Reweirding urban locations as haunted spaces

Introduction

Location is often my starting point when it comes to devising short stories. As a writer, I am interested in a kind of fiction in which place 'transcends the status of mere setting to play an active and agential role in the unfolding narratives' (Cooper and Lichtenstein, 2020:1). In this article, I will discuss how horror fiction can reweird place to explore the connections between space and the ghosts that haunt it. As scholar Ralph Harrington proposes:

> 'The intersection between the spectral and the mundane happens, if it happens at all, on a spatial dimension: hauntings occur in particular places, and those who are haunted are located in space. The very definition of haunting can be said to be a locating of the spectral' (2017: 302).

To illustrate this, I will reflect on the writing process behind my published short stories 'Flatworms' and 'No Greater Love'. I will also analyse two short stories by Latinx writers Samantha Schweblin and Mariana Enríquez that I was able to read in their original language, Spanish, also my mother tongue. My goal will be to explain how these two authors, with whom I share linguistic and cultural experiences, have enlightened my own creative practice.

It is important to preface this discussion by pointing out that I am drawn to write horror to engage with real sociopolitical contexts such as the impact of the COVID-19

pandemic and the immigrant experience. I agree with another Latinx author, Carmen Maria Machado, in that horror writing can be a tool to reveal contemporary uncertainties:

> 'When you enter into horror, you're entering into your own mind, your own anxiety, your own fear, your own darkest spaces […] horror is an intimate, eerie, terrifying thing, and when it's done well it can unmake you, the viewer, the reader. That tells us a lot about who we are, what we are, and what we, individually and culturally, are afraid of. I love the ability of stories to have spaces in them where the reader can rush in' (2017).

Hence, I want to use horror and, in particular, the ghost short story, to provoke uneasiness in the readers – as scholar Nicholas Royle points out, the uncanny is often 'ghostly […] strange and mysterious, with a flickering sense (but not a conviction) of something supernatural' (2003:1). To this effect, I decided to reweird the urban spaces of my fiction, just as Schweblin, Enríquez and many other authors have done before me.

I'm borrowing the concept of 'reweirding' from landscape punk [1] and weird fiction writer Gary Budden who argues that 'the ordinary is *in itself* weird, mysterious, always on the verge of spilling out a deep and profound truth of the universe' (2021:94, original emphasis). He goes on to encourage writers of uncanny fiction to refocus 'on the spaces humans interact with on a daily basis yet think of as "nowhere"' (2021:94), spaces which at first sight may

[1] Landscape punk is a genre coined by Gary Budden in his essay 'Awake Awake Sweet England: Why We Need Landscape Punk' published by *The Quietus* in 2017. Landscape punk borrows from nature writing, landscape fiction, the weird and punk culture. It's also 'politicised […] to try and get to some deeper truths about the insane world we've found ourselves in. Landscape punk is a method for writing about, and dealing with, the world we live in, not the one we may want' (Budden, 2017). It's also worth mentioning that landscape punk strongly stands against conservativism, fascism and nationalism. In Budden's words: 'Everything and everyone is hybrid. We may not like the fact, but no-one and everyone belongs' (2017).

seem ‘banal or commonplace’ (2021:93) so they can expand ‘the concept of the strange place and the weird location’ (2021:94). Whereas the places I will discuss in this article are certainly not those most readers will encounter – the care home and the dogfighting ring are connected to particular communities; the restaurant in a truck stop and the tosquera are places which attract people in specific circumstances – they can certainly be considered commonplace. Ultimately, I believe that Budden sees this reweirding as a tool:

> ‘I think of it as a method of writing fiction that taps into the true idea of ‘wyrd’ – a concept originally from Anglo-Saxon culture that roughly corresponds with ideas of fate or destiny, but is more accurately understood as an awareness of the total interconnectedness of things’ (2021:95).

Reweirding place in a short story means thinking carefully about how characters connect with those environments ingrained in their lives and how societal rules and politics shape them and even impose on the plot. This kind of writing is not only preoccupied with the ‘deep mapping of particular locations’ but also with ‘displacement… deracination and placelessness’ (Cooper and Lichtenstein, 2020:4).

