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Ugly Feelings in Mariana Enriquez's Short Fiction

In his 'Tesis sobre el cuento', Ricardo Piglia states that 'un cuento siempre cuenta dos historias': one 'en primer plano' and another 'secreta'. According to him, in the modern short story, 'la historia secreta se construye con lo no dicho, con el sobreendido y la alusión'.[1] This proposition can be fruitfully employed to read Mariana Enriquez's *Las cosas que perdimos en el fuego* (2016), where most of the stories feature both a main plotline and a dense background teeming with narrative and affective possibilities, through which we can discern not one but potentially multiple 'historia[s] que se cuenta[n] de un modo enigmático'.[2] Although in his brief essay Piglia focuses on plot, I take his insight as a starting point for an exploration of the rich affective texture of Enriquez's stories, of which a distinctive quality is their unnerving and disturbing 'feeling tone'.[3] Given Enriquez's well-documented aesthetic of political horror it is not surprising that fear and dread are the dominant emotions evoked in her fiction; after all, the author herself has stated in interviews that, rather than a genre, 'el horror es una emoción'.[4] And yet there is considerable depth and complexity to the affective resonances of her stories, in terms of both the emotional content portrayed in them and the readerly solicitation staged through the narratives' formal and stylistic qualities. Giving a slight twist to Piglia's thesis on the double nature of the short story, I argue that, diegetically, an Enriquez story is rarely simple or one-dimensional, and neither is its feeling tone: her stories interweave a constellation of 'ugly feelings' that range from fear—that most prominent 'vehement passion'—and its accompanying affects (shock, dread) to distinctively noncathartic emotions such as uneasiness, shame, and disgust, whilst also exploring the

[1] Ricardo Piglia, 'Tesis sobre el cuento', in *Teorías del cuento*, ed. Lauro Zavala, 3 vols (Mexico City: UNAM, 1993), I, 55-59 (pp. 55, 56, 57).
[2] Piglia, 'Tesis', 57.
[3] I refer to Sianne Ngai's formulation of 'feeling tone': 'a literary or cultural artefact's […] global or organizing affect, its general disposition or orientation towards its audience and the world' (*Ugly Feelings* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P, 2007], 28).
[4] Enriquez in Favio Lo Presti, 'Temor y temblor, los nuevos cuentos de Mariana Enríquez', *La Voz,* 12 May 2016<https://www.lavoz.com.ar/ciudad-equis/temor-y-temblor-los-nuevos-cuentos-de-mariana-enriquez> (accessed 3 September 2020).

paradoxical ugliness of moral emotions such as compassion.[5] Both the *historias visibles* and the *historias secretas*—potential, *no contadas*, merely suggested, not explicit—brim and overflow with affective intensities in Enriquez's universe. This article explores how the above-mentioned negative emotions are articulated in *Las cosas que perdimos en el fuego*, with reference to 'Bajo el agua negra', 'Tela de araña' and 'El chico sucio'. It is through the synergies between these ugly feelings that the aesthetic and political potency of Enriquez's fiction is fully realised.

Enriquez and 'the weirdly horrible tale'

Critics have variously defined Enriquez as a writer of 'Gothic feminism' (Gallego Cuiñas), 'political horror' (Bustamante), or '*weird*' literature (Amaro), but that her fiction is identified with horror, and that this genre is 'affectively defined' (Clasen), are hardly contestable propositions.[6] In his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, H. P. Lovecraft inaugurates the modern reflection

[5] A distinction between 'affect' and 'emotion' is often made in recent theory, particularly in those approaches influenced by Brian Massumi. Like other critics, however, I use these terms more or less interchangeably in the present discussion, although I broadly keep to Rei Terada's understanding: 'by *emotion* we usually mean a psychological, at least minimally interpretative experience whose physiological aspect is *affect*. *Feeling* is a capacious term that connotes both physiological sensations (affects) and psychological states (emotions)' (*Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the 'Death of the Subject*' [Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2001), 4). I appropriate Ngai's concept of 'ugly feelings' somewhat liberally throughout this paper. With the phrase she refers to 'minor', 'noncathartic', emotions that would not comprise 'grander passions' such as fear (*Ugly Feelings*, 6). There is no room for a detailed discussion of terminology here, but the 'passions' refer us to a pre-modern framework that predates the widespread use of the term 'emotions' in the 18th century. For a discussion of fear as an aesthetic emotion, see Philip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions* (Princeton UP, 2002).

[6] See Ana Gallego Cuiñas, 'El feminismo gótico de Mariana Enríquez', *Latin American Literature Today*, 1:14 (May 2020) <http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/es/2020/mayo/el-feminismo-g%C3%B3tico-de-mariana-enr%C3%ADquez-de-ana-gallego-cui%C3%B1as> (accessed 3 September 2020); Fernanda Bustamante, 'Cuerpos que aparecen, "cuerpos-escrache": de la posmemoria al trauma y al horror en relatos de Mariana Enriquez', *Taller de Letras*, 64 (2019): 31-45; Lorena Amaro, 'La dificultad de llamarse "autora": Mariana Enriquez o la escritora *weird*', *Revista Iberoamericana*, LXXXV, 268 (2019): 765-812. On horror as affectively defined, see Mathias Clasen, *Why Horror Seduces*, Oxford Scholarship Online (Oxford: OUP, 2017), Chapter 1.

on the 'weirdly horrible tale as a literary form' by noticing its inseparability from fear, 'the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind'.[7] In his view:

> [W]e must judge a weird tale not by the author's intent, or by the mere mechanics of the plot; but by the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point. […] The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim.[8]

Thus, according to Lovecraft, this triggering of high arousal ('profound sense of dread') and fascination ('subtle attitude of awed listening') are intrinsic characteristics of the weird tale — they are not dependant on an individual reader's feelings but constitutive of the genre, for which 'the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation'.[9] A similar point is made by Philip Fisher in his discussion of 'key passions' that 'determine genres or literary kinds', among which he considers the gothic novel as 'a form generated by the experience of fear': 'By describing fear, it induces fear in its reader or in an audience by means of step after step of graduated doses of fear.'[10] The reader or audience-oriented solicitation of emotion as *the* integral part of the genre's demarcation is also highlighted in two

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[7] H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Project Gutenberg Australia (2006), I: Introduction, 1st paragraph. Mark Fisher argues that the weird tale is different from both fantasy and horror fiction (*The Weird and the Eerie* [London: Repeater, 2016], 8-9, 16), although Lovecraft's essay is a common starting point to discussions of both horror and the weird. An elucidation of the separations between the two is not the main aim of this paper –arguably, Enriquez's short fiction straddles both modes (with the uncanny and the eerie also appearing), and the weird's very slipperiness and resistance to definition would render such rigid borders problematic in any case. In what follows I settle for Lovecraft's formulation of the 'weirdly horrible tale' as appropriate to 'Bajo el agua negra'. For the purposes of my analysis, I accept Clasen's proposition of horror as 'the umbrella term, a category that encompasses those kinds of fiction that are *designed to instill negative emotions such as anxiety and fear in their audiences*' (*Why Horror*, Chapter 1, emphasis added). It is this capacious definition of horror that I adopt here.

[8] Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror*, I: Introduction, 7th paragraph.

[9] Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror*, I: Introduction, 7th paragraph.

[10] Fisher, *The Vehement*, 8-9.

recent studies grounded on different theoretical perspectives: in her Deleuzian approach to horror film, Anna Powell notes how formal aspects of cinematography are 'used to arouse physical sensations and to "horrify" the viewer'.[11] For his part, drawing on an evolutionary approach grounded on cognitive science, Mathias Clasen states:

> Horror fiction typically is *designed* to draw us in and keep us engaged. It does so by drawing up a recognizable fictional universe […]; giving us an 'anchor' in the fictional world (one or more characters from whose perspective we experience story events and/or with whom we can empathize); and exposing that anchor to nasty events. This structure allows for audience transportation, that is, it allows audiences to project themselves into the fictional world and feel with and for the protagonists.[12]

It is clear that many of Enriquez's stories satisfy the Lovecraftian categories of the 'weirdly horrible tale' and are scaffolded in accordance with the basic affective structure of 'horror fiction' defined by Clasen. The stories of *Las cosas que perdimos en el fuego* do feature a 'recognizable fictional universe' (a literary representation of specific areas in Argentina, often in and around Buenos Aires, within specific and well-defined socio-historical coordinates); an 'anchor', which is generally a female protagonist and focalizer; and a series of 'nasty events' that range from mysterious disappearances (a term loaded with political significance in the Argentine context) attributable to equivocal causes, to full-blown supernatural occurrences such as metamorphosing houses and demonic entities.

