

# A Gothic Maternity in Pilar Quintana's *Los abismos* (2021)

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*Pensé en las mujeres muertas. Asomarse a un precipicio era mirar en sus ojos. En los de Gloria Inés, igual de altiva que una yegua y más tarde reventada contra el andén. Miré a mi mamá, que estaba inclinada como yo hacia el abismo*  
Pilar Quintana, *Los abismos*, 153

## Introduction

Any attempt to characterize contemporary literature faces a crucial problem of definition: how do we define *contemporary*? The clearest approach, and perhaps the most on-the-nose, would be to consider a set period ranging from the present and reaching back to an abstract date in the past. Next, one would have to consider who is controlling the conversation and what themes are dominating cultural production. If we take Latin America, for example, and we look at what has been written over the past twenty-five years, a key theme emerges. In narratives, particularly those written by women authors, the deconstruction or reimagining of motherhood in the face of rapidly changing family dynamics appears time and time again. *Casas vacías* (2019) by Brenda Navarro, *Mugre rosa* (2020) by Fernanda Trias, and *Sacrificios humanos* (2021) by María Fernanda Ampuero are just a few recent publications that problematize motherhood and, to go a step further, present motherhood as monstrous. The concept of a monster, according to Jeffrey Cohen's monster theory, is defined by seven theses, one of which is that "the monster is the harbinger of category crisis" (Cohen 1996, 4). Over the next few pages, I seek to identify and explore the concept of *gothic maternity*, a monstrous label that redefines motherhood, something often associated with love and care, into something that produces fear and anxiety while provoking questions related to the genre.

For the Colombian author Pilar Quintana, motherhood has been a central yet fraught theme in her latest two novels, *La perra* (2017) and *Los abismos* (2021), of which the latter was awarded the Alfaguara prize. *Los abismos* is narrated by Claudia, a young girl whose mother, also named Claudia, becomes the source of her daughter's anxieties. Claudia's mother is depressed and deeply dissatisfied with her life, her marriage, and her career, or lack thereof. Often overwhelmed by depressive episodes, she hides in the darkness of her bedroom, ignoring Claudia and her pleas for attention. The rare moments in which she connects with her daughter are when she is telling stories of dead women, many of whom were mothers too. She draws from stories that appear in the tabloids which tend to be harrowing and hardly appropriate topics to discuss with an eight-year-old child, but her mother relishes in the details and suggests her own theories regarding

the deaths. According to Claudia's mother, the cause of death is always suicide. These stories, shared from mother to daughter, become ghost stories, and the dead women haunt Claudia's imagination and provoke anxiety. It follows that the mothers in this novel, especially Claudia's mother, become haunting, scary, and even monstrous characters.

These stories produce a deep-seeded fear of abandonment in Claudia which manifests as overwhelming anxiety regarding the possibility of her mother's untimely death. Through Claudia's perspective, it becomes clear that she conflates bad mothers with dead mothers as they both threaten to abandon their children. I argue that the concept of the bad mother, as it relates to the Western tradition of motherhood, is crucial in creating gothic maternity as she produces fear, instability, and anxiety in the narrative and her child's life. The dead mothers that populate this novel are just as anxiety-inducing. In their proclivity towards suicide, dead mothers embody the ultimate form of abandonment and neglect while operating as a ghostly and gothic presence in the novel. While using *Los abismos* as a model, I will describe *gothic maternity* as an important contemporary literary theme that engages with the Gothic genre through the reproduction of gothic imagery by way of ghosts, monsters, and ominous symbols while attributing the most crucial psychological impacts of the genre, like fear and anxiety, to the mothers themselves.

## A Plurality of Gothics

The Gothic as a literary genre finds its origins in 18<sup>th</sup> century England with *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole and, when reduced to its most fundamental element, relies on an aesthetics of fear. This genre is characterized by spooky, foreboding, and ominous tones and often employs a variety of frightening figures such as ghosts, monsters, and vampires whose purpose is to produce terror and horror in the narrative. In the introduction to the edited volume *Latin American Gothic in Literature and Culture* (2018), Sandra Casanova-Vizcaíno and Inés Ordiz outline the various challenges to Gothic fiction in Latin America, explaining that "Latin American literary criticism... has been largely centered on the analysis of historical texts and, when focused on non-mimetic types of discourse, has favored fantastic literature

and, unquestionably, magical realism” (Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz 2018, 3). Albeit marginalized in comparison to magical realism and fantasy, there are several works of criticism from the past decade that explore the presence of the Gothic in Latin American literature and film.<sup>1</sup> Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz also describe how the Latin American Gothic “evolves in various ways, adapting to different socio-historical contexts and becoming a dark and complex response to different processes of modernity as experienced in different parts of Latin America” (5). In Quintana’s novel, she responds to the processes of modernity, focusing on how shifting family dynamics and opportunities for women during the late twentieth-century both collide with and are denied by social and patriarchal pressures.

