produce meaning.



The identification of space with something that is no longer there but somehow remains, or comes back, is the exact point where critical posthumanism, new materialism and affectivity connect. The figure of the ghost, to which Elisa's sought out presence can be associated, has the possibility to represent the consequences of porosity between the different ontological categories, as it allows in something that should not be there and therefore shifts the affectivities. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle recognise this when they state that "[t]he notion of the ghost unsettles all distinctions between being alive and being dead, the real and the unreal, the familiar and the unfamiliar" (40), attesting to the in-betweenness associated to this figure.

However, in the case of the identified language of the cruel and its attention to materiality, the ghost is not simply seen as an incorporeal presence that remains in-between with little physical power. Instead, the story will give Elisa's spirit a space on the material level. First, because her bodily remains have infiltrated the water, but also by making her able to materially communicate with the fanatics as she partially re-occupies the space of the water tank. This is seen at the end of the last ritual shown in the story, when there seems to be an effective communication with Elisa's ghost. The material consequences of what seems to be Elisa's presence in the water tank are once again connecting space with affect through the trope of haunting, as her movements are then felt by the people participating in the ritual.

The protagonist describes this instance of contact with the nonhuman as an undeniable case of intrusion and porosity, "Algo se movía adentro y golpeaba las paredes de metal [...] Cuando estuvo cerca de mí, lo sentí venir, dejé de pensarlo como una cosa y lo pensé como Elisa. Sentí sus puños" (Enriquez 120). It was a momentary intrusion of the dead into the world of the living, but it was enough to demonstrate that the Human is not isolated from other categories precisely due to its embeddedness in the material. It is through space's shared materiality with the human that the affectivity is able to move across bodies.

However, as mentioned earlier, this story presents two different views on haunting, as there is one collective haunting as well as the protagonist's personal haunting experiences as she treads through the city of Los Angeles unable to separate it from her experiences with Dizz before he died. In fact, she refers to the city as one of the "lugares que duelen" (Enriquez 106). This language provides non-sentient materiality, as is space, affective capacity that is usually tied to alive elements, therefore reiterating its agency in the web of affectivities where the ontological categories are embedded.

In this case, the haunting is related to a particular trauma experience by the character, and it results in the constant re-emergence of Dizz's presence through instances of material traces that trigger this phenomenon. As Ibrisić rightly underscores in the study of possible links between critical posthumanism and trauma affectivity, understanding the traumatised subject as actively relational illuminates the very feeble boundaries between the human and nonhuman due to their materiality. Building on Braidotti's aforementioned relational subject, Ibrisić considers materiality



"not as firmly attached to a sealed-off conception of the mind, the body and the world, but as a creative exploration of a human and more-than-human alliance" (233). Therefore, space remains an interest element whose agency within the web of affectivity gains relevance in a posthuman view of haunting.

For example, the protagonist initially chooses to stay at the Baltimore Hotel during her stay in Los Angeles, giving it centrality. However, it is also the hotel where she used to spend her time with Dizz. In fact, one of the nights she stayed there, she found a strand of hair resembling that of Dizz's, thus unchaining a series of memories related to him and the space, "recordé como había bañado a Dizz en una habitación más pequeña que esta pero en el mismo hotel" (Enriquez 111). Following other memories specifically located in the hotel and in the city, the affect grows too strong and the protagonist has to leave.

In fact, she comes to the conclusion that the hotel management probably has a CCTV recording of Dizz's final moments before dying, once again linking his identity and materiality to that of the hotel's. Due to this web of affectivity, the hotel is not just a neutral space where events take place, but a producer of meaning in as much as it is capable of quite literally holding "los últimos momentos de Dizz" (Enriquez 112). In fact, the protagonist goes as far as to imagine what this video would have looked like, once again clearly locating within the space of the hotel, "lo imagino golpeándose la frente contra el espejo, el tic nervioso a la derecha de los labios, su parpadeo, los pantalones negros" (Enriquez 112). It can be seen that there continues to be a special attention to materiality as well as space, furtherly aiding the consideration of affectivity as bodily feelings.

