

Book Review

Ginway, M. Elizabeth. *Cyborgs, Sexuality, and the Undead: The Body in Mexican and Brazilian Speculative Fiction.* Vanderbilt UP, 2020.

In this study of speculative fiction from two literary heavyweights in Latin America, Brazil and Mexico, M. Elizabeth Ginway focuses on the representation of one icon, the human body, across different historical periods in these two countries. The author has chosen Mexico and Brazil for their many literary, cultural, and historical similarities. Both have similar economic trajectories: export-focused economies from 1880 to 1930 followed by import substitution from 1930 to 1955. Since in neither country was economic equality achieved, in spite of substantial growth, by the 1970s both countries experienced great social and political tensions. In socio-cultural terms too, Mexico and Brazil are similar in their philosophies of *mestizaje/mestiçagem*—racial mixing to form unique national identities. Also, both countries have strong traditions of speculative fiction: non-realist narrative, such as science fiction, fantasy, and horror. The author states that while in Anglo-American science fiction there is often emphasis on the mind-body dichotomy, in Latin America this relationship is more nuanced since “cultural traditions resist the idea of a mind without a body” (1). The body in its more ambiguous state is represented here by cyborgs, zombies, and vampires whose transformations, as per the author’s thesis, “show human resilience in the face of national and global inequalities arising from a past often characterized by authoritarian rule” (2). That is, while in the West these beings are often considered a degeneration of normalcy (e.g. human), in Latin America they can be viewed more positively as representing defiance to being completely de-humanized by economic and political forces.

Ginway (Ph.D., Vanderbilt, 1989), Associate Professor of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Florida, is a well-known scholar of Brazilian science fiction. Her 2004 monograph *Brazilian Science Fiction: Cultural Myths and Nationhood in the Land of the Future* (translated into Portuguese in 2005) is perhaps the most complete study of this genre in that country. She has also

authored numerous articles as well as co-edited with J. Andrew Brown *Latin American Science Fiction: Theory and Practice* (2012). Thus, Ginway has not limited her scholarship to Brazil or, as this new book attests, science fiction.

Here Ginway analyzes the body from two angles: biopolitics (an entity controlled by the state) and as an object buoyed and impacted by cultural traditions in Latin America, such as the Catholic church, the Napoleonic Code, racial hierarchies, and especially the respective national ideologies of *mestizaje/mestiçagem* in Mexico and Brazil. The overall theoretical framework upon which the author premises her study is the Ecuadorian philosopher Bolívar Echeverría's concept of the *ethos barroco*, according to which Latin Americans resist direct confrontation with capitalism's "strict definition of profit" by "renegotiating social reality in such a way as to avoid direct conflict or confrontation with the powers that be, while pursuing social survival and economic advantage" (11). Ginway also applies Echeverría's term *codigofagia*, which literally means code-eating, to describe how cultural, political, and economic oppression is often resisted by these non-human beings (e.g. cyborgs, etc.). Beyond Echeverría, the author also applies various theories of cybernetics, sexuality, and biopolitics throughout the book. Ginway takes a comparative approach to Brazilian and Mexican speculative fiction—mostly stories with a few novels—pointing out both similarities and differences throughout her study.

In Chapter 1, "Gendered Cyborgs: Mechanical, Industrial, and Digital," the cyborg is mainly viewed as a metaphor of late modernism. The works analyzed are from three key moments: the late nineteenth century, mid-twentieth century, and early twenty-first century. In all three periods cyborgs (or cyborg-like entities) are seen resisting the mandates of capitalism and subsequent social hierarchies. In the second chapter, "The Baroque Ethos, *Antropofagia*, and Queer Sexualities," the focus is on various types of queer identities. In the first section on "Women Warriors," female protagonists in various stories end up negating or questioning male heroic discourses. In the following section on "Women in Men's Bodies," stories studied are premised on female minds being placed in male bodies, thus disrupting and queering traditional gender binaries. In the last section, "Women as Other Species," female bodily transformations and identification with various kinds of animals—insects, reptiles, etc.—represent queer communities outside of traditional norms.

In Chapter 3, “Trauma Zombies, Consumer Zombies, and Political Zombies,” Ginway departs from the general Western concept of zombies as mindless “living dead” monsters to present them as metaphors of resistance to economic and political disruption and oppression. Trauma zombies represent the early twentieth-century period when populations in both countries experienced deep economic declines while consumer zombies critique economic systems and political zombies signal, ironically, an awakening to action against repressive governments. In the fourth chapter, “Vampires: Immunity and Resistance,” Ginway analyzes this familiar figure in popular culture as a “revenant monster that represents recurrent and unresolved historical issues” (137). In the first instance vampires represent foreign agents invading domestic spaces. Vampires can also represent female resistance. Thirdly, extraterrestrial or biologically re-engineered vampires actually defend subalterns.

Ginway analyzes in detailed fashion a good number of stories as well as some novels, ranging from the late nineteenth century to well into the twenty-first century, to illustrate her principal ideas. The author’s style is concise and coherent, clearly leading the reader from beginning to end. Even though most of the works studied here will be familiar to scholars of Mexican and Brazilian speculative fiction, the book’s greatest strength is that Ginway has broken new critical ground by producing a cogent and detailed comparative study of these two bodies of literature while couching it within the cultural and political histories of both countries. Thus, this book will be a valuable resource for not only specialists in these fields of literary studies but also non-specialists from both inside and outside of academia.

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