To further define the Gothic in the Latin American context, Enrique Ajuria Ibarra explains in his chapter titled “Latin American Gothic” that “in the twenty-first century, the Gothic is accepted as a critical approach to the aesthetic movements that have dominated the region’s literature and culture” (Ajuria Ibarra 2019, 264). Ajuria Ibarra describes that “[i]n Latin America, terror, horror and the uncanny are reconsidered in narratives that develop isolation and social and political anxieties” (265). Not only has the Gothic been an important influence in literature, but it has also been a major influence in cinema, particularly in Cali, Colombia. In his chapter, Ajuria Ibarra also reflects on a subgenre that originates from Colombia and is called the Tropical Gothic, which he describes as a rethinking of “the Gothic’s flexibility and adaptability to explore monstrous and disturbing narratives situated in a location usually associated with sunlight, warmth and richness of natural resources” (Ajuria Ibarra 2019, 267). In this context, he suggests that the Gothic is used to “[reveal] the terror and anxiety derived from failed social and political projects” (270).<sup>2</sup>

The Tropical Gothic is also discussed in Gabriel Andrés Eljaiek Rodríguez’s book *Colombian Gothic in Cinema and Literature* (2022), which explores the presence of the genre in both twentieth and twenty-first-century film and literature. His book takes great interest in how the Gothic genre is used to engage with Colombia’s political history. With regards to the Tropical Gothic in particular, Eljaiek Rodríguez focuses on the genre’s boom in Cali, Colombia’s third largest city, located in the southwest. Due to its geography and climate, Cali is regarded as “hot land”, or *tierra caliente*. Eljaiek Rodríguez explores how “hot land” was regarded in Colombia’s nation-building projects as a savage space dominated by barbarism, which, given the region’s large Black and indigenous population, has obvious roots in racism (Eljaiek Rodríguez 2022, 32-33). Nevertheless, this stereotype of barbarism would later be appropriated for artistic purposes in the growth of the Gothic in Cali’s cinema.

In considering the relationship between motherhood and the Gothic, we can explore the contested category called the

“Female Gothic”, particularly as it relates to Juliann Fleenor’s work in *The Female Gothic* (1983). This term was first coined by Ellen Moers in 1976 and was relatively straightforward as it simply sought to consider the Gothic works produced by female authors. Fleenor’s work proposes a deeper exploration of the themes that appear in the representation of women in gothic narratives, and her approach suggests plurality in this area of research, emphasizing that there is “not one Gothic, but Gothics” (Fleenor 1983, 10). In a thesis published in 2018 entitled “Giving up the Ghost: The Gothic Maternity of Literary Modernism,” Shannon Leone explores the understudied question of motherhood as it relates to the Gothic. She focuses on twentieth-century English literary modernism with a specific interest in how the Female Gothic provokes complex conversations about maternal imagery and identity. Ginette Carpenter also explores the representation of motherhood as it relates to the Gothic in her chapter “Mothers and Others” in *Women and the Gothic* (2016). She analyzes two films in order to explore how “depictions of the uncanny and abject monstrosity combine with the visual tropes... to create unsettling depictions of feminine embodiment, pregnancy, birth and mothering” (Carpenter 2016, 47). Carpenter’s use of Julia Kristeva’s concept of “maternal abjection” along with references to Freud’s concept of the “uncanny” convey motherhood as sinister. With Quintana’s novel, I focus on the development of gothic maternity, which highlights the struggles of maternal ambivalence, the neglect and disinterest of the bad mother, and the dead mother’s resolute abandonment, while focusing on the anxiety and fear that this produces in children.

