

## “He Did Not Know Which of the Two Shadows Was His”: A Posthumanist Reading of Amparo Dávila’s First Short Story Collection

“No sabía cuál de las dos sombras era la suya”: una lectura desde el poshumanismo de la primera colección de cuentos de Amparo Dávila

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**Abstract:** In this article, I propose a reading from a posthumanist perspective of a selection of short stories from Amparo Dávila’s first collection, *Tiempo destrozado* (1959), some of which have been translated into English and are included in *The Houseguest and Other Stories* (2018). The author creates fictional universes that exhibit the limitations of an anthropocentric humanist perspective through the multiple nonhuman entities that inhabit these texts. I describe how various techniques work in this respect. For instance, the author questions the link between sight and rationality while emphasizing other sensorial experiences; we can find numerous and diverse symbiotic relationships between humans and nonhumans, and many situations challenge the construction of non-humanity as the antithesis of the human. In addition to enriching the critical readings of the author’s work, this approach highlights its profound contemporary relevance.

**Keywords:** *Ámparo Dávila, The Houseguest and Other Stories, posthumanism, nonhuman agency*

**Resumen:** En este artículo propongo una lectura desde el posthumanismo de una selección de los cuentos incluidos en la primera colección de Amparo Dávila, *Tiempo destrozado* (1959). Algunos de estos cuentos han sido traducidos al inglés y aparecen en *The Houseguest and Other Stories* (2018). La autora crea mundos de ficción que exhiben las limitaciones de una perspectiva humanista antropocéntrica a través de los múltiples entes no humanos que habitan estos textos. Describo cómo funcionan varias técnicas a este respecto. Por ejemplo, la autora cuestiona el vínculo entre la vista y la racionalidad, y enfatiza otras experiencias sensoriales; podemos encontrar numerosas y diversas relaciones simbióticas entre humanos y no humanos, y varias situaciones cuestionan la construcción de la no humanidad como la antítesis de lo humano. Además de enriquecer las lecturas críticas de la obra de la autora, esta propuesta destaca su profunda relevancia en la actualidad.

**Palabras clave:** *Ámparo Dávila, Tiempo destrozado, posthumanismo, agencias no humanas*

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At the end of “La quinta de las celosías,” one of the twelve short stories included in Amparo Dávila’s *Tiempo destrozado*, a man follows a woman along a path that leads them to the end of her house’s backyard. The nocturnal journey that might otherwise seem ordinary turns into a situation where space and time are disrupted. The man, named Gabriel, walks behind Jana, the woman, and notices a presence following him. As he hears the unknown footsteps approaching, he enters a state where trepidation and hopelessness converge. Gabriel does not turn around; instead, he decides to keep going until the footsteps are so close that, when he sees two shadows projected in front of him, he no longer knows which of them is his. At this moment, Gabriel is unable to differentiate the unknown presence from himself. My essay’s title refers to this passage because I believe it encapsulates Dávila’s unrelenting efforts to decenter the human. The mixed shadows become a representation of how hazy the lines that define humanity can be, a metaphor that highlights how, far from the blinding presence of light, the separation between human and nonhuman loses meaning.

*Tiempo destrozado* (1959) includes some of the short stories by Amparo Dávila that have received the most attention from critics— “Alta cocina,” “La señorita Julia,” and “El huésped”—the latter being, arguably, the most influential of them all. Numerous scholars have pointed out that the texts in this volume exemplify some of the recurrent features of Dávila’s work, among them her predilection for an expression of the fantastic, in between suspense and horror, that is sustained by insinuations and absences (Carrera Garrido 188). In addition to *Tiempo destrozado*, Amparo Dávila is the author of the collections of short stories *Música concreta* (1961), *Árboles petrificados* (1977), and *Con los ojos abiertos* (2008), this last one published as part of a volume that collects her prose: *Cuentos reunidos* (2009). Additionally, her short stories have been included in multiple anthologies. An English-language collection of her work appeared in 2018 under the title *The Houseguest & Other Stories*, composed mainly of texts from *Tiempo destrozado* and *Música concreta*. Besides being a storyteller, Dávila was also an active poet, leaving us *Salmos bajo la luna* (1950), *Perfil de soledades* (1954), *Meditaciones a la orilla del sueño* (1954), and *El cuerpo y la noche*, a series of poems written between 1965 and 2007 that appeared in her *Poesía reunida* (2011). Dávila has had a significant influence on current Mexican writers. We can find explicit connections between her work and that of Cristina Rivera Garza (*La cresta de Ilión/The Iliac Crest*, 2002/2017), Guadalupe Nettel (*El huésped*, 2006), and Verónica Gerber Bicecci (*La compañía*, 2019). However, a more detailed analysis of her impact on current Mexican literature would generate a more extensive list.