To contextualize my discussion around the concept of reweirding – and how it manifests in the four short stories featured in this article – I will draw on Mark Fisher’s definitions of the weird and the eerie (2016), with an emphasis on how the Latinx ghost short stories that Enríquez and Schweblin write are distinctive because they cannot be easily categorised as either ‘weird’ or ‘eerie’. They favour instead a hybrid approach, blending in

elements from these two modes and showcasing a clear preference for urban landscapes as settings to explore the uncanny. Thus, my use of the verb 'reweirding' will encompass both terms since, as per Budden's original definition, interconnectedness is an essential part of this process.

The semi-abandoned care home in a bleak seaside English town during a pandemic

This is the location of my short story 'Flatworms', which was published in *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal* in 2022. It was born from a collection of details, starting with stories I found in several Spanish newspapers during 2020. These featured the crisis in care homes for the elderly that were being abandoned by their employees because of the lack of resources and fear of contagion during the first wave of COVID-19. Care workers, cleaners and nurses didn't receive adequate personal protective equipment to perform their duties – which forced them to repurpose bin bags as aprons and use paint masks instead of medical masks[2]. Understandably, many of them were refusing to go to work (Romero et al., 2020). Despite how appalling this situation was, I sympathized with these care workers – I was a bookseller when the pandemic hit and before going into lockdown we were not given any equipment to protect ourselves from the virus by the corporation that employed us. Many of us felt anxious and disposable, put in the position of considering the risk of going to work versus the salary we all depended on.

I have also worked as a carer before – albeit on a one-to-one basis, and not in the context of a care home – and know how complex and draining this job can be. When I was in

[2] The British drama *Help* written by Jack Thorne and directed by Marc Munden explores a similar situation in a British care home during the pandemic, while also featuring horror elements and a strong sense of place.

the care industry, my colleagues were mostly women, and many of us were immigrants too. I was one of the employees that stayed the longest at my post (the staff turnover rate was high, people normally lasted two to three months). This was, to this date, the hardest job I have ever had – I found it too emotionally taxing – but I could not afford to quit at the time.

Other details that fed into 'Flatworms' were stories told to me by friends who have worked as domestics in care homes. One of these featured a basement in which the human brains of some of the residents were stored in freezers. The care home was joined to a research centre focused on the study of Alzheimer's. Residents were given the option to donate their brains to science. If they did, these would get extracted in an operating theatre, also in situ. Of course, cleaners avoided the night shift at the basement, and the security guard at night swore the space was haunted. Stories like these are not rare in care home facilities; my friends tell me almost every domestic and cleaner has a memory of seeing something that should not be there, for example, a resident, in the corner of their eye, who passed away a few weeks ago. This is how it is described in my short story, narrated by María, a Spanish cleaner:

> 'No matter what, it was my job to clean the basement every afternoon. I was the new one, and none of the other domestics would take it. A room with fluorescent lights reflecting on the white walls that seemed to be out of proportion with the rest of the floors. Too vast and open. As if the space inside the care home had expanded underground, defying all logic. In reality, this basement also belonged to the building next door: a research centre for neurological diseases.

> The basement was noiseless, apart from the humming of the freezers and the cold storage unit that you stopped hearing after ten minutes or so. I took advantage of being alone and played music on my headphones—I'd already learned to hide my phone in my uniform. I downloaded different piano versions of *Petrushka* and I listened to them again and again, memorising the polyrhythms, the glissandos, the tremolos…
>
> It was there I started hearing it again. The banging. At first, I thought it was something wrong with my headphones, or that the music files were corrupted. But when I took them out, it was clearer than ever.
>
> Like a thousand rock-cold hands banging on invisible doors' (Labarta, 2022).

María, the main character, is a Spanish student who starts working as a cleaner in a care home by the sea in a northern English town at the beginning of an unnamed pandemic. In my first drafts, the ghosts María saw were more conventional, visual – shadows where there should not be any. But the story did not quite click – I was having trouble pinning down María's voice and true purpose. At a later point in the drafting process, I decided that María was a pianist who had moved to England to study Music, looking for better job prospects. She was also escaping from her father's expectations – he still dreamed of her becoming a virtuoso. Her frustration with not being able to make it in the music world leads to her obsession over a notoriously difficult piece to play, the piano version of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*.