At the same time, the three elements neatly defined by Clasen are dense in connotations in Enriquez's fiction. Firstly, the 'recognizable fictional universe' is never simply a neutral setting where disturbing events take place: at the core of Enriquez's stories there is often a question about *agency*, which is expressed, inter alia, in houses, neighbourhoods, and a fictionalized Buenos Aires vibrating with supra-personal affective forces and intensities stemming from a problematic

[11] Anna Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film*, Edinburgh Scholarship Online, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005), Introduction.
[12] Clasen, *Why Horror*, Chapter 2.

past and present. Enriquez' reappraisal of the Gothic motif of the haunted house is well established and much could be said about it; in the context of this essay, it is relevant to point out that, in her fiction, ugly feelings arise from an ugly past: negative affects 'stick'—in Sara Ahmed's memorable formulation—around unresolved collective issues, haunting presences and haunting absences.[13] As I will discuss shortly, areas such as Villa Moreno and the Riachuelo in 'Bajo el agua negra', the Constitución neighbourhood in 'El chico sucio', or the Paraguay/Argentina border in 'Tela de araña' are affective environments, with the 'anchor' intermeshed in webbed relations through which the stories' multiple (not necessarily only dual, pace Piglia) diegetic and emotional foregrounds and backgrounds are constituted. Secondly, in Enriquez the 'anchor' interacts with the affective forces teeming through the 'recognizable fictional universe' in ways that either enhance a given atmosphere or introduce some dissonance that renders the feeling tone of a story even more disquieting. Part of the horror in 'El patio del vecino', for example, ensues from the fact that the protagonist's sense of guilt and pity towards (what might be) a boy next door turn out to be the *wrong* emotions to have. As I discuss below, although in general fear as a narrative emotion does not admit distraction—it is often the prevalent affect in the *historia visible* and captivates us in that 'subtle attitude of awed listening' noted by Lovecraft—in Enriquez the object of fear is often slippery, ambiguous, or manifold. This is because the third point mentioned by Clasen, those 'nasty events' to which the 'anchor' is exposed, are rarely singular or self-contained: even when the main plotline focuses on one anecdote, Enriquez's writing often suggests a great deal of distressing scenarios just simmering

[13] I agree with Pablo Brescia that 'la matriz de la desaparición nutre casi todos los cuentos de Enríquez' ('Mariana Enríquez en construcción: diez tesis', *Latin American Literature Today,* 1:14 (May 2020) <http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/es/2020/mayo/mariana-enr%C3%ADquez-en-construcci%C3%B3n-diez-tesis-de-pablo-brescia> [accessed 3 September 2020]). Bustamante focuses on the concepts of *desaparición* and *desaparecido* evoked in the author's short fiction ('Cuerpos que aparecen', 39-43), an issue also explored by Marie Audran, 'Resistencias corpopolíticas en Argentina: monstruos femeninos levantándose contra la desaparición', *Revell, Revista de Estudos Litérarios da UEMS*, 3.17 (2017), 76-96. For the idea of emotions as 'sticky' see Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2014).

beneath the surface; scenarios whose presence is felt in myriad ways but only briefly hinted at or suggested through 'lo no dicho, […] el sobreentendido y la alusión'.[14] The overall affect working through her writing is therefore not only fear, but a generalised sense of disquietude that emerges from the interactions between the stories' various elements through specific formal and stylistic choices.

'Bajo el agua negra'

A story that features a demonic cult and an undead body, 'Bajo el agua negra' follows the pattern of the 'weirdly horrible tale'. The main settings of the story are Villa Moreno, in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, and a polluted river adjacent to it, the Riachuelo, where the body of a teenager has 'disappeared' at the hands of the police. The tale is told by a third person narrator but focalized by the protagonist, district attorney Marina Pinat. Through her eyes, we learn of the normalised police corruption in the area; she suspects that two teenagers from the *villa*, Emanuel López and Yamil Corvalán, have been throw by police officers into the Riachuelo— 'el río más contaminado del mundo'—where they died.[15] Yamil's body eventually appears, but Emanuel's is still missing at the start of the story, and Pinat sets out to find it and to see that the officers responsible for these deaths are charged with the crime. The story proceeds by accumulation of intensely negative situations, in which the slippage from the ordinary to the supernatural is gradual: almost imperceptible at first, the occult becomes progressively more palpable until it engulfs the diegetic world. The reader's increasing trepidation gives way to dread and horror as we move through a succession of dysphoric scenarios: extended police brutality; pollution of the

[14] Piglia, 'Tesis', 57. Both Emanuela Jossa —with her notion of 'cuentos oblicuos'— and Fernanda Bustamante point to this allusive quality of Enriquez's fiction. See Emanuela Jossa, '"Los huesos son un asunto político'. Los cuentos oblicuos de Samanta Schweblin y Mariana Enríquez', *Les Ateliers du SAL* 14 (2019): 156-168; Bustamante, 'Cuerpos que aparecen'.
[15] Mariana Enriquez, *Las cosas que perdimos en el fuego* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), 164. All subsequent references are to this edition; page numbers will be given parenthetically.

environment to the point of inhabitability; extreme social deprivation leading to violence, no-go zones and (possibly) abject madness; a demonic cult; a body that is both dead and alive.

Let us have a look at the opening lines:

> El policía entró con la mirada alta y arrogante, las muñecas sin esposar, la sonrisa irónica que ella conocía tan bien: toda la actitud de la impunidad y el desprecio. Había visto a muchos así. Había logrado que condenaran a demasiado pocos. [...] Odiaba la oscuridad de ese edificio centenario y odiaba todavía más que le tocaran los casos de los empobrecidos barrios del sur, casos donde el crimen siempre estaba mezclado con la desdicha. (155)

It is through the perspective of our 'anchor' that the whole story is conveyed. Our access to Marina's consciousness, thoughts, feelings and sensory experiences facilitates the phenomenon of empathetic perspective-taking that is central to the aesthetics of horror.[16] Throughout the text, Marina's perspective situates us spatially, an extremely significant detail given the politics of location that are central to the story, and which are markedly affective, as the quoted passage makes clear. The use of internal focalization thus provides a framework for the events of the story to be evaluated from an emotive and political standpoint. At crucial times, focalization also facilitates the detailed description of bodily affects and physical sensations felt by Marina. All these aspects aid in the conjunction of character's and reader's feeling that is fundamental to the workings of horror, as I explore below.

The *historia visible* in 'Bajo el agua negra' can be read through the lens of Marco Caracciolo's enactivist approach. Drawing on Monika Fludernik's concept of 'experientiality' —

[16] Marco Caracciolo defines empathy in narrative fiction as a 'simulative mechanism': 'a form of imaginative engagement where people "enact" the emotional experience that they, at the same time, attribute to a fictional character' (*The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* [De Gruyter, 214), 66). For a discussion of narrative empathy, see Suzanne Keen, 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy', *Narrative*, 14. 3 (2006), 207-236.

which designates narrative's 'quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience'—and on the model known in the mind sciences as enactivism with its focus on 'experience, embodiment and interaction', Caracciolo's study sheds light on the way in which our engagement with narrative makes visible a continuum between the sensory imaginings, emotional responses, moral and aesthetic judgements, and socio cultural evaluations cued by fiction.[17] Although there is no space here for a sustained engagement with his model, some of his insights seem apposite to discuss Enriquez: clearly, 'Bajo el agua negra' invites readers' strong reactions within the domains mentioned above, and its potency, as well as the effectiveness of the horror twist, rests on the intense 'experiential "feel"'—a formulation used throughout Caracciolo's study—it provokes in its readers. In addition to narrative devices such as the use of internal focalization, a number of structural and stylistic choices contribute to this: the creation of suspense, and the meticulously timed insertion of the supernatural in the narrative; the rich use of description, evaluative adjectives, and sensory imagery; as well as Enriquez's extremely effective use of syntax and diction to convey emotional inflections. All of these are discussed in what follows.