The work of Amparo Dávila received modest critical attention before the 1990s. However, the second half of that same decade brought an uprising interest that has only continued to grow, coinciding with the so-called *boom femenino* in

Mexican literature.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the critical corpus on her work is now substantial, diverse, and constantly increasing. A significant number of studies follow two broadly defined trends. The first group focuses on issues related to gender and the body, including expressions of femininity and masculinity, relationships, sexuality, and desire, subjects that are undoubtedly fundamental in her texts.<sup>2</sup> The second trend has to do with how the author approaches the fantastic, the supernatural, and the sinister.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, these two aspects are not mutually exclusive, and both trends converge in many critical works.<sup>4</sup>

Some scholars have considered other characteristics, including how Dávila dialogues with formal aspects of the short story as a genre (Sardiñas Fernández, “*Tiempo destrozado*”), and the influence of her work on contemporary productions (Mercado; Zavala). Laura López Morales (“De animales”; “Para exorcizar”) has taken a slightly different approach, paying attention to representations of nonhuman animals with the ultimate goal of building a bestiary. Like López Morales, many critics have noted the central role of nonhuman beings in Dávila’s prose. In the following pages, I will engage critically with this crucial aspect.

In this article, I examine Dávila’s early work, specifically some of the stories in *Tiempo destrozado*, from a posthumanist perspective. To be more precise, I take as a starting point various theoretical approaches that seek less anthropocentric ways of reading and interpreting the presence of human and nonhuman entities in literature. The work of Rosi Braidotti, Francesca Ferrando, and Stefan Herbrechter are particularly influential to my point of view. I describe how such perspectives allow us to think about the different material and spiritual entities in this collection—including nonhuman animals, plants, monsters, and unknown presences—as nonhuman agents that draw attention to the fragility of androcentric

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<sup>1</sup> Many critics have noted the “dramatic emergence of women’s voices in the cultural sphere in Mexico” during the last three decades, using the term *boom femenino* to describe the phenomenon (Finnegan and Lavery 1).

<sup>2</sup> Among those who have proposed readings in this vein of the short stories included in *Tiempo destrozado*, we could mention Erica Frouman-Smith, Irenne García, Laura Cázares H., Marisol Luna Chávez and Víctor Díaz Arciniega, and María de Lourdes Ortiz Sánchez.

<sup>3</sup> The list of studies that have examined these themes is extensive, with works concentrated on Dávila’s first collection by José Luis Martínez Suárez, Fortino Corral Rodríguez and Nubia Uriarte Montoya, Ana Rosa Domenella, Édgar Cota Torres and Mayela Vallejos Ramírez, Miguel Carrera Garrido, Felipe Oliver Fuentes, José Miguel Sardiñas Fernández (“Lo sobrenatural”), Alejandra G. Amatto, and Miguel Candelario Martínez.

<sup>4</sup> The essays contained in the volume *Amparo Dávila: Bordar en el abismo* (2009), edited by Regina Cardoso Nelky and Laura Cázares, and *Un mundo de sombras camina a mi lado: estudios críticos de la obra de Amparo Dávila* (2019), edited by Claudia L. Gutiérrez Piña et al., as well as Victoria Irene González Pérez’s *El silencio destrozado y transgresión de la realidad: Aproximaciones a la narrativa de Amparo Dávila* (2016), are representative in this regard and indispensable references.

humanism. This analysis also seeks to emphasize the current relevance of Dávila’s work and propose new ways to study it.<sup>5</sup>