Quintana’s novel participates in the gothic tradition, as she develops a narrative that creates an ominous and unsettling tone, narrated by the innocent yet highly aware voice of an eight-year-old who is tormented by fear and anxiety throughout the novel. The author goes beyond a simple reproduction of traditional Western gothic symbols and installs the Gothic through imagery that is uniquely Colombian. In an interview with Silvia Frieria from Argentina’s *Página 12*, Quintana discusses her novel’s connection to the Gothic, describing it as an example of “gótico tropical, gótico colombiano o para mayor precisión gótico caleño” (Frieria 2021). *Los abismos* is set in Cali during the nineteen-eighties at a time where the Gothic was garnering a great deal of attention. Filmmakers Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina were members a group of young writers and filmmakers from Cali going by the name of Caliwod or the Cali Group, and they produced some of the most influential films in the development of the Gothic in Colombia, which they would retrospectively cite as examples of the Tropical Gothic. Some of these films include *Carne de tu carne* (1983) and *La mansión de Araucaima* (1986) directed by Mayolo, and *Pura sangre* (1982) directed by Ospina, the latter of which was dedicated to writer Andrés Caicedo. Caicedo was one of the most emblematic members of the Cali Group, who committed suicide in 1977, the same day his novel *¡Que viva la musica!* was published and, coincidentally,

the same year of the release of Colombia's first horror film *Funeral siniestro* by Téllez. Caicedo was deeply influenced by the Western Gothic tradition, and in an interview with *El País*, Quintana recognizes him as her "papá literario" (Quintana 2020).

In *Los abismos*, the gothic aesthetic is at times subtle, as Quintana avoids the more obvious and fantastic elements of the Gothic like the vampires from *Carne de tu carne*. Instead, the author creates her own fear-inspiring figure, the mother, while incorporating other symbols that connect her text to the Gothic while staying faithful to realism. One of the first ominous symbols that sets a gothic tone is a large black moth that Claudia notices while sitting in the living room beside her mother's dense jungle of potted plants. She observes how it "tenía las alas abiertas, con grandes ojos negros, pegadas contra el muro" (Quintana 2021, 56). Many readers might miss the importance of this scene as it relates to a Colombian superstition that if a large, dark moth appears in your home, death is on the horizon. Although her mother barely gives attention to the insect, Claudia is unsettled by it. Not only does this function as a gothic symbol, but it also foreshadows the anxieties that Claudia will experience throughout the novel as the fear of death, especially that of her loved ones, slowly consumes her.

Although the moth is not a traditional symbol of the Western Gothic genre, it fits within the Colombian context, as does the *viruñas*. In the third part of the novel, the family travels to a country home outside of Cali, and while talking to the groundskeeper, Claudia learns about the *viruñas*, a demon that lives in rural properties and comes out at night. In her imagination, she pictures it to be "resbaloso y calvo...de ojos brotados y uñas retorcidas" (Quintana 2021, 157), a veritable monster lurking in the darkness that once again links the narrative to the Gothic genre while giving it a Colombian flavor. However, even a superficial reading is enough to see that the *viruñas* is a lesser monster in the context of *Los abismos*. What provokes the greatest fear in the novel is not the thought of a terrifying monster scratching at the walls of the house, but rather the bad mothers and dead mothers that promise to neglect and abandon their children.

### The Myths of Motherhood and Maternal Expectations

In Diana Gustafson's book, *Unbecoming Mothers: The Social Production of Maternal Absence* (2005), she synthesizes the concept of motherhood and states that it is defined by the presence of "overarching social narratives that organize women's way of thinking about, interpreting, and performing motherwork" (Gustafson 2005, 24). It is within these narratives that one might begin to understand and identify the often-unfair binary of motherhood: the good mother versus the bad mother. These labels serve as "benchmark[s] for evaluating

mothering performance" (25). The good mother, according to Gustafson, is completely selfless regarding the needs and well-being of her child. To be a good mother, she must forget about herself and be ready to sacrifice anything for her progeny. The needs, dreams, and desires of the mother only are acceptable if they benefit the child.

These ideals associated with the good mother come from what many describe as the fundamental myths of maternity. In Yadira Calvos article entitled "La mitificación de la maternidad," she describes how, according to the myth, motherhood is "el goce de los goces... es el papel magnífico otorgado a la mujer por voluntad divina" (Calvo 2019, 470). Therefore, a mother who refuses to fulfill her divine role with joy is unnatural and thus acquires the label of a bad mother. The image of motherhood that is developed throughout *Los abismos* not only refuses to reproduce the myths of maternity but also destroys them. The mothers in this novel, if alive, are ambivalent at their best and psychologically abusive at their worst.