'Bajo el agua negra' is divided into five sections. The first sets out the suspected crime and the disappearance of Emanuel's body, as well as exposing the generalised state of police corruption and the extreme deprivation that prevails in Villa Moreno and other slums adjacent to the polluted river. As Enriquez has stated, the *cuento* is based on a real and well-known case of police brutality in Buenos Aires.[18] As far as the details of the crime are concerned, she appears to invent very little: Ezequiel, a youth that in reality does die at the hands of the police, becomes Emanuel, the undead figure of a dark cult in the story. The policeman's incriminating words in the fiction—'Asunto solucionado, aprendieron a nadar' (156)—echo the real policeman's words as reported in a newspaper: 'Naden, naden. No van a hinchar más las pelotas'.[19] The high levels

[17] Caracciolo, *The Experientiality*, 8 and passim.
[18] Elisa Navarro, 'Las obsesiones de Mariana Enríquez', *Zero grados*, 13 January 2017, n.p.; <http://www.zgrados.com/las-obsesiones-mariana-enriquez> (accessed 3 September 2020).
[19] 'El tema del domingo / El crimen del Riachuelo: ayer encontraron ahogado al muchacho que era buscado desde el sábado de la semana pasada', *Clarín*, 22 September 2002, n.p.;

of the Riachuelo's toxicity are also not Enriquez's contrivance: the river's infamous status as the most polluted in Latin America is well documented, and it was listed as one of the 'the world's ten most polluted places' by *Time* magazine in 2013.[20] As an extratextual referent, the Riachuelo therefore stands as a material site for environmental and social injustice, an imbrication that Enriquez suggests from early on in the story: 'La autopsia estableció que el chico [arrojado al agua por la policía] había intentado nadar entre la grasa negra' (157). This first section of 'Bajo el agua negra' therefore establishes what in my reading is both the *historia visible* (a crime story that eventually turns into a horror tale) and a number of much broader historias—of toxicity, deprivation and police violence—which are organically intermeshed with the horror story but also exceed it, both affectively (amplifying the ugly feelings that run through the former, especially fear and anxiety) and ontologically, spilling over the page of the Lovecraftian tale and into the reader's own world.

As Caracciolo points out, narrative structure can function as an expressive device that solicits an emotional reaction from readers—a point made earlier by other critics such as Keith Oatley and Patrick Hogan.[21] With curiosity, shock or surprise, suspense is one of such reactions, prompted by the ordering of key information in the plot, by the moment in which events are revealed to us. In 'Bajo el agua negra', suspense is first triggered by the policeman's words that close the first section: 'Ustedes no tienen idea de lo que pasa ahí adentro. Ni idea tienen.' (158) The ambiguity in the statement, paired with the chiasmic repetition that stresses the point, invite a desire, on the reader's part, to know the information that is being so conspicuously withheld.

<https://www.clarin.com/sociedad/oficial-ordeno-tirar-ezequiel-amigosriachuelo_0_HytTAmeCFg.html> (accessed 3 September 2020).

[20] Bryan Walsh, 'Matanza-Riachuelo, Argentina', *Time*, 4 November 2013 <https://science.time.com/2013/11/04/urban-wastelands-the-worlds-10-most-polluted-places/slide/matanza-riachuelo-argentina> (accessed 3 September 2020).

[21] Caracciolo, *The Experientiality*, 44. See Patrick Colm Hogan, 'Affect Studies and Literary Criticism', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2016), 1-32 (p. 2, 9) <https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-105> (accessed 3 September 2020).

Instead of providing a direct answer, the second section of the story then expands—always from Marina's perspective—on the appalling levels of pollution in the river:

> [L]os hijos de las familias que vivían cerca de esa agua, que la tomaban, aunque sus madres intentaban quitarle el veneno hirviéndola, se enfermaban, morían de cáncer en tres meses, horribles erupciones en la piel les destrozaban brazos y piernas. Y algunos más, los más chicos, habían empezado a nacer con malformaciones. Brazos de más (a veces hasta cuatro), las narices anchas como las de felinos, los ojos ciegos y cerca de las sienes. (159)

The movement from a realist to a fantastical register here is short-lived but decisive, while the level of sociological detail in the subsequent paragraph—which alludes to the religious practices (or lack thereof) in the *villa*—intensifies both the 'reality effect' (Barthes) and our appreciation of the alarming social conditions in the area. These two factors enhance the unsettling effect of the '"mutaciones"' allegedly suffered by the poisoned children (159), the first instance of the narrative dipping into 'the weirdly horrible'. This section introduces another character, the priest Francisco, and closes with a structural parallel that repeats the effect of the first section's ending by leaving the reader with an enigma, regarding the precise nature of the 'oscura desesperanza' that, according to Marina, afflicts the priest (159). This second section, therefore, amplifies the generalised sense of disquietude introduced in the first: things are profoundly wrong in the diegetic world, both in the generalised background, and in relation to the specific 'nasty events' that configure the plot of the *historia visible*. A sense of apprehensive anticipation is being carefully laid out.

After the expansive function of the second section, we are back into the present moment of Marina's investigation. A pregnant teenage girl from the *villa*—a character whose description resembles the mother of 'the dirty boy' from the first story in the collection—pays Marina a visit. She claims that Emanuel is now living in the *villa* having returned from the polluted water after two weeks: 'Volvió del agua. Siempre estuvo en el agua' (161). The supernatural element now fully enters the story and 'Marina sintió un escalofrío' (161). Marina's comments about the girl's

testimony—'había algo en la historia que sonaba extrañamente real, como una pesadilla vívida' (162)—has an echo of affective self-reflexivity on the perturbing effect of the very story we are reading. At this point, Marina has a nightmare:

> Durmió mal, pensando en la mano del chico muerto pero vivo tocando la orilla, en el nadador fantasma que volvía meses después de ser asesinado. Soñó que de esa mano se caían los dedos cuando el chico se sacudía la mugre después de emerger y se despertó con la nariz chorreando olor a carne muerta y un miedo horrible a encontrar esos dedos hinchados e infecciosos entre las sábanas. (163)

The figuration of a 'chico muerto pero vivo' is no longer a vague proposition: his vivid, palpable, detailed description invites a visceral reaction on reader's part, highlighting the corporeal pre-eminence of the affects evoked here: horror and disgust, a constellation typical of Enriquez, which we are cued to recreate in our own embodied imagination.[22] I detect an echo of Borges (which is given an Enriquezian sinister turn) in the image 'se despertó con la nariz chorreando olor a carne muerta', which potently brings an object from the dream (here, a foul smell that is so strong it is conveyed through a haptic sensation) into the wakeful state of the protagonist, disturbing the separation between both realms. The mention of Marina's 'miedo horrible' fits in with another characteristic of horror fiction noted by Clasen: the descriptions of protagonists' fearful reactions, which the readers are cued to replicate through a mechanism of emotional contagion.[23] The high 'experiential "feel"' of the narrative in combining 'sensory imaginings, emotions, and socio-cultural evaluations' throughout,[24] always from Marina's perspective, is substantially intensified from this section onwards, sealing our engagement with the horror tale.

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[22] Different theoretical approaches can shed light on the process of embodied simulation involved in fiction reading, for the fact that thought, imagination and cognition are embodied is well established from anthropological, philosophical and neuroscientific perspectives. For a Deleuzian understanding of the embodied nature of cinema as an aesthetic experience, see Powell, *Deleuz*e. Embodied simulation is central to Caracciolo's study (*The Experientiality,* 132 and passim).

[23] From the evolutionary perspective that underpins his study, Clasen explains: 'Such a transfer of emotion from character to reader is possible because humans have an adaptive capacity to mirror the emotional states of other humans, including fictional ones' (*Why Horror*, Chapter 3).

[24] Caracciolo, *The Experientiality*, 51.

The fourth section traces Marina's taxi journey through the city towards Villa Moreno. Structurally, this part increases suspense by deferring the actions of the main plot, serving instead to describe a detailed and multi-layered environment that conveys the other story: not the *visible* Lovecraftian horror tale but the *historia* of social and political injustice, as well as ecological destruction, that is intermingled with the former. When they arrive in Villa Moreno the taxi driver refuses to enter; he is 'asustado, sinceramente asustado' (165) because, Marina explains, nobody 'se acercaba a la Villa Moreno a menos que fuera necesario. Era un lugar peligroso.' (165) As it happens often in Enriquez, the ambiguity of the fear-inducing object leads to a slippage between the natural and the supernatural that increases the intensity of the emotion. There are parallels here with 'El chico sucio', where the equivocality of that which causes fear enhances the unnerving feeling for the reader: there is nothing supernatural about the accompanying phenomena of high deprivation and high criminality that would render a specific area in a big city particularly dangerous. Yet the possibility of an occultist cause—merely (if powerfully) suggested in 'El chico sucio' but already fleshed out by this point in 'Bajo el agua negra'—juxtaposes this explanation with a more ordinary fear, such as that of being robbed. The effect of this slippage is an intensification of dread given that the specific nature of the threat cannot be pinned down or domesticated. Just before entering the *villa*, Marina steps onto the bridge over the river. The detailed visual description of the space as seen by the protagonist, accompanied by strong sensory descriptions involving proprioception and smell, increase the granularity of the scene and hence its 'experiential "feel"'. On the one hand, this facilitates our enactment of both the character's consciousness—including her emotive states—and of narrative space.[25] On the other, the bridge stands as a threshold (geographical, social, and ontological, as it signals a space occupied by the demonic) that the character is about to cross, and so our emotional involvement in the narrative is highly aroused by the time Marina enters the *villa.*

[25] See Caracciolo, *The Experientiality*, 104.