Since María was a pianist, it suddenly made more sense to make her ghostly encounters auditory [3]. A second character emerged, Miss Barale, a retired Italian pianist, and care home resident in the late stages of dementia. Both women are connected by *Petrushka* – María finds a video on the internet of Miss Barale playing Stravinsky's infamous piece to perfection. Hence María is not only haunted by the sounds no one else can hear in the care home but also by Miss Barale's performance.

I purposely decided to play with ambiguity when it comes to the real nature of the sounds that haunt María. They could be considered supernatural, or they could be seen as the noise made by real residents forced to perish in their rooms. In that sense, it could be said that my story makes use of the eerie, which Fisher defines as constituted by:

> '…a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing or there is nothing present where there should be something' (2016:61, original emphasis).

Enríquez uses the eerie with a similar intent in 'Our Lady of the Quarry', which I will discuss at length later in this article. In this story, black dogs, large as horses, are some of the ghosts haunting the tosquera, a quarry in which many people have died before. Like Enríquez, I do believe that the ghosts which haunt places are linked to history and memory, affecting not only how we perceive said places, but how we feel when we are around them:

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[3] In *The Uncanny*, a scholarly examination of Freud's article of the same name, Nicholas Royle discusses 'the strangeness of sounds – a creaking, a click, a clang' and sees the auditory dimension as 'critical' when it comes to engaging with the uncanny (2003:136).

> ‘the spirit of places, places where something horrible happened feel like places where something will happen again because they are haunted. They are marked. Places are characters to me. In general, I don’t think you can take the power back, not completely, but you can break the silence’ (2017b).

Thus, through my reweirding, the care home – a normal setting that moves away from the more traditional ‘uncanny natural or rural landscapes in weird fiction’ (Budden, 2021:95) and is decisively urban – became an eerie space in which the banging in the doors, like the dogs in Enríquez’s story, can be initially questioned by the readers. Their role is not as much to confuse but to draw attention to the sociopolitical context of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected the lives of those who were already vulnerable, that is, old people and immigrants in precarious job situations. In the quarry, people go to swim and enjoy the cold water during the unforgiving Argentinian summers; but we must be reminded that this is not a natural lake: its extreme depth, the toxicity of the waters and the viscosity of the sediment trapped at the bottom make it a deadly trap – quarries like the one depicted in the story claim the lives of many every year (Pilar a Diario, 2023). These quarries also suggest a particular sociopolitical reality, that of economically deprived teenagers who do not have access to the private swimming pools of wealthier Buenos Aires neighbourhoods and need to take an hours-long bus journey to get to these artificial lakes.

The clandestine dog fighting ring in a pub basement

Although completely fictional, ‘No Greater Love’, my story published in *Extra Teeth* in 2023, draws from my personal experience taking care of a loved family member as they died – a process which took weeks – all whilst witnessing some troubling and violent family dynamics. The space of the dog fighting ring became the metaphor for the main theme of the story, which is love understood as the endurance of abuse. From these circumstances emerged the unnamed narrator, a seventeen-year-old woman living under the overpowering presence of her aunt, Emma, who is also the head of the family’s dogfighting business. My narrator is also haunted by Apollo, Emma’s beloved fighting pit bull, who has been lethally injured in the ring and becomes a corporeal ghost. Emma is an important, yet complicated figure in the story. She hand-rears pit bulls and trains them to become fighting dogs. In her family, the dynamics of the ring intertwine with those of the home.