The bad mother, according to Gustafson, is more than simply the opposite of the good mother, although they are antithetical in many ways. The stereotypical image of the bad mother is one who "neglects, abuses or fails to protect her child. A woman who is unwilling or unable to perform her motherly duties is thought to be motivated by selfishness, self-absorption, and self-indulgence—all individual defects" (Gustafson 2005, 28). The only examples of selflessness and unconditional love are represented in the secondary characters in Quintana's novel, who do not assume the role of the mother, such as Claudia's maternal grandfather and Claudia's aunt, Amelia. In *Los abismos*, it is easy to identify a bad mother based on the features that Gustafson highlights, but it is also imperative that we acknowledge how the perspectives surrounding maternity and its representations have changed. Motherhood has moved, slowly but surely, away from its defining myths. Thus, the problematization and rewriting of motherhood should provide opportunities to analyze the many facets of the mothering experience with fewer value judgements. Nevertheless, from Claudia's perspective—which organizes the narrative—this value-based binary is still in full effect. She states clearly to her father, "Quiero otra mamá" (Quintana 2021, 171). When her father asks "¿Qué tiene de malo la tuya?", the answer is plain and definitive: "todo" (171).

In *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct* (1981), Elisabeth Badinter conducts an extensive research about maternity in France, seeking to answer the following question: Does the maternal instinct exist? The maternal instinct here is understood as maternal love; it is an instinct insofar as it "has come to seem rooted in woman's very nature, regardless of the time or place in which she has lived" (Badinter 1981, xx). If we accept that the maternal instinct is naturally bestowed upon all mothers,

then how can a bad/good mother binary exist? Should the maternal instinct exist, then the bad mother would be nothing more than an anomaly. Of course, this is not the case, especially considering how the label “bad” mother has become ubiquitous. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky explore the pervasiveness of “bad” mothers and how they tend to receive undo blame and criticism in their book *“Bad” Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (1998). Badinter rejects the idea of a universal maternal instinct and concludes that “the feeling may exist or may not exist; appear and disappear; reveal itself as strong or weak; be focused on one child or lavished on many” (309). Thus, in denying the universality of the maternal instinct, Badinter affirms the plurality of the mothering experience and sheds light on the negative experiences of motherhood. In doing so, she destabilizes the good/bad mother binary. Contemporary Latin American literature’s fascination with the rewriting of motherhood and family dynamics also reaffirms this plurality.

### Creating the *Mala Madre*

In 1974, Andrés Caicedo published his self-proclaimed masterpiece, a short story entitled “La maternidad”, which begins with the young narrator describing a string of strange deaths that occur in the summer before he is to start the new year of high school. Later at a party, the narrator meets a beautiful girl, Patricia, and almost immediately decides, “le haré un hijo a esta mujer” (Caicedo 2014, 298). The narrator uses Patricia’s body to fulfill his desire of transcendence through reproduction, and then she is discarded. The mother, according to the narrator, “[n]o cuidó bien a nuestro hijo. No quiso tampoco volver al colegio. Le perdió interés a todo, se pasaba los días sin asearse ni asear la casa, mal sentada en una silla, presa de un vacío” (300, my emphasis). The “vacío” is most likely caused by post-partem depression in the case of Patricia, but it is not dissimilar from the abysses found in Quintana’s novel. Caicedo’s short story shows a disregard towards the maternal body and denies readers a true understanding of the mother’s motivations that lead her to ultimately abandon her child, in part, because she is no more than a vessel for the narrator’s needs. The narrator supports her rejection of motherhood, even encouraging it as he injects the sleeping mother with cocaine, making evident that the bad mother is a product of much more than her personal faults.

In *Los abismos*, motherhood is not a joyous experience, but rather one met with ambivalence. This is first made clear through the stories about Claudia’s maternal grandmother, a woman easily labeled as a bad mother according to the criterion that Gustafson outlines of the stereotypically bad mother. In the first part of the novel, Claudia’s mother describes the abandonment that she felt as a child. Her mother was absent, playing cards with her friends, and ignoring Claudia’s mother whenever possible. During one of these card games, the

grandmother was asked by another mother why she decided not to have more kids. While gesturing at Claudia’s mother, just a young girl at the time, her grandmother offhandedly responds, “si hubiera podido evitarlo, tampoco habría tenido a ésta” (Quintana 2021, 16). Claudia’s mother remembers how it felt as if the words “le abrían el pecho para meterle una mano y arrancarle el corazón” (16). Despite the pain that she felt during this experience, she still reproduces elements of this mothering style in her relationship with Claudia. Being unwanted and having an ambivalent, uninterested mother, deeply impacts both Claudia and her mother.