The final section of the story opens with a sense of eeriness that is made more powerful through the painstaking enumeration of everything—sounds, food stalls, people, stray dogs—that is *not* there. This last section is the longest and it is filled with perceptual, sensory details, with the plot adopting the classical pattern of the horror tale through the increasing build-up of fear and anxiety. After Marina is followed by 'uno de los chicos deformes' (167), whose *weird* appearance is described minutely, she enters the church and from that point a stronger presence of the occult is made evident. The apparently incoherent inscription on the church walls is an invocation of Lovecraft's deity Yog-Sothoth, with the wording borrowed from *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*: 'Yi-nash-Yog-Sothoth-he-lgeb-fi-throdog'.[26] A second direct Lovecraftian reference is the phrase 'En su casa el muerto espera soñando' (169), the adapted 'translation' of a fictional invocation to the titular god from the *The Call of Cthulhu*: 'In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming.'[27] Firmly into the territory of horror, we witness the priest's suicide; we accompany Marina onto the streets of Villa Moreno where a procession is taking place, and where, despite her repeated and hollow-sounding attempts at a rational explanation, we see the inevitable outcome through her eyes: the 'tamaño humano' of the effigy carried by the procession towards the river, one of whose 'brazos grises' is finally glimpsed by the protagonist, bringing back all the vividness of her nightmare:

> [Y] Marina recordó los dedos de su sueño que se caían de la mano podrida y recién entonces corrió rezando en voz baja como no hacía desde la infancia, corrió entre las casas precarias, por los pasillos laberínticos, buscando el terraplén, la orilla, tratando de ignorar que el agua negra parecía agitada, porque no podía estar agitada, porque esa agua no respiraba, el agua estaba muerta, no podía besar las orillas con olas, no podía agitarse

[26] H.P. Lovecraft, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, n.p.; <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/cdw.aspx> (accessed 3 September 2020).
[27] H.P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu*, n.p.; < https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/cc.aspx> (accessed 3 September 2020).

> con el viento, no podía tener esos remolinos ni la corriente ni la crecida, cómo era posible una crecida si el agua estaba estancada. (174)

The formal elements of this sentence (alliteration, anaphora, repetition, parallelism, polysyndeton, accumulation); its length, which exceeds that of any other in the story (I am not quoting it in full); its crescendo, with mirrors Marina's flight; all these aspects punctuate her desperate attempt to negate what is inescapably before her eyes. These are the textual marks of Enriquez's rhetoric of horror in 'Bajo el agua negra'—they convey the quale of Marina's fear as well as soliciting it from the reader. At the risk of stating a so-called 'fallacy of imitative form', we can see how the quotation presents a feeling of agitation through an agitated style.

The *historia visible* in 'Bajo el agua negra' is thus a horror plot that absorbs the reader's embodied attention intensely. As Clasen explains, horror fiction is not only scary, it is also captivating because it engages a deep-seated 'fear system'—'a watchful, hypersensitive set of mechanisms that prompt us to respond strongly to even ambiguous cues of danger'—and which, 'when we are immersed, does not really care that it's fiction'.[28] And yet, while the emotions of fear and dread pulsate through the *historia visible* at the forefront of 'Bajo el agua negra', there is a greater sense of *disturbance*—a word whose resonances across the mental, emotional and material realms I evoke consciously here—that is entangled with the supernatural in the story, but also with the political and the ecological: it is materially and affectively present in the 'agua agitada' of the last quotation. Although the political aspects of Enriquez's brand of horror have received much commentary, to my knowledge the coexistence of urgent socio-political and environmental concerns in this story have not. Stepping away from the realm of supernatural horror, the river's toxicity can be read as an example of what Jane Bennett calls 'vibrant matter': 'the capacity of things […] not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to

[28] *Why Horror*, Chapter 2.

act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities or tendencies of their own'.[29] Indeed, if we look at the *historia contada de un modo enigmático*, we can detect a position not incompatible with some contemporary voices in ecocriticism and feminist materialism: an acute sense of the intermeshing of human and nonhuman life, objects and forces, and an argument against the illusion of human autonomy from and control of the environment.

The detailed descriptions of the Riachuelo's toxicity articulate an entanglement of material agencies (rather than a 'landscape' or a 'background') that far exceeds the crime and horror story. The insistence on the river's toxicity repeatedly underscores 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle'.[30] The not-subtle effects produced by pollution are, of course, weirded, when they go from illness—'cáncer', 'horribles erupciones de la piel'—to full-blown '"mutaciones"' (159). To an extent, 'Bajo el agua negra' can be read as an example of Heather Houser's category of ecosickness fiction, which she defines as 'a literary mode […] that joins experiences of ecological and somatic damage through narrative affect' and explores 'the connection between environmental toxification and human illness'.[31] The material elements that impact on the water's agentic capability range from 'aceite y […] restos de plástico y químicos pesados' (157), to 'restos de carne y huesos y la mugre que traía el animal desde el campo, la mierda, el pasto pegoteado' (164)—the noxious combination of organic and inorganic matter that causes the 'falta de oxígeno del agua' (164)— to, finally, the suggestion of a demonic entity that has been awakened by the bodies thrown in the river (170). Although the 'restos de carne y huesos' refer to cattle, we are told that not only animal remains but also human bodies have been disposed of in the water. The ambiguity in the dual meaning of *carne* in Spanish is powerfully evoked throughout Enriquez's fiction, often the material elicitor of fear and disgust. Ugly actions, ugly matter, ugly affects and their effects, all converge in the

[29] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 9.
[30] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 6.
[31] Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary US Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014), 1.

vibrancy of the *agua negra*. The story is concerned with the ecosystemic destruction of life at different levels (social, political, spiritual, material and ecological). It is thus no surprise that it conveys (i.e. illustrates as well as imparts) agitation through plot, atmosphere, imagery and language.

Enriquez responds with a 'weirdly horrible tale' to urgent contemporary questions about nonhuman agency: 'How can humans become more attentive to the public activities, affects, and effects of nonhumans? What dangers do we risk if we continue to overlook the force of things?'[32] It is through the aesthetics of horror that the author illustrates the 'enormity of the effects of material agencies that humans can never quite chart and can certainly never master' (Alaimo), reflecting a contemporary understanding of the current environmental crisis as 'fundamentally estranging' (Merola).[33] As ever in literature, the appearance of the monstrous signals an interrogation about the nature and limits of the human—in this story, such interrogation takes the form of a profound ecological questioning about the (in)habitability of the biosphere in the context of our current environmental anxieties. In Enriquez's texts, however, none of these questions can be articulated in a political and socio-economic vacuum: albeit recognizing the agency of the material world, Enriquez would not embrace a concept such as Bennet's 'distributive agency': polluting substances in the river were put there *by* human agents and interests.[34] The toxic river becomes not just the site for the demonic, but also for the material, affective, political, and conceptual intermeshing of the social evils that Enriquez articulates here: police brutality over

[32] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 111.
[33] Stacy Alaimo, 'Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature', in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Alaimo and Hekman, 237-264 (p. 261); on the Anhtropocene as estranging, see Nicole Merola, '"what do we do but keep breathing as best we can this/minute atmosphere": Juliana Spahr and Anthropocene Anxiety', in *Affective Ecocriticism*, ed. Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 2018), 25-49 (p.26). Roger Luckhurst expands on the link between ecocritical literature and the weird: 'Modernity trained human subjects to dominate natural objects. The Anthropocene arrives when this disastrous tactic has defeated itself, the earth becoming an actor again, pushing back against human development, and where humanity has to learn before it is too late to 'share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy'" ('The Weird: a Dis/Orientation', *Textual Practice*, 31.6 [2017], 1041-1061 [p. 1057]).
[34] On distributive agency see Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix and passim.

vulnerable populations (especially deprived youths), exploitation of the environment, abject poverty, and toxic pollution. I am artificially separating these several *historias* for analytical purposes, but of course the *cuento* is made up of all of them at the same time.

Furthermore, the story also *performs* the textual 'mutation' of a literary trope in Argentine literature: instead of the mighty Río de la Plata—the 'río de sueñera y barro' that opens Borges's 'Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires', to name just one iconic example— it centres on its most polluted and degraded tributary stream. The story evokes a passage from Leopoldo Marechal's *Adán Buenosayres*: '—¡El Plata!—declamó Adán exaltado—. ¡El río epónimo, como diría Ricardo Rojas! […] ¡El que no ha escuchado la voz del Río no comprenderá nunca la tristeza de Buenos Aires. ¡Es la tristeza del barro que pide un alma!'.[35] In Enriquez, the idea of the *barro* in the river asking for a soul takes on an occultist, supernatural connotation that also shows the heavy human costs of pollution, poverty, and material degradation: this is the Buenos Aires not of the River Plate and its *barro* from both the Borges and Marechal quotations, but of the Riachuelo and its—literally and symbolically—noxious black water.