### Reading Amparo Dávila’s Work Through a Posthumanist Lens

When scholars use the terms posthumanism and the posthuman, they think of several, sometimes conflicting, meanings. That is, posthumanism is not a homogeneous movement or ideology with shared theoretical principles. Instead, posthumanism has become “an umbrella term” for a variety of positions that “share a common perception of the human as a non-fixed and mutable condition, but they generally do not share the same roots and perspectives” (Ferrando, “Posthumanism” 27). Given such multiplicity of meanings, it is necessary to characterize the viewpoint I take in this essay with respect to the posthuman and the possibilities of a posthumanist reading. The reading of Dávila’s early work that I am proposing is based on Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus’s work. These authors have suggested that “a posthumanist reading may identify oppositions between the human and the nonhuman at work in a text or practice and demonstrate how the vital difference between the two has to be strategically breached in order to trouble protection of the ‘essential purity’ of the categories” (97). In this sense, such a reading “aims to show that another and less defensive way of thinking about the human in its posthuman forms and disguises, and in its implication within the posthumanising process, may be not only possible but pre-inscribed within texts” (97). The numerous nonhuman entities that inhabit Amparo Dávila’s short stories provide ample evidence that the author’s work often sought to decenter the human, an undertaking in line with posthumanism as it actively acknowledges “all those ghosts, all those human others that have been repressed during the process of humanization: animals, gods, demons, monsters of all kinds” (Herbrechter 9). Many examples can be found in *Tiempo destrozado* in this respect: there is a man who imagines himself living as a tree in “Muerte en el bosque”; a situation where cutting a piece of fabric is equated to a crime in “Tiempo destrozado”; the wavering state between life and death of nonhuman animals in “La señorita Julia,” and, as we will see, multiple instances of blurred boundaries between human and nonhuman beings in “La quinta de las celosías,” “Alta cocina” (“Haute Cuisine”), “Moisés y Gaspar” (“Moses and Gaspar”), and “El huésped” (“The Houseguest”).

At this point, I would like to go back to “La quinta de las celosías,” the short story I introduced in this essay’s opening paragraph. This story follows Gabriel

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<sup>5</sup> Trying to maintain as much consistency as possible with the language used in this essay, I will be quoting Audrey Harris and Matthew Gleeson’s translations from *The Houseguest & Other Stories* if the text being discussed is included in the volume. For those short stories that have not been published in English, I will turn to *Cuentos reunidos*, providing titles and quotes in Spanish. In the case of quotes presented in Spanish, I will also offer my own English translation in a footnote to facilitate the reading of this article to those who are not familiar with Spanish.

Valle as he tries to woo Jana, a young woman of German origin. Gabriel is a man who recites poems by T. S. Eliot at the bar, who judges his friend's predilection for pop culture as a lack of depth in thinking, and who attributes a woman's unwillingness to hold a conversation with him to how lonely she must feel due to her unattractiveness. It does not take too much effort to think of Gabriel as an embodiment of Western androcentric humanism. In this regard, the character's description at the beginning of the story is significant: "Se miró al espejo para hacerse el nudo de la corbata, se vio flaco, algo encorvado, descolorido, con gruesos lentes de miope, pero tenía puesto un traje limpio y planchado y quedó satisfecho con su aspecto" (29).<sup>6</sup> Here, androcentrism is a worn-out category that, nonetheless, views itself uncritically. This notion becomes more relevant as the story progresses and Gabriel's certainties collapse, culminating in his visit to Jana's house.

After a period of courtship and then silence, Jana invites Gabriel to visit her home for the first time. Gabriel imagines that the night will end with the formalization of their romantic relationship. When he arrives, she opens the door and guides him into the house. It is at this point that Gabriel's expectations start getting shattered. Jana lures Gabriel to the backyard after a series of unusual events take place in the living room. There, he follows her into a room located at the other end. The story concludes when a mysterious creature, most likely a transformed Jana, attacks Gabriel and—we suspect—kills him. Alejandra G. Amatto has shrewdly pointed out the significant role of spaces in constructing the *unheimlich*, or the uncanny, in this story (107). According to Amatto, through the careful introduction of symbolic elements and descriptive details of mundane spaces, Dávila prefigures the fantastic event (116). Indeed, when Gabriel enters Jana's house, *la quinta de las celosías*, he finds himself in a space where reason and logic are insufficient to make sense of what is happening around him and to himself. We are in a territory dominated by uncertainty, absent of the light of reason, where reality leaves behind human paradigms and requires new, more expansive ways of knowing. Dávila masterfully creates this atmosphere with a combination of literary devices of repetition, accumulation, and comparison. The following quote provides an excellent example of the textual mechanisms that the author uses to create such an environment:

El rostro sonriente de Jana se iba y regresaba, se borraba, aparecía, los dientes blancos que descubrían los labios al sonreír, las pupilas dilatadas, se perdía, regresaba otra vez, ahora riendo, riendo cada vez más fuerte, sin parar; él se pasó la mano por los ojos, se restregó los ojos, todo le daba vueltas, aquel extraño gusto en el té, todo giraba en torno de él, los retratos,

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<sup>6</sup> Translation by the author: "He looked in the mirror to tie his tie, he saw himself thin, somewhat bent, pale, with thick myopic glasses, but he was wearing a clean and ironed suit and he was satisfied with his appearance."

el gobelino, las estatuillas, los bibelots; Jana se iba y volvía, riéndose; la araña con sus mil luces lo cegaba, el piano negro, los pasos en el pasillo, las ventanas con celosías blancas, la respiración, el rostro de Jana blanco, muy blanco, entre una niebla perdiéndose, regresando, acercándose, los dientes, la risa, los pasos nuevamente, la respiración detrás de la puerta, las figuras danzando sobre la hierba en el gobelino, saliéndose de allí, bailando sobre el piano, en la chimenea, aquel sabor, aquel gusto tan raro del té... (37)<sup>7</sup>

At first glance, this fragment might seem like it originated in a writing instructor’s nightmare. Periods are absent; commas and semicolons predominate in their place. We will not even find one in the end; the author chooses an ellipsis instead. We see the continuous use of asyndeton; no conjunctions indicate when a series of phrases will conclude. Through form, Dávila is emphasizing the collapse of rigid limits and closed categories. We also notice that, with the use of antithesis, she destabilizes the spatial referents of this scene. Jana leaves and comes back, appears and disappears, almost simultaneously. Far and near, here and away, become fluid. Numerous figures of repetition, polyptoton and anadiplosis among them, place us in the eye of a vortex. The same words and phrases pass in front of the reader over and over again (“sonriente”/“sonreír”/“riendo”/“riéndose”/“risa”; “blancos”/“blancas”/“blanco”; “aquel extraño gusto”/“aquel sabor”/“aquel gusto tan raro”), sometimes altered by the force of the current. Gabriel, the human, is located at the center not to assert his dominance but at the mercy of a whirlwind tearing his conception of reality to pieces, tearing our conception of reality to pieces. The senses are crucial to accomplish this goal.

Other critics have pointed out the sensorial nature of Dávila’s work, the importance of sight in particular. Óscar Mata Juárez asserts that the gaze is the most significant element in her prose, playing a critical role in most of her texts (15). “La quinta de las celosías” is no exception. There is an emphasis on what Gabriel can and cannot see, and it is through his gaze that Dávila builds and destroys his world. Adriana Álvarez Rivera has noted how sight and hearing work in tandem to produce fear in this particular text (3). Gabriel can only hear the mysterious breathing on the other side of the door and the steps behind him in the backyard. Beyond generating fear, however, a recalibration process between sight and hearing—but also taste and balance—is taking place. Gabriel rubs his eyes because overwhelming sensory evidence has broken the connection between sight and rationality: The tea, the

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<sup>7</sup> “Jana’s smiling face went away and came back, it faded, it appeared, the white teeth revealed by the lips when smiling, the dilated pupils, she disappeared, she came back again, now laughing, laughing louder each time, without stopping; he passed his hand over his eyes, he rubbed his eyes, everything was spinning, that strange taste in the tea, everything spun around him, the portraits, the tapestry, the statuettes, the bibelots; Jana went away and returned, laughing; the chandelier with its thousand lights blinded him, the black piano, the steps in the corridor, the windows with white lattices, the breathing, Jana’s white face, very white, disappearing amidst a mist, coming back, approaching, the teeth, the laughter, the steps once more, the breathing behind the door, the figures dancing on the tapestry’s grass, coming out of it, dancing on the piano, in the fireplace, that flavor, that odd taste of the tea...” (Unless stated otherwise translations are mine).

breathing, the room spinning, the ceiling light blinding him. His confusion is understandable. After all, observation is a pillar of the age of enlightenment and the light of reason the banner of human exceptionalism. Given the powerlessness of sight, his auditory, vestibular, and gustatory systems are called to make sense of the situation and, in turn, they open the door to the unknown, a space and time that are not governed by human rationality. Overall, this text illustrates how Dávila relies on a combination of form and attention to the senses to destabilize rigid categories, showing how unstable the limits between the human and the nonhuman are.