In “‘Malas Madres’: La Construcción Social de La Maternidad”, Cristina Palomar Vereá emphasizes how the impact of unwanted motherhood is detrimental to both mother and child. Vereá explains how

convertirse en madre sin cuestionarse las razones, los motivos o, inclusive a veces, las circunstancias en que una se convierte en madre, puede ser la fuente de catástrofes subjetivas muy serias desde cuadros psicopatológicos severos hasta condiciones de vida miserables para estas mujeres, para sus hijas o hijos y para quienes conviven con ellas. (Vereá 2004, 14)

There is an expectation to have children for both Claudia’s mother and grandmother and thus motherhood feels forced and not chosen. In an interview with *The Objective*, Quintana comments on the ambivalence between being a woman and being a mother in the novel, saying, “[n]uestras madres se casaron y formaron familias porque era la imposición social. Eso era para lo que habían nacido y lo hicieron. Yo recuerdo llegar del colegio y encontrar a mi mamá, ya liberada de ciertos deberes de la maternidad, un poco frustrada” (Quintana 2022). This frustration is palpable in the novel, not only through the memories that Claudia’s mother shares about her childhood, but also in her treatment of Claudia. Although Claudia’s mother expresses that she “no quería ser como [la] abuela” (Quintana 2021, 15), she seems powerless to avoid it. Unlike the grandmother who was constantly absent, Claudia’s mother plants herself in the home, but her presence becomes ghostly, especially after her affair with Aunt Amelia’s husband, Gustavo.

Presented through Claudia’s eyes, her mother epitomizes Gustafson’s definition of a bad mother, “motivated by selfishness, self-absorption, and self-indulgence” (Gustafson 2005, 28). However, readers also see that many of her choices and the characteristics of her mothering style are the result of both depression and dissatisfaction with her life. Readers learn that her dreams of a career in law were squashed when her father vehemently prohibited further study by stating that “lo que hacían las señoritas decentes era casarse y que cuál universidad ni Derecho ni qué ocho cuartos” (Quintana 2021, 19). Claudia also describes how her mother felt a social pressure to marry her father, a man many years her senior. Just

like the oppressive heat of Cali, this pressure begins to feel like “una sogá en su garganta” (27), and it is a discontent that worsens as time passes and that motherhood is unable to be fixed. These factors contribute to her depression, as she finds herself unhappy and living a life molded by social and patriarchal pressures that she would not have chosen for herself. It is understandable that she would fantasize about an escape, and before this fantasy turns into suicidal ideations, it first manifests as an affair with Gonzalo, her sister-in-law’s young and handsome new husband.

During the affair, she ignores Claudia and uses her as a shield for her actions. At first, Claudia is excited when her mother begins spending more time with her, taking her to the mall and buying her ice cream, but she quickly disappears with Gonzalo, who works in a department store called Zas. Claudia is left to her own devices. In one scene, Claudia is eating ice cream alone, hands filthy from the melting treat, and she contemplates how easily she could be stolen or get lost without her mother knowing. When Claudia enters Zas, she crawls under the clothing racks and sees her mother’s red pumps facing Gonzalo’s brown moccasins inside a closed fitting room. Claudia does not quite understand what is happening in the changing room, but she is keenly aware of her own feelings of loneliness and neglect as she waits outside.

When the infidelity is exposed, the neglect that Claudia experiences from her mother becomes frightening. At first, Claudia is afraid that she will lose her mother, and that her father is going to throw her out into the street as her Aunt Amelia does with Gonzalo. To her relief, her mother stays at home, but she quickly becomes a shell of herself. Here is where the Gothic begins to present itself in the maternal experience. Claudia’s mother becomes a shadow in the room, a lump in the bed, a monster in the corner. She blames her excessive tissue usage and consumption of allergy medication on “rhinitis,” a sinus issue, which is an excuse that is unconvincing for Claudia and readers alike. Her thinly veiled depression has a deep impact on Claudia, who begins to draw connections between her mother’s mental state and the fascination that she has for dead women in the tabloids. She seems to be jealous of them, specifically of the rest that they are awarded in death. At first, the dead women in her stories are famous and appear at distance in the tabloids, but as the novel progresses, dead women start surfacing in her community. Death creeps closer and closer, and Claudia fears that her mother will be the next to abandon her child.

Gothic maternity turns the mother, a traditionally comforting figure thanks to the myths of maternity, into an example of the *uncanny*. Freud explains the uncanny as something that “is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Freud 1919, 241). The mothers in this novel are a

perfect example of Freud’s uncanny because they are classic figures that become distorted and warped through Claudia’s anxieties and fears. These mothers are alienated from the traditional motherly representation and are depicted as ghostly and unsettling, especially as Claudia’s mother emphasizes the threat of suicide experienced by all the mothers in the novel, including herself.