I now move on to a brief reflection on 'Tela de araña', which is also concerned with questions about agency and the nonhuman material world, through an emotional register that is markedly different from the one prevalent in 'Bajo el agua negra'.

'Tela de araña'

Not a horror tale, but a study in irritation and uneasiness, 'Tela de araña' is punctuated not by the high arousal of fear, dread or shock, but by a persistent sense of discomfort and menace. The story evokes the mode of the eerie as defined by Mark Fisher, which 'clings to certain kinds of physical spaces and landscapes' and is tied up with questions about 'the way in which "we" "ourselves"

[35] Leopoldo Marechal, *Adán Buenosayres*, edición crítica de Jorge Lafforgue & Fernando Colla, coordinadores (Madrid: ALLCA XX, 1997 [1948]), 136. I am grateful to [] for bringing this to my attention.

are caught up in the rhythms, pulsions and patternings of non-human forces'.[36] More precisely, rather than a 'landscape', the story textualises a 'naturecultural' (Haraway) environment that radiates with vibrancy and activity and is a site of human and nonhuman entanglements, and of affective, political, and ontological interconnections.

The narrative begins as follows:

> Es más difícil respirar en el norte húmedo, ahí tan cerca de Brasil y Paraguay, con el río feroz custodiado por mosquitos y el cielo que pasa de celeste límpido a negro tormenta. La dificultad se empieza a sentir enseguida, ni bien se llega, como si un abrazo brutal encorsetara las costillas. Y todo es más lento: *las bicicletas pasan* muy de vez en cuando por la calle *vacía* a esa hora de la siesta, las heladerías parecen *abandonadas* a pesar de los ventiladores de techo que giran para *nadie*, las chicharras gritan histéricas en sus escondites. Nunca vi una chicharra. Mi tía dice que son unos bichos horribles, unas moscas espectaculares de alas verdes que vibran y te miran con sus ojos lisos y negros. (93)

In only a few lines, the story moves conceptually from the geographical vastness of South America to the eyes of the cicadas. The scalar play—recurrent throughout the text—both points at the more-than-human world in which the human drama at the centre of the plot is enmeshed and underscores its importance. Just like there is not one fixed spatial reference point, time gives the impression of being elastic. The conspicuous lack of human presence in most of these opening lines (suggested in the terms highlighted above and in the initial use of the impersonal *se*) confers a sense of eeriness to the physical space and foreshadows the enigmatic disappearance of the male character in the dénouement of the *historia visible*. Such eerie emptiness is accentuated by the cries of the cicadas 'histéricas' in a high-pitched yet apparently disembodied burst of emotion, with the word suggesting also an undertow of weirded feminised agency. Earlier on, the martial lexis attributed to the natural elements ('río feroz custodiado') anticipates the military presence

[36] Fisher, *The Weird*, 61, 11.

in the area—the past and present political contexts mentioned in the story, with the inescapable ugly feelings arising from them. The collocation 'abrazo brutal' likewise foreshadows the tale of marital aggression that is about to ensue, while juxtaposing it with an atmosphere that is suffocating in a physical sense, a link that is sustained throughout. In short, the overall feeling tone is one of generalised menace, to which even the minute agencies of mosquitos and cicadas contribute. With the image of the cicadas' eyes (vaguely reminiscent of the titular 'Axolotl' in Cortázar's story), the text introduces an idea that resonates with Timothy Morton's thoughts on environmental awareness:

> there is always more than our [human] point of view. There is indeed an environment, yet when we examine it, we find it is made of strange strangers. Our awareness of them isn't always euphoric or charming or benevolent. Environmental awareness might have something intrinsically uncanny about it, as if we were seeing something we shouldn't be seeing, as if *we realized we were caught in* something.[37]

As in other contemporary 'weird fictions', in 'Tela de araña' nature 'refuses the role of passive object', and it vibrates 'with eerie, occluded intent'.[38]

'Tela de araña' is a story about knotty interconnections—some of which are made of barely visible threads, as the title suggests. It is also a story where a hot, sticky climate—'Está pegajoso' (115)—and the sticky affects of vexation, irritation and resentment coalesce. A tale of micro-aggressions by an abusive husband told in the first person by the female protagonist, at the end of which we discern an ultimate act of retribution through *lo no dicho, el sobreentendido y la alusión*, it focuses on that which is apparently small and inconsequential—'lo dejé pasar, como le dejaba pasar cada pequeñez mientras crecía en mi estómago una piedra blanca que le dejaba poco espacio al aire, a la comida' (95)—: minor but unpleasant and highly significant exchanges, granular details, and tiny insects. These are all weaved through the story—the spiderweb—in a

[37] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2010), 58, emphasis added.
[38] Luckhurst, 'The Weird', 1057.

narrative whose immersive quality is underscored by a high degree of experientiality. We read about trappings and entrapments, and discern insinuated plottings (does Natalia, the 'good witch', ensnare Juan Martín into a carefully constructed trap with the suggestion of the trip to Asunción?); there is luring (of Juan Martín, of the reader as we follow the tale); a road trip, a chance encounter; and, finally, a convenient disappearance. Although the *historia visible* is occupied by the central plot of conjugal unhappiness and eerie liberation, the story's texture is made of superimposed narrative and conceptual threads—all adding to the unnerving tone. In what follows, I touch upon the most evident.

First, 'Tela de araña' is about a 'natural' world that teems with vibrancy and far exceeds the narrator's marital drama. In the vastness of this world, life forms come into view and disappear, as we glimpse through the descriptions of insects. The way in which 'things' are interconnected in this story reminds me of Morton's figure of 'the mesh', which in his conceptualisation is synonymous with what he calls the ecological thought: 'The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange. […] The ecological thought imagines a multitude of entangled strange strangers.'[39] Enriquez's minute descriptions of damselflies (98) and fireflies (105) introduce an idea of scale that is 'infinite in size and infinite in detail'.[40] In Morton's thought, 'each being in the mesh interacts with others. The mesh isn't static. We can't rigidly specify anything as irrelevant.'[41] Juan Martín's ostensible contempt for the people, environment and culture of the north is only commensurate with his fear of the natural world around him: 'Juan Martín chilló cuando una araña le rozó la pierna' (94); '¡Me pasó una víbora por el pie!' (105)—reactions that are met with bemusement and quiet disdain by the other characters, but which constantly insinuate a potential change in the dynamics of power and vulnerability throughout the story, triggered by that which at first sight might seem small. At times the text suggests tenuous parallels between human and nonhuman

[39] Morton, *The Ecological*, 15.
[40] Morton, *The Ecological*, 29.
[41] Morton, *The Ecological*, 30.

animals, as in the veiled correspondences between the people who follow the main characters in the Asunción market until they feel 'acosados' and the little fruit flies which 'volaban […] atraídas por la fruta' (100), and in the description of the 'carretilleros' that evokes the busy activity of an ant colony (100). These parallels give the impression that 'there is no static background'[42]—*everything* participates in the construction of the environment in which the characters are entangled. Morton's idea of the 'mesh' as embodying the quality of interconnectedness whilst also meaning 'a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled; a concatenation of constraining or restricting forces or circumstances; a snare' seems apposite to think about this story.[43] As a conceptual figuration, it is useful in illustrating how 'Tela de araña' is constructed: as an entanglement, where the main plot (which is *about* entrapment, as well as performing the enactment of a snare) is interwoven conceptually and affectively with all the other threads that conform the story.

A second signifying thread that configures but also surpasses the main plot is the social dimension of gender violence (a constant preoccupation throughout Enriquez' fiction) palpable, at different levels, in the interactions between the couple; in the references to the narrator's aunt being beaten by a previous partner (94); and in the intimidating attitudes of the Paraguayan military towards the protagonist, her cousin Natalia (99), and the waitress they encounter in the restaurant (103-104). Thirdly, 'Tela de araña' brings into its textuality a clear sense of the history of *longue durée* regarding the geopolitics between Argentina and Paraguay, as well as a history of regional colonialism, exploitation and racial tensions. These are also mirrored in the frictions between Buenos Aires and the northern provinces—exemplified by Juan Martín's contemptuous attitude towards Corrientes (and Asunción)—which echo the dichotomy of civilisation and barbarism that dominated Argentina's cultural debate during the nineteenth and twentieth

[42] Morton, *The Ecological*, 61.
[43] Morton, *The Ecological*, 28.

centuries.[44] Fourthly, the story alludes to a specific historical period of military dictatorships: that of Alfredo Stroessner in Paraguay (in power during the story's present moment) and the 1976-1983 military junta in Argentina (111-112). The reference to Malvinas in the past (108) would situate the story after 1982 (but before 1989 as per Stroessner's dates). These extratextual referents are not quite in the 'background' as directly informing the 'mesh' of the diegetic world.