### **Nonhuman Agents and Assemblages**

Scenes that decenter the role of the human to focus on nonhuman beings abound in many stories of *Tiempo destrozado*. Moreover, it is not unusual for human characters to accept a new upturned reality where they become part of unexpected collectives. Whether they want it or not, they establish relationships that force them to recognize the agency of nonhuman beings. Dávila's universes are populated by assemblages, in Deleuzian terms, formed by human and nonhuman actants. Recently, efforts to rethink and re-elaborate the notion of agency have brought posthumanist scholars to a point of convergence with those in political ecology, environmental thought, literary criticism, and science studies. Jeffrey Scott Marchand has described how the concept of agency in literary studies has traditionally been linked to limited notions of subjectivity and power, built from a perspective that privileges humanistic precepts such as intentionality, rationality, and voice (292). That is, by defining agential beings in anthropocentric terms, we have limited our understanding of the role of nonhuman beings and forces in shaping our world.

Aware of the historical limitations of the notion of agency, many scholars have sought to expand it to nonhuman actants. For example, Jane Bennett builds on Deleuze and Guattari's work to propose the idea of assemblages of vibrant matter, that is, groupings that can be formed by human and nonhuman, living and nonliving elements (23). Each of these elements has a vital force; however, the grouping's "ability to make something happen" is distinct from the collective sum of forces, which Bennett calls the agency of the assemblage (24). These collectives of vibrant or dynamic materialities function as actants without a central mind that, individually, cannot determine the impact of the group. Similarly, Stacy Alaimo has highlighted the need to recognize the material world as agential. Such recognition "demands more responsible, less confident epistemologies" that encourage us, humans, to imagine ourselves in constant interchange with other material entities, to understand the world as a realm of interconnected agencies, to admit their unpredictability, and to accept the limits of human knowledge (22). Dávila's work

provides a space for these types of epistemologies through the representation of human-nonhuman collectives. This is the case in “Moisés y Gaspar” (“Moses and Gaspar”).

“Moses and Gaspar” begins with Kraus, a first-person protagonist narrator, describing the pain he feels after the death of his brother, Leonidas. Kraus gives us access to his mourning process in the first pages of the story, focusing his narration on past experiences with his brother and on the profound sense of loss he is now bearing. However, he soon realizes that his suffering is not exclusive. Moses and Gaspar, the characters who give the title to the story, seem to be grieving too. The nature of these two mysterious creatures is never revealed. We only know that they lived with Leonidas and, with his passing, the surviving brother becomes their guardian. Candelario Martínez has proposed that through their presence and Kraus’s inability to communicate with them, Dávila asserts the limits of human language to contain and circulate knowledge (129). Indeed, it is not through language that Kraus interacts with Moses and Gaspar; instead, emotions dominate their relationship. By pushing Kraus out of the realm of linguistic communication, the author forces him—and us—to examine their interconnections at other, more horizontal levels.

The first moment of recognition comes after Leonidas’s funeral, when the three characters are together in the dead brother’s apartment. It is then that Kraus identifies their shared pain: “Then I realized that they were both silently weeping. The tears dripped from their eyes and fell to the floor; they wept with no expression and without a sound” (6). This scene encapsulates various processes that are taking place at once. First, the hierarchy that places humans at the top begins to collapse into a more horizontal state of shared emotions. Kraus, Moses, and Gaspar establish a collective in which the members have a distinct ability to “make things happen” or, in Bennet’s terms, form an assemblage of vital materialities. Second, the anthropomorphism of Moses and Gaspar is not complete. Although Kraus establishes a connection with both through their sense of loss, we notice that their behaviors contrast with Kraus’s emotional responses when he describes them. As readers, we can see that he recognizes their commonalities and that, based on his experience and knowledge, Moses and Gaspar are still unpredictable to him. Lastly, the author clearly identifies this moment in the diegesis. As we will see, Dávila populates her stories with what I call *anagnoristic* instants, moments when characters open the door to new epistemologies that will help them understand their shifted reality as a world of interconnected agencies, going back to Alaimo’s work. In general, the author signals such instances through the use of verbs that indicate the newly-gained awareness (“Ahora lo *sabía*,”<sup>8</sup> “Moisés y Gaspar” 85),

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<sup>8</sup> “He now *knew* it.”



understanding (“*María comprendió todo en aquel momento,*”<sup>9</sup> “La celda” 42), or acceptance (“*aceptamos sin rebeldía ni violencia,*”<sup>10</sup> “El espejo” 78), making sure that we do not miss them.