Throughout both collective and personal experiences of haunting, it has been seen that the limits between not only life and death but also across all ontological categories are blurred. As previously observed in "Bienvenida," it is the materiality of the web of affectivities that renders these borders porous and therefore denies the isolation of the Human. Looking specifically at space, the materiality, foregrounded by the language of the cruel, gives it the agency to produce meaning through instances of haunting where it becomes more than a locus and, instead, a trigger of new entanglements. What should be gone is back, occupying space, and giving it an affective role, thus denying the isolation between categories.

CONCLUSION: NEW ENTANGLEMENTS AND SHARED MATERIALITY

Employing the theoretical frameworks of critical posthumanism, new materialisms and affect theory, a certain narrative and thematic pattern has been found in the chosen texts. The authors' language of the cruel, that is, its attention to the material as the channel through which the different ontological categories (mainly) negatively affect each other, collaborates with critical posthumanism' decentring of the Human category.



By making possible the intrusion of the dead into the living, not only are the borders between ontological categories revealed to be porous, but new subjectivities and affective configurations are constructed. Particularly looking into the element of space as a producer of meaning, it has been observed that materiality allows the human to affect space and vice versa. Uncanny and haunted spaces, in these stories, are both affective and affected elements physically embedded along with all the other categories. In other words, the shared materiality renders the different ontological elements capable to affect and be affected, including space itself.

In “Bienvenida,” the reverberation of uncanniness, represented through language reiterates the notion of reciprocity identified in the web of affectivities. Materiality renders all categories equal in their possibility to be affected and therefore subject to the possible intrusion of an unwelcome ‘something else,’ as it happens with the protagonist herself since she should not be back in the world of the living after her suicide. In fact, the material traces of what she did make it impossible for her to regain a sense of normalcy, and this is felt by other characters as well as space.

The home and neighbourhood, whilst keeping her grounded and consequently alive, are nonetheless becoming a new environment that she will have to learn to navigate. The uncanniness lies in the new entanglements that have been formed after the intrusion, which has been possible due to the shared materiality between the categories, thus denying a definite separation between life and death, as well as between the human and the nonhuman. However, this shared materiality implies that there will never be a definite separation, and so she is not completely back, as shown by the material traces of her underwater death left around the house and on herself.

Similarly, “Un lugar” uses the same type of language and focus on the material to explore instances of haunting which, once again, speaks to the notion of intrusion. In this context of porosity between ontological categories, space has been identified as a producer of meaning in as much as it is capable of being affected as well affect others. The Cecil Hotel is considered to be haunted due to various violent episodes that have occurred within its walls. However, this manifests as more than spectrality, as it is shared across the web of affectivities and, therefore, at a material level.

As it was explained with the water episode and the communication attempts with Elisa’s spirit, space has acquired a new dimension of agency through this haunting given that it not only allows literal porosity (biological traces of Elisa in the water drunk at the hotel) but also works as a vessel of communication with the nonhuman. The shared materiality between Elisa and the water tank due to it being the place of her death make it possible for her to come back and materially interact with space and her fanatics. The intrusion of what is not supposed to be there, according to theory on the concept of the haunted, is possible due to the material porosity in the borders between categories, which denies definite separation.

On the other hand, a more personal take on haunting takes place in the story as the protagonist tries to come to terms with her former lover’s death in the spaces where they spent most time together. Once again, certain material traces and the memories



they trigger, shift the affectivities shared by the various ontological categories and allows intrusion. The Baltimore Hotel, in fact, acquires the capability to trigger certain memories that are very specifically localised in that space due to an acute attention to the material. However, its agency goes further as it can also create moments that have not actually happened and are not therefore stored in the protagonist's memory. This occurs when she imagines a very specific CCTV recording of Dizz's last moments alive at the hotel which she believes could exist but has no certainty of. This capability to create meaning through the relations of affectivity as they flow across bodies is possible due to the shared materiality and its permeability, as haunting allows new reconfigurations and possibilities.

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