As with ‘Flatworms’, I was keen on challenging the idea of a traditional ghost as a shadow or an apparition of the past. Apollo the pit bull exists in the present as he is not dead, but he is not exactly alive either:

> ‘Apollo rests on the bed in between a mess of cushions, pillows and blankets. He doesn’t look like a pittie anymore, but like a puppet of one, badly assembled, full of staples and frayed seams. Dull eyes, tongue out, he only pants and drools. He doesn’t react to familiar voices or to touch, not to food either, and has to wear nappies. Yet, he refuses to die on Emma. He won’t leave her. Emma is heartbroken, and so, so mad that sometimes she threatens to kill him. She says she’ll do it with a pillow, fast and quick, and that’ll be a kindness. Mum doesn’t like it when she speaks like this. She says Apollo will heal, in his own time. Mum argues with Emma day and night now.

> They are pit bulls at each other's throats. In the evening, once the heat dies down and windows can be open again, you help Mum change Apollo's nappies and nurse her bruises. To all your questions she has the same answer: family. She feeds Apollo organic baby puree you can't afford. She pats him softly on the head telling him what a good boy he is, what a good, good boy.' (Labarta, 2023:18-19).

As a ghost, Apollo still breathes and bleeds, but his haunting – of the house, of the narrator and her family's lives – is not less powerful because of that. Jenn Ashworth suggests that the figure of the ghost can be used 'to find a way to talk about trauma: the out-of-time repetitions, the fear, the sickliness of hurt, the way the ghost is always wounded and never heals' (2021:188).

The dying Apollo triggers a crisis in the narrator's home – her mother and Emma cannot agree on how to best care for him, with each of them expressing their love for the dog in equally twisted and useless ways. There is a clear disconnection between the sorrow they feel and the fact that they are the causes of it – they keep loving and training dogs to send them to their deaths in the ring. This obsession with sacrifice and the sanctity of suffering resonates with my experience of being brought up in Spain, in a culture intrinsically linked to Catholicism. The framework of the ghost story and its weird elements, such as this 'fleshy ghost' allowed me to take this to a darker extreme, in a narrative where the loyal Apollo refuses to leave his owner, Emma, even if he cannot be of service to her any longer.

Although we tend to think of realism and the weird as opposites, Schweblin suggests otherwise:

> ‘The weird doesn’t contradict realism […] I’ve always felt that the weird is another way of displaying ‘reality’, what’s ‘normal’ – to recreate that sense of realism in fiction is as important as it is to challenge it. To challenge something you need that thing to exist first, right? Also, what is realism in fiction? What is normal? What is considered socially acceptable? What is known by everyone? Our social constructs can’t encompass the whole world, and what do we have literature for if not to peek into what is weird? I think that, even in the most realistic stories, fiction always starts when something weird or unexpected happens’ (2022, my translation).

In ‘No Greater Love’ I am reweirding the clandestine dogfighting ring to challenge what it means to belong to a family or to show love to others. The story’s ending embraces the weird, which Fisher sees as a montage, the joining of two or more things which normally do not belong together (2016:11). In the case of my story, a young woman fights a pit bull with her bare hands in the dogfighting ring, attracting an audience that is ready to indulge in the weirdness of the spectacle. During the drafting process, I wondered if this would be too much for the readers to accept, but I realised that the ghost story offered me a space to explore the effect of intergenerational trauma and its intersections with class and gender – even though she takes pride in it, Emma’s dysfunctional family lacks the resources to find a different occupation to dogfighting. Many of these dysfunctionalities have become socially acceptable, or simply invisible to those of us who are lucky enough to not inhabit the spaces where we would be confronted by them. This process of reweirding an urban setting can be,

again, a wake-up call, a shock to the system which, as Schweblin puts it, forces us to question the limitations of our social constructs.

The truck stop restaurant on a desolate Argentinian road during the hottest summer

Schweblin's short story 'Irman' starts with a scorching summer day in which the narrator and his friend, Oliver, arrive at a truck stop restaurant in their van. Both men are dehydrated and desperate for a cold drink. The waiter who comes to serve them is immediately noticeable because of his size. He is 'petiso', an Argentinian word to describe someone very short. After making them wait for a long time, the waiter comes back still empty-handed. He cannot reach the fridge where the cold drinks are stored. The friends are surprised – how does he manage to keep the restaurant going if he cannot get cold drinks to the customers? The petiso man explains that his wife normally gets the drinks for him, but she had an accident.