The spectrum of human-nonhuman collectives is vast in Dávila’s work. There are instances of mutualist relations when humans and nonhumans seem to benefit equally. Other times, we find commensalism, when some beings benefit without harming others. Nevertheless, parasitic collectives are perhaps the most frequent ones, and in such cases, nonhumans are often the ones located on the favorable side of the relationship. It is worth noting that the symbiotic relationships and collectivities formed in the stories of *Tiempo destrozado* are not limited to material beings; they expand to the territory of the supernatural. In other words, Dávila invites us to decenter the human beyond materiality. Because of this characteristic, pushing notions related to materiality that emerged in ecocriticism and political ecology into the realm of posthumanism seems particularly appropriate and productive in the case of Dávila’s work. In *Tiempo destrozado*, materiality itself becomes a rigid category, as many characters come to realize. In the process, they must consider a world that cannot fully be explained or understood with the tools provided by human rationality. In this world, the continuities, interconnections, and interactions between actants do not solely depend on their shared material constitution but also on relationships based on affective processes.

As proposed earlier, a key aspect in Dávila’s first collection—although we can see similar examples in her later work—is the presence of anagnoristic instants, that is, clearly defined moments of realization. Particularly noteworthy are those times when humans accept situations in which they are no longer in sole command, recognizing nonhuman agency. Such moments usually come after humans unsuccessfully try to reestablish control over their circumstances. For example, in “Moses and Gaspar,” the creatures’ violent behavior shatters Kraus’s previous life. He needs to move several times due to complaints from neighbors, ends a long-time romantic relationship, leaves his job to keep an eye on the creatures at all times, and is on the brink of financial ruin. In the end, Kraus reluctantly accepts a future shared with the creatures he now despises: “With the money I had left, I bought a small old farm outside the city [...] There the three of us will live, far from everything but safe from ambush and assault, tightly joined by an invisible bond, by a stark, cold hatred and an indecipherable design” (13). By taking steps to keep their collective safe, Kraus shows his resignation to a joint destiny and, at the same time, draws attention to their relationship’s affective nature, hate being the leading force in this case.

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<sup>9</sup> “*María understood everything in that moment.*”

<sup>10</sup> “*We accepted without rebelliousness or violence.*”

Similar anagnoristic instants can be found in “El espejo” and “La celda” (“The Cell”). In “El espejo,” enigmatic beings emerge from a mirror at midnight to besiege a hospitalized woman. She describes the situation to her son, who tries to help her. He requests a new nurse to take care of his mother at night, looks for another sanatorium to transfer her to no avail, and tries covering the mirror with a sheet. All efforts are unsuccessful. David Córdova Prado et al. suggest that since both characters see these visions, a level of reality is introduced to the story; hence, it remains undefined if the event occurs in reality or their minds (153). Many critics have pointed out in the past that this sort of ambivalence is a distinctive aspect of Dávila’s work. Mother and son are unable to keep the nightly visitors at bay despite their efforts. In the end, failure leads to acceptance: “No volvimos a cubrir más el espejo. Habíamos sido elegidos y, como tales, aceptamos sin rebeldía ni violencia, pero sí con la desesperanza de lo irremediable” (78).<sup>11</sup> Jorge Luis Herrera describes this moment as the characters’ surrender to the inexplicable, the external, the immeasurable (268).