Finally, 'Tela de araña' also engages with a multifaceted literary imaginary that is rich and profuse in connotations: there are elements of a road novel, and resonances of Horacio Quiroga, but the strongest allusion is perhaps to some aspects of the *novela de la selva*. Among these, the 'relentless bombardment of the senses' through which the jungle overwhelms the urban traveller[45] (of which we read plenty of descriptions in 'Tela de araña') stand out. Likewise, the 'cuentos de caucheros' present in novels such as Rómulo Gallegos' *Canaima* are echoed in the ghost stories told by the truck drivers (111-112), which firmly establish the notion of disappearance in the conceptual world of the story. Indeed, most prominently, 'the motif of the vanishing subject' central to the *novela de la selva*—epitomised in the words that close José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine*: '¡Los devoró la selva!'[46]—is appropriated in 'Tela de araña' under Enriquez's distinctively feminist brand of the eerie.

In Fisher's formulation, 'sometimes a disappearance can be more haunting than an apparition', and the feeling of the eerie arises when 'there is nothing present when there should be something'.[47] The decisive event of Juan Martín's disappearance is in itself absent from the

[44] Both Inés Ordiz and Inti Soledad Bustos call attention to Elsa Drucaroff's concept of *civilbarbaire* (the fusion of civilization and barbarism in the *nueva narrativa argentina*) in their respective readings of Enriquez. See Inés Ordiz, 'Civilization and Barbarism and Zombies: Argentina's Contemporary Horror', in *Latin American Gothic in Literature and Culture*, ed. Inés Ordiz & Sandra Casanova-Vizcaíno (London: Routledge, 2018),15-26, <http://hdl.handle.net/1893/27005> (accessed 4 September 2020); Inti Soledad Bustos, 'Monstruos, muertos y otras historias del borde: gótico y civilbarbarie en "Bajo el agua negra", de Mariana Enriquez', *Boletín GEC*, 25 (2020): 28-43.

[45] Lesley Wylie, *Colonial Tropes and Postcolonial Tricks: Rewriting the Tropics in the novela de la selva*, Liverpool Scholarship Online (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), Introduction.

[46] See Wylie, *Colonial Tropes*, Chapter 2.

[47] Fisher, *The Weird*, 122, 61.

narrative, graspable only through *lo no dicho, el sobreentendido y la alusión*: 'No seas tonta. Si se fue, se fue, me dijo' (115). For Fisher, the eerie is 'fundamentally tied up with questions of agency. What kind of agent is at work here? Is there an agent at all?'[48] This question is certainly posed in 'Tela de araña', but never answered: we can only conjecture that *something* has been done, most likely by Natalia, to make possible the narrator's recurrent fantasy of eliminating Juan Martín, of which we are told in three occasions (101, 108, 111). The fact that it is impossible to establish whether this has been a result of the agencies of the natural world, a supernatural force, a combination of the two—after all, Natalia 'tiraba las cartas, sabía de remedios caseros y, sobre todo, se comunicaba con espíritus' (95)—or an all human intervention (in which the sympathetic 'camionero rubio' [110] might have played a part?) leaves all possibilities open. As befits a narrative preoccupied with the micro scalar, there are numerous detailed descriptions of all kinds of objects, such as Juan Martín's clothes (101), the *ñandutí* embroidery (101), and of course, the natural world. All this abundance enhances precisely what is not there: an explanation surrounding Juan Martín's vanishment. The text merely suggests mysterious correspondences between things that we might not have initially thought of as interconnected:

> Me preguntaba por qué llamarían al ñandutí 'tela de araña'; probablemente fuese por la técnica de tejido, porque el resultado final se parecía mucho más a las colas de los pavos reales, los ojos entre las plumas, hermosos, y al mismo tiempo inquietantes, muchos ojos. (101)

A feeling of surveillance, a snare, an eerie natural world, a handcraft made by Paraguayan women, a self-referential wink to the story's title—this is an example of how 'Tela de araña' is made up of powerful allusions interwoven together. Ugly feelings of uneasiness and menace circulate through all the threads discussed above. In the narrator's eyes, insects range from the strange to

[48] Fisher, *The Weird*, 111. As is evident from my discussion of 'Bajo el agua negra', and unlike Fisher, I do not circumscribe a concern with agency to the terrain of the eerie, but consider it crucial in the realm of the 'weirdly horrible' too.

the unpleasant and the disgusting: the highest emotional point in the narrative is given by an intense combination of fear and disgust involving insects and human excrement (107)—a feeling that, in some readings of emotion, represents the very embodiment of horror.[49] Yet for the most part the tone is one of discontent, irritation, and understated threat: of *bad* things bubbling just under the surface, not too intense and not too explicit but definitely there. Through its textual operations, 'Tela de araña' enacts and solicits a very different set of affects than 'Bajo el agua negra': a feeling of discomfort that is not necessarily synonymous with fear, but which certainly engages and unnerves.

'El chico sucio'

I finish with 'El chico sucio', one of the collection's more powerful stories. The text has commanded a good deal of critical attention, and my brief discussion of it here is not meant to be comprehensive. In a recent article, Marcelo Rioseco reads it from the axis of the weird and the eerie, arguing that the construction of both modes hinges on the power of the abject in the story.[50] While I find Rioseco's reading subtle and convincing, I am interested in probing in more detail the ugly feelings that Enriquez explores. A constant emotion in my discussion so far has been that of disgust, which in Enriquez's fiction is often concomitant with fear, as in the two stories previously addressed. Vivid descriptions of physical revulsion add to the narratives' 'experiential "feel"', allow for emotional contagion through embodied simulation, demand our attention, and —combined with fear— increase the reader's arousal and engagement.[51] In the two stories covered so far, Enriquez dwells on that which we normally find horrific within the constellation formed by fear and disgust.[52] In 'El chico sucio', she centres on dirtiness—and the disgust it

[49] William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1998), 26.
[50] Marcelo Rioseco, 'Lo raro, lo espeluznante y lo abyecto: los espacios liminales del terror en "El chico sucio" de Mariana Enríquez', *Orillas* 9 (2020), 85-97.
[51] As Miller states, 'even as the disgusting repels, it rarely does so without also capturing our attention. It imposes itself upon us' (*Anatomy*, x).
[52] From their very different perspectives (one grounded on evolutionary theory and the other on a cultural approach), both Clasen and Miller would classify rotten flesh (as in 'Bajo el agua negra')

provokes—to delve into the ugly side of emotions we normally find comforting, such as compassion, and to explore the continuum of negative feelings such as revulsion, fear, and shame. In this story, the focus is not only on the visceral and raw drive associated with disgust, but also on what critics such as Laurent Berlant and Sara Ahmed would call the 'cultural politics' of this emotion. As Miller persuasively argues, 'for all its visceralness', disgust 'turns out to be one of our more aggressive culture-creating passions': 'Contempt, disgust, and shame rank us and order us in hierarchies' that are moral, social and political.[53] Enriquez is particularly interested in the last two realms and on the ugly consequences such orderings produce.

The story is told in the first person by a middle-class female narrator who has decided to move into her family home in Constitución, a formerly aristocratic *porteño* neighbourhood that in the present of enunciation is 'marcado por la huida, el abandono, la condición de indeseado' (10).[54] There, she is exposed to economic deprivation, *narcos*, urban violence, and crime; these bring about a sense of danger and threat which is initially perfectly realistic, but whose 'límites de […] verosimilitud son extendidos al máximo', so that an enigmatic, potential dimension of black magic (or a Satanic cult?) is introduced, as Rioseco explains.[55] The narrator becomes very interested in a homeless boy, 'el chico sucio', and in his young, pregnant, addict mother, who shelter in an abandoned building opposite her house. One evening the boy knocks on her door asking for help, which the narrator provides, as his mother seems to have disappeared. Eventually

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and a swarm of insects combined with human faeces (as in 'Tela de araña') as belonging unequivocally to the category of the disgusting. See Clasen, *Why Horror*, Chapter 8 (esp. his discussion of the zombie) and passim; Miller, *Anatomy*, 80.

[53] Miller, *Anatomy*, xii, 202.