This is the point when Schweblin's reweirding of setting becomes more noticeable. Oliver and the narrator follow the waiter to the back of the restaurant, where they observe an eerie scene:

> 'The kitchen was small and overflowing with casserole dishes, saucepans, plates, and things piled up on shelves or hanging from hooks. Lying on the floor a few meters from the wall, the woman looked like a marine beast washed up by the tide. She was clutching a big plastic spoon in her left hand. The fridge was hung high up, flush with the cupboards. It was one of those kiosk refrigerators with transparent lids, the kind that stand on the floor and slide open on top, only this one had ridiculously been

tacked to the wall with brackets, following the line of the cupboards, and with the doors facing outward' (Schweblin, 2017, translated by Megan McDowell).

That said, the actual reweirding started at the beginning of the story when the two friends enter the empty establishment – Fisher suggests we often find the eerie in 'landscapes emptied of the human' (2016:11) – in which 'the tables were littered with crumbs and bottles, as if a battalion had just eaten lunch' (Schweblin, 2017, translated by Megan McDowell). Nothing is quite as it should be: the customers seem ghostly, and the waiter looks 'disoriented, as if someone had plopped him down there all of a sudden and he didn't really know what he was supposed to do next' (2017). The eerie intensifies in the description of the kitchen, with the unconscious woman on the floor who is referred to, cruelly, as a 'marine beast washed up by the tide' (2017). Both the waiter and his wife are weird elements in this space – the waiter is too short (with the narrator thinking he seems to be constantly shrinking); she is too large, like a whale, 'a marine beast'. An unequivocal sense of wrongness, of what does not belong, is, another essential element of the weird (Fisher, 2016:10), employed here to portray the fainted woman as a ghost haunting the space, her vulnerability mirrored in her husband, the petiso waiter, who cannot do his job without her. However, I would argue that at this point in the story Schweblin's use of another mode, the eerie, becomes differentiated from what Fisher considers the standard: '… the eerie is also fundamentally to do with the outside... a sense of the eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces' (2016:11). Yet it is not on an emptied rural landscape but in a restaurant's kitchen where the most distressing scene in this story takes place. Oliver, the narrator's friend, decides to take advantage of a powerless man and bullies him for his

money. The narrator is an unwilling spectator to all of this: he is shocked at his friend's transformation, but he does not know how to react to it. In the end, Oliver takes a small box he finds hiding in the kitchen where, he presumes, the petiso waiter must keep his valuables.

Schweblin's reweirding of place has an essential role in her story. The eerie, empty restaurant affords Oliver the power and anonymity to attack the waiter. This scene also forces readers to confront a particular social context: that in which we (like the narrator) witness something frightful and unfair. Like María in 'Flatworms', the narrator in 'Irman' stays passive. María is overwhelmed by her circumstances, her job, which becomes increasingly difficult and dangerous as the pandemic advances, her worry about her father alone in Spain during lockdown. When she discovers what is happening in the care home she is so engulfed by the horror she cannot spare any energy to set things right. Like many of us, she simply goes through the motions of the daily routines of her job, ignoring the ghosts, and letting the real monsters remain unchallenged. At the end of the story, the care home has transformed into an eerie space for María, who keeps performing her duties even though she is sick. In her fever dream, the space is reweirded to acquire human-like characteristics:

> 'I moved through the large bright space of the basement which seemed to contract and expand like a giant heart. I felt very hot—the fluorescent lights shining on me like piercing suns. The bin bag tied as an apron melting with my uniform onto my bare skin. I had forgotten to check my temperature for days. Not good. I took off my face mask. I couldn't breathe.

The refrigerators went on with their humming. Rows and rows of them, glossy white. They seemed to move ever so slightly, almost as if they were breathing. I blinked to focus my vision' (Labarta, 2022).

In 'Irman', the narrator and Oliver rush out of the restaurant and come back to their van, resuming their journey and leaving the uncanny behind. In 'Flatworms' I decided to end the story in the eerie space of the care home's basement – the place where María first heard the strange noises and where she finally decides to give in to the horror of the situation:

'I wondered what the brains inside looked like. If they were all in containers, or in bags. Would they have tags attached to them? Perhaps small labels noting the weight, who the brain belonged to. Maybe some information about the person.