Likewise, throughout the short story “The Cell,” María Camino has to deal with a mysterious presence. The being, identified only as “He,” visits the young woman at night in her room, and she cannot do anything to prevent it. Camino thinks that marriage might be her only escape and devotes many months to wedding preparations after becoming engaged. All the planning starts feeling like another oppressive force for Camino, who then longs for the ominous being’s nightly visits. The story ends with the protagonist imprisoned in a castle, surrounded by mice and flies—dead and alive—rats and men, at his captor’s disposition. Critics have proposed different readings of Camino’s situation. López Morales, for example, favors a symbolic interpretation of the many beings that end up inhabiting the diegesis. From her perspective, they are a product of Camino’s delirium, imaginary projections that provide an escape from an oppressive framework imposed by a conventional social order (“De animales” 184). On his part, Sardiñas Fernández recognizes the possibility of alternative readings and identifies a connection between the text’s supernatural elements, vampire narratives, and gothic literature (“Lo sobrenatural” 7).

As Kraus in “Moses and Gaspar,” and the mother and her son in “El espejo,” María Camino realizes that the connection that unites her with the mysterious being is inescapable: “In that moment, María understood everything. And she knew why she was so happy. She had been claimed forever. Nothing else would matter now. She was like ivy attached to a gigantic tree, submissive and trusting” (32). The plant metaphor used here does not go unnoticed, and it points to the continuity between humans and nonhumans in Dávila’s work that I will discuss further in the next

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<sup>11</sup> “We did not cover the mirror again. We had been chosen and, as such, we accepted it without rebelliousness or violence, but with the hopelessness of the irremediable.”

section. Whether a product of imagination or an example of the supernatural, the presence of nonhuman beings in these stories challenges human notions of agency and urges us to get comfortable with a world beyond the boundaries of human rationality.

### **Junctions, Exclusions, and Continuities**

Posthumanist thinkers have pointed out that, although definitions of the human have become increasingly unstable, it is important to recognize that the human has not only been considered the conceptual antithesis of the nonhuman, but also non-humanity has traditionally been constructed from what the human denies, excludes, and destroys (Karkulehto et al. 3). Prominent posthumanist scholars, such as Rosi Braidotti and Francesca Ferrando, have made significant contributions in this direction. Concurrently, the material turn of the humanities has provided opportunities to reflect on human-nonhuman continuities. Focusing on post-revolutionary Mexico, Susan Antebi reminds us that the emphasis on materiality has encouraged the revalorization of bodies marked by difference and their experiences, bringing “attention to the permeability between bodies and their environments, between human and nonhuman bodies, and between the material and the social” (13). The notion of vital materiality, a political project that no longer privileges humans over seemingly inanimate matter, is especially relevant. According to Jane Bennett, vital materiality “tends to horizontalize the relations between human, biota, and abiota” and provides a framework to think about the paths of systems beyond deterministic causality, reminding humans of their kinship with the nonhuman (112). Similarly, Stacy Alaimo notes the profound change in subjectivity that comes with the recognition that we are interconnected with the material world through the very substance of ourselves, our human bodies (20). The questioning of human subjectivity is also at the center of posthumanist scholarship. In particular, Rosi Braidotti describes posthuman subjects as relational beings, with three primary connotations: agency is not an exclusively human prerogative, subjectivity is not linked to classical notions of rationality, and consciousness is not viewed as the opposition between self and the others (45). Scholars of the posthuman, including Braidotti and Ferrando, have revisited perspectivism—signaling its origins and deployments beyond Eurocentric elaborations—and have defended its advantages when looking for more pluralistic ways of knowing.

One of the stories in *Tiempo destrozado* that I find most interesting in this regard is “Muerte en el bosque.” The story begins with a man walking down the street while reflecting on the demands of his daily life. He recalls his wife’s constant reminders of their family needing a bigger apartment when he sees an “apartment for rent” sign and decides to inquire about it. He finds himself on the rooftop of the

building, waiting for a distracted manager who cannot find the keys to the apartment he is there to see. Impatient, he looks at the sky and watches a flock of birds fly by. He follows them with his eyes until they arrive at a nearby forest. At this point, Dávila delivers a fascinating description of how the protagonist imagines his existence would be like if he were a tree. Although there is no doubt that we can read this act as a symbolic representation of the man’s desire to escape his unsatisfactory life, I would argue that the author is also engaging in an exercise of perspectivism, as the progression of the character’s thoughts reveals: “Sentíó entonces nostalgia de los árboles, deseo de ser árbol [...] vivir en el bosque, enraizado, siempre en el mismo sitio, sin tener que ir de un lado a otro, sin moverse más [...] descansando de aquella fatiga de toda su vida” (54).<sup>12</sup> Although it is clear that the man sees his transformation as an escape at this point, it is very telling that the author chose “nostalgia” to be the driving force of his reflection. Dávila is pointing towards a shared past as if the process of becoming a tree were not a new occurrence.