[54] The poetics and politics of space are fundamental in this story; although they directly impact on the affective texture of the narrative, I will need to leave this discussion for another time. In her biography of Silvina Ocampo, Enriquez mentions Constitución and notes that 'en ese barrio [Silvina] ubicó uno de sus mejores cuentos' (*La hermana menor. Un retrato de Silvina Ocampo* [Barcelona: Anagrama, 2018], 64). She is referring to 'La casa de azúcar' (published in *La furia*, from 1959), where the house is a central element, like in 'El chico sucio'. It is impossible not to see, in Enriquez's words about Ocampo's 'verdadera obsesión por las casas', a comment that seems apropriate to her own treatment of 'la casa como último refugio y también como el lugar que, cuando se vuelve enemigo, es el más peligroso de todos' (*La hermana menor*, 54-55).

[55] Rioseco, 'Lo raro', 91.

the narrator and the boy's mother have a confrontation that evening, after which the two homeless characters vanish leaving no trace behind. About a week later the body of a gruesomely tortured and murdered boy is found in the neighbourhood. A highly televised police operation ensues, which the narrator and her friend Lala follow obsessively; at first, the narrator fears that 'the dirty boy' is the victim—a suspicion that turns out to be wrong when the latter is identified as a different child, Nachito. Still anxious about the fate of 'el chico sucio'—whom she sees dying violently in her nightmares—, a short while after the crime the narrator runs into his (no longer pregnant) mother. After a confrontation in which the mother first denies that she has children and then shouts '¡Yo se los di!' (32), the narrator returns home, shell-shocked, no longer able to feel safe in her house, expecting to hear the (presumably dead) dirty boy knocking on her door at any moment (33).

The key signifying strategies in the story are accumulation and ambiguity, with the synergies between them resulting in an unnerving feeling tone. As an example, the first section of the narrative is mostly concerned with space and social dynamics, so there is a profusion of details in the description of the house (9) and the street life of the neighbourhood (10-11). The same descriptive proliferation is employed throughout—for example, in the account of the eclectic religious and spiritual practices in the area, which results in the creation of a weirded atmosphere (17-18). Such emphasis on detailed, accumulative description, is evident in the incremental build-up of horrific details about the murder: first, the narrator and Lala learn about a 'chico muerto', who is 'degollado' (22); some hours later the level of grisly detail has increased (two separate stages in p. 22, and then again in p. 26); a few days later, Lala's friend Sarita introduces the notion of rape when telling of a similar murder in El Chaco (29).[56] Unsurprisingly, the same incremental logic underscores an intensification of characters' emotional reactions and

[56] Some echoes of Esteban Echeverría's *El matadero* (1871)—not least the shocking incident of a decapitated boy, and the interplay between cruelty and political vulnerability—are discernible in the story. Enriquez again subtly alludes to a (foundational) literary antecedent and adapts it to Buenos Aires' contemporary world. The slaughterhouse was still located in Constitución at the time of Echeverría's writing (1838-1840). I am indebted to [X] for this observation.

the physical manifestations of those feelings: the narrator first feels that what is happening is 'extraño' (21); then cries (23); and later experiences acute anxiety, horror, and a feeling of guilt, before finally getting drunk and vomiting (23). Shortly after, a paroxysm of emotion is presented in the uncontrollable reactions of Nacho's mother, which are shown on television: 'No se entendía lo que gritaba. Se caía' (25).

This sense of abundance and augmentation —of the details that make up the diegetic world; the degree of awfulness involved in the crime; and the intensity of the characters' reactions to it— jars with a cluster of urgent, haunting absences: the disappearance of the boy, and the equivocality/ambiguity at the core of the story, which derives from all the questions that arise but are never answered: Why have the boy and his mother disappeared in the first place? Can the murdered child be the dirty boy? Could Nacho's story be staged, given that there is a suspicious sense of theatricality around it? Did the dirty boy's mother offer him in sacrifice to a ritual demonic cult —an offering to San La Muerte, whose threatening presence has been noted by the narrator from early on in the story? Is the crime the work of a 'narco brujo' (29)? What did the mother do to him? As Rioseco rightly notes, Enriquez offers no answers, and in this she is 'fiel a la estructura del cuento fantástico rioplatense más tradicional'.[57] The story's effect indeed depends on epistemic uncertainty: the narrator's initial confidence in her knowledge of the workings of the district (10) is soon dismantled by Lala: 'Qué sabrás vos de lo que pasa *en serio* por acá, mamita. Vos vivís acá, pero sos de otro mundo (14). In this same exchange, Lala introduces a supernatural element, which, from this moment, starts percolating through what we thought was a perfectly rational fear–of criminality—on the narrator's part. Importantly, the former never goes away so that the hesitation remains unresolved throughout.

The dynamics between accumulation, absence and ambiguity thus add to the tense pace of the story, to the suspense, and to the mood of apprehension by expanding the realms of possibility, with the high degree of experientiality of the narrative (enhanced by the increasing

[57] Rioseco, 'Lo raro', 91.

heat that amplifies the sense of discomfort throughout), and the extended fear and anxiety providing a classic Enriquezian note that imbues the whole collection. And yet this needs to be read against the grain of a second *historia*, which delves into other powerful emotions such as the disgust, compassion, and shame felt by the narrator at key moments in the narrative. The disquieting feeling tone of the story emerges from the interaction of all these affective undercurrents.

As Rioseco rightly notes, from the title, 'se nos advierte que la suciedad no es un adjetivo sino una categoría'.[58] The first time the boy and his mother are introduced, he is described as follows:

> El hijo debe tener unos cinco años, no va a la escuela y se pasa el día en el subterráneo, pidiendo dinero a cambio de estampitas de San Expedito. Lo sé porque una noche, cuando volvía a casa desde el centro, lo vi en el vagón. Tiene un método muy *inquietante*: después de ofrecerles la estampita a los pasajeros, *los obliga* a darle la mano, un apretón breve y mugriento. Los pasajeros contienen *la pena y el asco*: el chico está sucio y apesta, pero nunca vi a nadie lo suficientemente compasivo como para sacarlo del subte, llevárselo a su casa, darle un baño, llamar a asistentes sociales. (12; my emphasis)

This is the first time a haptic sensation is evoked in the story, inextricably linked to an emotional response of pity and disgust. The brief and grimy squeeze is 'inquietante' because it forces the passengers into a physical contact that is perceived (by them, presumably, as well as the narrator) as defiling. As Miller states, the 'idiom of disgust consistently invokes the sensory experience of what it feels like to be put in danger by the disgusting, of what it feels like to be too close to it, to have to smell it, see it, or touch it'.[59] When the boy forces the passengers to shake his hand, he also breaks the invisibility that is often imposed upon those at the bottom of the social scale.

[58] Rioseco, 'Lo raro', 93.
[59] Miller, *Anatomy*, 9.

Indeed, the whole story plays with the tensions around the (in)visibility and corporality of those who represent 'the embodied indignities of structural inequality',[60] and the anxiety they generate in the narrator's bourgeois sensibility. The boy and his mother are *supposed* to be part of a generic, anonymous and unseen mass: 'esas vidas desdichadas' (19); 'muertos sin nombre' (15); 'un chico de la calle que había desaparecido, como solían desaparecer los chicos de la calle' (26)—according to this logic, they are 'either invisible because contemptible or visible because disgusting'.[61] The boy becomes noticeable for the narrator *because* of the disgust he instils, and immediately after the above paragraph, the adjective 'sucio' will no longer be used to denote a non-permanent state: it becomes the boy's essentialising trait. Crucially, disgust does not appear alone: here it is in tandem with 'pena', introducing a constellation of ugly feelings that will subsequently also incorporate a sense of guilt and shame.

The narrator's irony in noticing the limits of compassion is also telling, for the story probes the limits of this 'moral sentiment'[62] in the context of a deeply unequal society. What 'El chico sucio' appears to highlight is that, as Berlant notes, in 'operation, compassion is a term denoting privilege: the sufferer is *over there'*.[63] The pairing of 'la pena y el asco' above is powerful because it arises from the 'inquietante' shattering of a distance that is supposed to be physical as well as symbolic. Throughout the story, Enriquez throws light precisely on the inequality inherent to the relationship between the narrator and the boy, exploring the uncomfortable asymmetry on which compassion is predicated. After the boy has approached her on the night his mother appears to be missing, the narrator feeds him and clearly expects something in return: 'Tuve ganas de sacudirlo y enseguida me avergoncé. Necesitaba que lo ayudase; no tenía por qué saciar mi curiosidad morbosa. Y sin embargo, algo en su silencio me

[60] Lauren Berlant, *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), 4.
[61] Miller, *Anatomy*, 189.
[62] Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 1.
[63] Berlant, *Compassion*, 4.

enojaba. Quería que fuera un chico amable y encantador, no este chico hosco y sucio' (16). The narrator oscillates between anger and a sense of guilt/shame, a bundle of ugly feelings she experiences more than once in the presence of both the boy and his mother. The passage above reveals the problematic nature of the impossible reciprocity involved in compassion:

> the apparent disinterested gift assures a counter gift in the form of an obligation on the receivers sometimes to tell their story, frequently to mend their ways, and always to show their gratitude. But it is clear that in these conditions the exchange remains profoundly unequal.[64]

The boy does not provide the assumed counter-gift, though the narrator's awareness of the inequality underpinning her compassionate intervention is clear and it is what motivates her shame. The story offers an exploration of what Berlant terms 'the ethics of privilege'[65] —a privilege that is under constant and uncomfortable negotiation on the narrator's part.