It couldn't be that difficult to locate Miss Barale's.

I imagined her playing *Petrushka* at the Royal Albert Hall, packed full, her fingers repeating a perfect sequence of movements that emulated the melodies of a whole symphony orchestra. All the neural connections sharp and sublime waves pouring over her body.

What would it be like to taste them?' (Labarta, 2022)

I foreshadowed the possibility of cannibalism in a conversation that María had with her landlady earlier on, a retired biologist who shares with her the hypothesis of cellular

memory as seen in flatworms – who seem to acquire memories and skills from older flatworms by ingesting their flesh. This ending seeks to disturb and show how the reweirding of the space has also affected those who inhabit it, turning them monstrous.

The large and dangerous flooded quarry with its odd red Virgin chapel

A tosquera is the Argentinian term for a specific kind of quarry, left there after the ground has been mined for tosca, a reddish stone which is used to build houses, pavements, streets, airports and motorways. I mention the colour of the stone because it is an important detail for this short story which is not reflected in the more general word 'quarry' (used in the English translation) which can include many types of stones and materials. These tosqueras in Argentina are often flooded with rainwater, and they become artificial lakes. As I explained before, they are treacherous spaces: because of the mining, the ground has collapsed in some areas, leading to very deep spots; it is very easy to drown in them. They also tend to be polluted with toxic waste. They can also be the ideal secluded spot for a teenage summer dream turned into a sinister nightmare. This is what Enríquez loves about the horror genre too, 'the sense of anticipation, of waiting for the inevitable to hit you. I like feeling unsafe in a story, both reading and writing it' (2020b).

In 'Our Lady of the Quarry', the tosquera, known to the characters as 'the Virgin's Pool' is described as such by the narrators:

> '[…] we had to go to the Virgin's Pool, which was the best, the cleanest. It was also the biggest, deepest, and most dangerous of all. It was really far, nearly at the end of

> the 307 route, after the bus merged onto the highway. The Virgin's Pool was special, people said, because almost no one ever went there. The danger that kept swimmers away wasn't how deep it was: it was the owner. Apparently someone had bought the place, and we accepted that; none of us knew what a quarry pool was good for or if it could be bought, but, still, it didn't strike us as odd that the pool would have an owner, and we understood why this owner wouldn't want strangers swimming on his property. It was said that when there were trespassers the owner would drive out from behind a hill and start shooting. Sometimes he also set his dogs on them. He had decorated his private quarry pool with a giant altar, a grotto for the Virgin on one side of the main pool. You could reach it by going around the pool along a dirt path that started at an improvised entrance from the road, which was marked by a narrow iron arch. On the other side was the hill over which the owner's truck could appear at any moment. The water in front of the Virgin was still and black. On the near side there was a little beach of clayey dirt.' (2020a, translated by Megan McDowell)

The tosquera becomes the place where the teenage narrators explore their sexual desire and fester in it, ultimately turning against their older friend, Silvia. Although they initially admire her, they become resentful towards her after she starts a relationship with the man they all desire, Diego. One of the teenagers, Natalia, prays to the Virgin of the tosquera so she may intercede and punish Silvia for 'stealing' their love interest. It is important to note here that what the teenagers initially identify as the Virgin – because of the chapel, and her white robes – is a different deity. Her skin is red, which links her to the tosca, and also to the Pomba Gira, an African-Brazilian goddess who represents female sexuality and is associated

with the colour red (Enríquez, 2020b). This is how Natalia describes the statue to her friends, '"It has a white sheet to hide it, to cover it, but it's not a Virgin. It's a red woman made of plaster, and she's naked. She has black nipples"' (Enríquez, 2020a, translated by Megan McDowell). The description of the red deity is an example of the weird as montage, as it 'brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it' (Fisher, 2016:10). But, in Enríquez story, this is also a nod to the hybridity that permeates the Argentinian sociocultural context. As scholar Enrique Ajura states, one of the most distinctive features of Latinx ghost stories is their blending of Roman Catholicism with other kinds of folklore – including pre-Hispanic and African:

> 'Rooted in a constant condition of hybridity and ambiguity, the Latin American ghost story demonstrates an obsession with a cultural and social convergence of spectral traditions that shapes the region's varied local identities, but this is usually subsumed into a literary preference for magical realism and the fantastic' (2017:234-235).