The idealized self-centered reality of his initial thoughts soon transitions into a reflection on the not-so-positive aspects of becoming a tree. He considers some of the dangers faced by these organisms, including those posed by other humans: “tener que sufrir los vientos huracanados que arrancan las ramas y las hojas... quedarse desnudo largos meses... inmóvil bajo la luna helada y persistente, sin ver el sol ni las estrellas... morir de angustia al oír las hachas de los leñadores, cada vez más cerca, más, más... sentir el cuerpo mutilado y la sangre escurriendo a chorros...” (54).<sup>13</sup> Even though sight and hearing are alluded to describe the plant embodiment experience, we can also read this description as a series of references to plant perceptions, such as the sense of light, temperature, sound, and tissue damage. The man’s imaginary transformation goes in the opposite direction of processes characteristic of a human-centered standpoint, such as anthropomorphism—which brings the nonhuman to the human realm to assign value to it—and animalization—which has often been used to question the humanity of specific individuals or groups of people. Furthermore, we find evidence of perspectivism. According to Ferrando, “[a]ccessing nonhuman perspectives means taking into consideration the existence of other species, their needs, their habits, and their co-evolution, in relation to our species and all the other species” (Philosophical 152). Indeed, the process of *vegetalization* to which the

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<sup>12</sup> “Then, he felt nostalgia for the trees, a desire to be a tree [...] to live in the forest, rooted, always in the same place, without having to go from one place to another, without moving anymore [...] resting from that lifelong fatigue.”

<sup>13</sup> “to have to suffer violent winds that tear off branches and leaves... to remain naked for many months... immobile under the frozen and persistent moon, without seeing the sun or the stars... to die of anguish when hearing the axes of the loggers, getting closer, closer, closer... to feel the mutilated body and the blood spurting...”

character in “Muerte en el bosque” is subjected disrupts his anthropocentric worldview. Moreover, by refusing to idealize plant life, the narrator avoids the perpetuation of a hierarchical order. That the man decides to enter the forest and become part of that collective, even if to die, confirms a posthumanist perspective in which human life does not take precedence over nonhuman life.

There is no doubt that literature has been a pillar of humanism as an anthropocentric project. At the same time, literature and literary studies have provided a space for approaches seeking to challenge anthropocentrism’s hegemony by decentering the human and exploring more inclusive epistemologies. In this article, I have proposed that Amparo Dávila’s first short story collection, *Tiempo destrozado*, exemplifies such a space.

As many critics have noted, Dávila’s early work introduces us to a version of the fantastic built on allusions, hints, and absences. It also illustrates the numerous ways in which the author decenters the human, defies dualisms, and recognizes the agency of nonhuman beings. A posthumanist reading of some of the short stories included in Dávila’s first collection allows us to see how, through the multiple nonhuman entities that inhabit these texts, the author creates fictional universes that exhibit the limitations of the human and encourages us to look beyond this category. I have described how various techniques work in this respect, emphasizing three in particular. First, in many of the stories analyzed, Dávila interrogates the link between sight and rationality, pushing characters to resort to other sensorial experiences that bring them closer to nonhuman perspectives. Second, we can find numerous and diverse symbiotic relationships between humans and nonhumans, in many of which nonhuman agency takes prominence. Lastly, the author challenges the construction of non-humanity as the antithesis of the human, as characters often cross the border intended to separate humans and nonhumans, showing its fragility.

Indeed, the invitation to read some of the stories from *Tiempo destrozado* from a posthumanist perspective, and by extension the rest of Amparo Dávila’s work, does not seek to minimize or challenge the value of existing criticism. Instead, I am looking to expand the range of critical possibilities by proposing less anthropocentric ways to read and interpret the presence of human and nonhuman entities in these texts. Finally, in addition to broadening the range of critical approaches to Dávila’s work, I believe that a posthumanist reading highlights its profound relevance, as it continues to stand the test of time when read from contemporary perspectives.

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