A feeling of guilt is also what triggers her intense dread that the murdered boy might be the dirty boy later on in the story:

> *[E]staba segura de que el chico sucio era ahora el chico decapitado* […] ¡Por qué no lo cuidé, por qué no averigüé cómo sacárselo a la madre, por qué al menos no le di un baño! Si tengo una bañera antigua, hermosa […] ¿por qué al menos no quitarle la mugre? […] Pero no. Me enojé con él por malagradecido, porque no me defendió ¡de su madre! ¡Me enojé con un chico aterrorizado, hijo de una madre adicta, un chico de cinco años que vive en la calle! ¡Que vivía en la calle porque ahora está muerto, degollado! […] *[E]staba segura de que era él, el chico sucio, violado y degollado en un estacionamiento quién sabe por qué*. (23, my emphasis)

The narrator's fearful certainty stems from her sense of guilt and engulfs her from this point onwards, whilst her juxtaposition of affects with outcomes invites a similarly growing sense of

[64] Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 4.
[65] Berlant, *Compassion*, 4.

dread on the reader's part. The passionate tone—manifest in the use of exclamation marks over a passage that takes almost one page— is one of emotional readerly solicitation (even though the narrator is addressing Lala). The two sentences highlighted above emphasize the simultaneous magnification of descriptive detail and emotional intensity, with the final iteration amplifying the horrifying nature of the crime and cementing our impression that 'el chico sucio' is indeed 'el chico decapitado'.

If, as I argue before, the narrator's disgust is mixed with pity and compassion for the boy, the mother instils in her a feeling of repulsion that is certainly *othering* —as Rioseco claims[66]— but that also overlaps with other close relations of disgust such as fear and indignation. There is something unspecific about the mother that neither the narrator nor Lala like from the beginning— 'Hay algo más que no me gusta' (13), 'Me da escalofríos […] yo no sé' (13)—and I agree with Rioseco that the narrator's experience with the mother 'es siempre física y de repulsión'.[67] Miller comments on the exchangeability between the idiom of the morally reprehensible and the disgusting: 'We perceive what disgusts and tend to imbue it with defective moral status *for that reason alone*'.[68] The narrator sees the woman as a bad mother, with her addiction always portrayed as the root cause of the disgust she provokes: in an early encounter, 'le veía cada uno de los dientes, cómo le sangraban las encías, los labios quemados por la pipa, el olor a alquitrán en el aliento' (20). The narrator's occasional feelings of guilt for her own stigmatizing of the mother emerge at times, and in those moments the former is described as 'esa pobre mujer que había dormido frente a mi casa tantas noches, esa chica adicta que debía tener poco más de veinte años' (25); a 'joven adicta' and 'moribunda' (32) when the narrator thinks she might not be responsible for her son's disappearance after all.[69] However, following the logic of amplification

[66] Rioseco, 'Lo raro', 93.
[67] Rioseco, 'Lo raro', 94.
[68] Miller, *Anatomy*, 180, my emphasis.
[69] In Miller's words, 'The stigmatized variously generate alarm, disgust, contempt, embarrassment, concern, pity, or fear. […] One of the surer markers in our recognition of stigma is our guilt for having recognised it' (*Anatomy*, 199-200).

we see operating throughout, by the end of the story both the markers of the mother's physicality and the narrator's repulsed reactions are intensified:

> La madre del chico sucio abrió la boca y me dio náuseas su aliento a hambre, dulce y podrido como una fruta al sol, mezclado con el olor médico de la droga y esa peste a quemado; los adictos huelen a goma ardiente, a fábrica tóxica, a agua contaminada, a muerte química. (31)

In contrast to the *visual* description of the mother's mouth quoted before, here the narrator's sensory perception is predicated on smell, which suggests less detachment from the object and appeals more directly to the reader's embodied engagement. Moreover, within the same sentence, the progressively uglier smells of 'hambre', 'droga' and 'peste' become more precisely and emphatically associated with the utterly foul in the tetracolon that closes the quotation. As Miller states, no 'other emotion, not even hatred, paints its object so unflatteringly, because no other emotion forces such concrete sensual descriptions of its object.'[70] A description like the above not only invites a visceral reaction on the part of the reader, as we are compelled to recreate the smell through our embodied imagination: if disgust 'has the look of veracity about it', and this encourages us to attach a negative moral value to that which it is disgusting,[71] it is not surprising that the mother *can* appear as something akin to an associate or even a conduct of evil by the end of the story. In the first example quoted, her addiction is synonymous with neglect; in the second—as a result of the synergies between intensification and ambiguity that operate in the story—it is closer to a malevolent supernatural force. The horrifying/disgusting embodied by the mother in this last description leaves a supercharged 'sense of despair that impurity and evil are contagious, endure, and take everything down with them.'[72] This is the disquieting feeling that pervades at the end of 'El chico sucio'.

Much more could be said about disgust in Enriquez, for the author thoroughly explores the 'miasmic gloom, in the realm of horror, in regions of dark unbelievability', in which this

[70] Miller, *Anatomy*, 9.
[71] Miller, *Anatomy*, 181.
[72] Miller, *Anatomy*, 205.

emotion operates.[73] In 'El chico sucio', she portrays the stickiness of affects that are complicated and enmeshed with each other: fear, dread, pity, shame, guilt, compassion —all emotions that 'derive from social training, emerge at historical moments, are shaped by aesthetic conventions, and take place in scenes that are anxious, volatile, surprising, and contradictory'.[74] In the very last lines of the story, the narrator evokes the boy's 'mano pegajosa' (33) as a material signifier of the unnerving, imminent presence she both fears and expectantly awaits. Concepts and feelings are often sticky in Enriquez: they are not self-contained and create unpleasant clusters; they are hard to let go and seek to get under her reader's skin.

Conclusion

In this paper I have started to trace the ugly feelings that are explored in Mariana Enriquez's short fiction. By focusing on three stories from the same collection I have attempted to show the considerable affective range involved in her writing, which incorporates a thorough engagement with horror in some cases but also goes beyond it. Caracciolo's thesis that 'readers' bodily involvement can strengthen their engagement with a story at the level of socio-cultural meanings'[75] seems apposite to read Enriquez, given her fiction's appeal to a visceral, sensory, embodied engagement on the part of the reader, and the evident socio-political concerns that her stories address. Other critics have likewise argued that our affective engagement with narrative can shape our ethical orientations—a point that has been made with respect to environmental preoccupations in particular. And yet, I agree with Rioseco that Enriquez's aesthetic and literary project is not reducible to a political agenda.[76] If we focus on fear as the most intense passion elicited in Enriquez's fiction, an important corollary of the theoretical reflection with which I converse in this paper is that 'horror's affective force is a potent *experiential* process'.[77]

[73] Miller, *Anatomy*, 36.
[74] Berlant, *Compassion*, 7.
[75] Caracciolo, *The Experientiality*, Introduction.
[76] Rioseco, 'Lo raro', 87.
[77] Powell, *Deleuze*, Introduction, my emphasis.

Enriquez's stories involve that level of experientiality at an aesthetic level, although what I have referred to as disquietude designates the broad range of affective engagements invited by her stories, again beyond horror. Moreover, through its attentiveness to aspects of technique, form and style, the discussion offered here also emphasizes Enriquez's superb craft as a storyteller, and the conceptual and aesthetic complexity of her verbal creations. Equally, a rich vein for exploration—only hinted at here—is her engagement with her literary precursors, within and outside the Argentine tradition. 'I want narrative to be a way of reflecting and thinking, and thinking is complex', she states in an interview.[78] An enticing challenge for a literary critic is, therefore, to account for that complexity in the wondrous mesh of thought, feeling and imagination solicited in her works.

12,597 words

[78] David Leo Rice, 'Mariana Enriquez on Political Violence and Writing Horror', *Literary Hub*, 18 April 2018 <https://lithub.com/mariana-enriquez-on-political-violence-and-writing-horror> (accessed 4 September 2020).