The tosquera in 'Our Lady of the Quarry' is a haunted space. The group of teenage friends are haunted by Silvia, an older and more experienced version of themselves. Diego also seems haunted by Silvia to the point he does not seem to notice the numerous sexual advances made by the narrators. Finally, the invisible owner, his dogs, and the red deity seem to all be part of a ghostly Holy Trinity.

I am interested in the way ghost short stories like this one use the trope of the haunting to showcase the deterioration of what should be nurturing interpersonal

relationships. ‘Our Lady of the Quarry’ shows jealousy turning friendship awry and women attacking each other to compete for the attention of men; in ‘No Greater Love’, my focus was on twisted family ties. To accomplish this, I looked at voice and point of view as tools to keep reweirding the atmosphere and setting. This is something that Enríquez does with her short story too, as she uses the first-person plural narrator – one of the most notorious aspects of this text, narrated not by a singular girl but a gang of them, a sort of ominous chorus. Enríquez discussed this choice in an interview published by *The New Yorker*:

> ‘Girls can be like bees or like locusts: there’s something toxic and delicious and exotic about them together—they can convey a certain power, they are a coven, and they are vulnerable, and this mix intrigues me. I’ve written many stories about teen-age girls that tend to have just one voice, yes, like a chorus, because to me there’s a buzz at that age, a world that functions in your own private language. You are going through a metamorphosis: it’s a very mythological time. You’re a beauty and you’re a monster and you can be damaged and you can hurt’ (2020b).

I decided to use a second-person singular narrative voice in ‘No Greater Love’ to express the vulnerability of my narrator – earlier drafts of this short story were written in first-person point of view and third-person close point of view. Using an experimental point of view is risky, as it can become tiresome for the readers. That said, I decided that voice in my short story needed to be unusual to enhance the weirdness of the plot. The constant repetition of the word ‘you’ makes the diction claustrophobic to show readers that my main character has been trapped in a complicated situation even before she was born. Also, the

second-person point of view represents, to an extent, that whispering in my character's head, coming from Emma, who is both the antagonist and the most formative person in my narrator's life:

> 'Everyone needs to get this one thing about dogfighting, Emma tells you the first time you ask about the dogs and where they go some nights. It's all about love.
>
> Mum and Emma look like twin sisters even though Emma is two years older – same green eyes, same red hair, same thin-lipped mouth. The only difference is in the nose: Emma's is large and crooked and Mum's is small and perfectly straight. She saved money throughout her teenage years so she could buy herself a beautiful nose the week before turning twenty. She says she broke her nose when she was little and hated the way it looked, but it's a lie, because you have that crooked nose, and Grandad had the nose too, you've seen the photos, so it comes from that side of the family. Most people who see you, Mum and Emma together taking the dogs down to the pit assume you are Emma's daughter. It's the nose. You never correct them. You're ashamed of admitting it, but it feels like a compliment. Perhaps it's because even though Mum birthed you, Emma is the one who taught you about love. And dogfighting. There's no doubt Emma loves her dogs fiercely, as she loves you, as she loves Mum. Pit bulls love exactly like that, without reason or logic. They don't give a shit about little equal exchanges of care and tenderness. They don't know what boundaries are. They'll never leave you. Which means pit bulls don't back up. Ever.' (Labarta, 2023:18).

In the end, what the four stories I have discussed in this article have in common is their use of urban locations as a place where the weird and the eerie reside. They are also stories in which the most significant horror elements are not supernatural but human, since all their main characters end up committing abhorrent acts. In 'Our Lady of the Quarry', Natalia and her friends leave Silvia and Diego to be attacked by a pack of aggressive dogs. They not only refuse to help them but pray that no cars stop nearby to hear their screams. In 'Irman', the narrator lets his friend assault a powerless man. In 'Flatworms', María is tempted to eat Miss Barale's brain during a fever dream in which she believes that this organ retains the virtuoso capacities of the older pianist, which can be passed on to her by consumption. The main character in 'No Greater Love' willingly takes the place of a pit bull in the dog fighting ring to keep sustaining her family in what she sees as an act of ultimate, unconditional love.

Writing as an exorcism

To conclude, I would like to propose that writing ghost short stories is akin to a haunting and its subsequent exorcism. The short story is a form that demands, by its brevity, that the author focuses on a curated collection of images and moments that need to not only feel like they belong together but also suggest a wider story arc. When it comes to writing ghost short stories, I am also purposely using personal memories that haunt me – my own experience as a personal carer, aiding someone to go through death in a difficult context – which, in turn, allows me to look at setting – the care home, the dog fighting ring – in unexpected ways.

Schweblin and Enríquez both have a similar creative process. Schweblin sees short story writing as a way to engage with 'things that truly bother me, things that hurt me or infuriate me' (2015). She created 'Irman' out of two memories, not connected in any apparent

way. The first memory was watching how two men disposed of a wallet a third person had forgotten, which to them only contained rubbish – Schweblin regretted not having intervened at that moment, as she realised that whatever was inside the wallet must have been a real treasure to its owner. The second was an anecdote, told to her by a friend, who had been asked by a waiter for help to move his large wife off the floor after she had fainted (2015).

Enríquez used the tosqueras she knew well as a teenager, fascinated by their danger (2020b). Urban locations often have a key role in her fiction, and she sees contemporary horror Latinx literature 'as something that emerges from society, as trauma, as something that is part of history… [horror] is becoming more urban now as it features more recognizable and realistic elements' (2023:183, my translation). This connects with her personal experience of growing up during the military dictatorship in Argentina:

> 'The Argentinian dictatorship was very *secretive*, the violence was fierce, but it happened at night, the prisons were secret, or as we like to say here, *clandestine*. In my home, we more or less knew what was going on, especially that people were disappearing (I mean, people were being sent to jail and then murdered), and that silence, that silent death permeating everything, had a huge impact on me. A lot of the time I try not to write about the dictatorship but, like with any trauma, it's difficult to keep quiet about it' (2023:185, my translation, original emphasis).

This 'secretive violence' is a feature in 'Our Virgin of the Quarry', a story about the collective cruelty of a group of teenage girls who have no qualms about allowing the death of

their older friend. Schweblin's story is also about an eerie absence of empathy in the protagonists, who instead of behaving humanely (and helping someone in need) become predatory. The 'silent death', the horror of uncertainty, is also present in the ending of 'Our Virgin of the Quarry': the huge black dogs function as a ghostly apparition and attack Silvia and Diego, but their demise is not shown in the story. The narrative in 'Irman' also engages with uncertainty – when Oliver and the narrator open the box they stole from the petiso waiter they do not discover money or riches but a collection of bizarre items including a photo, a collection of letters addressed to 'Irman' and a plastic medal. What all of this means in the story is never explained.

Schweblin described this process – of using memories that contain an element of trauma, which haunt us, which we cannot forget – as an exorcism:

> 'Plot is incidental: a mere conductor for something much deeper and heavier. It's an enticing bridge, well illuminated, which connects the writer to the reader. Its function is to exorcise the writer from something bitter which they couldn't keep to themselves any more and also captivates the reader with the discovery of that same bitterness which, when shared, is digested in a different way' (2015, my translation).

Thus, Latinx ghost short stories such as the ones discussed here clearly embrace the process of reweirding by bringing both the weird and the eerie to urban locations to make a powerful call to attention to the interconnectedness between place, humans and the sociopolitical context they inhabit. For writers interested in horror, ghosts and the uncanny,

this reweirding can be a powerful tool to engage with commonplace settings and help us digest all those issues that might otherwise seem too close and bitter to swallow.

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