### Ghost Stories and *Madres Muertas*

Throughout the novel, Quintana develops the image of the bad mother, but Claudia often conflates these bad mothers with the numerous dead mothers who appear throughout the narrative. According to Gustafson, “the bad mother is the absent mother—absent emotionally or absent physically from her children” (Gustafson 2005, 28). As a dead mother takes absence to its extreme, the figure of the dead mother becomes an important element of gothic maternity. Dead women, many of whom are mothers, populate the pages. They present themselves in tabloid magazines and are the morbid fascination of Claudia’s mother.

While hiding in the darkness of her bedroom, Claudia’s mother pours over magazines like ¡Hola!, and becomes obsessed with the untimely deaths of famous women.<sup>3</sup> When she tells these stories to Claudia, they transform into ghost stories. As she discusses the dead, she is recreating an experience that H.P. Lovecraft describes in his 1928 *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Our ancestors would participate in this oral story-telling tradition while sitting around a fire in the dark, discussing supernatural terrors to forget the real terrors of the day, if only just for a moment (Wisker 2002, 2). Although there is no fire in the bedroom, one might imagine how the light creeping through the curtains reflects on the bends of ¡Hola!’s glossy pages. The tragic stories that Claudia’s mother shares with her daughter seem to contradictorily distract her from her own domestic horrors while at the same time amplify her fascination with death and her interest in suicide. In *Female Gothic Histories: Gender, History and the Gothic* (2013), Diana Wallace explains that “there is a particular power of the gothic to express the erasure of women in history” (Wallace 2013, 2). In *Los abismos*, Quintana resurrects the famous women who are made a spectacle in the tabloids and challenges the narratives surrounding their deaths while exploring the darker side of motherhood. She places them at the center of the narrative, and they linger and haunt just as ghosts would.

There are three pop culture icons from the nineteen-eighties that capture the attention of both Claudia and her mother: Natalie Wood, Princess Grace of Monaco, and Karen Carpenter. The three women die, respectively, from a murder/drowning accident, a traffic accident, and anorexia. Claudia’s mother is convinced that the deaths are all suicides, projecting

on their corpses her desire for escape. When reading about Natalie Wood's accident, she tells her daughter, "accidental mi culo" (Quintana 2021, 91). With conviction, Claudia's mother claims: "ella se tiró sola" (91). With this comment, Claudia's mother introduces the concept of suicide to her young daughter, who struggles to understand why someone would want to die.

The importance of suicide in *Los abismos* cannot be understated. Not only does it emphasize the gravity of the mother's discontentment with her life, but it also furthers the novel's association with the Gothic. Suicide is a recurring theme in Gothic literature and film, and William Hughes and Andrew Smith assert in the introduction of their edited volume *Suicide and the Gothic* (2019) that the literary Gothic is "prefaced by the avowed intention of one character to exercise the ultimate preference of death over life" (Hughes and Smith 2019, 1). Suicide appears frequently in literary classics of the genre like Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798), but it also finds itself in the cinema of the Tropical Gothic in Mayolo's *La mansión de Araucaima* (1986) with the hanging of Ángela. Hughes and Smith argue that "suicidal acts are thus a form of display and performance," and this is exploited in not only tabloid journalism through the rationalization of the suicide note but in the Gothic genre as well (7). The tabloids that Claudia's mother reads not only dissect the deaths of these celebrities, but they romanticize their death and suffering. The suicidal ideations of Claudia's mother seem to grow as she reads the tabloids, and this reminds us in some ways of the "Werther effect," which was a compulsion of imitation that led readers of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) to commit suicide.<sup>4</sup> Even though these famous women's deaths are not confirmed suicides, they are easily interpreted as such by Claudia's mother.

Claudia's mother also becomes obsessed with the death of the actress Grace Kelly, referred to as "la princesa Grace de Mónaco" in the novel. Again, Claudia's mother remains unconvinced by the accidental nature of her death, which, according to the tabloids, occurred when she lost control of her car on a sharp curve. Claudia's mother provides an alternative explanation: the deviation in her driving that caused her to plummet to her death was intentional because "estaba cansada de las obligaciones" (Quintana 2022, 92). She comments on the princess's tiredness several times, and the allusion to suicide is so strong that even the young Claudia acknowledges its presence in the conversation. Claudia struggles to understand how a mother could abandon her children. She asks her mother: "¿Sin que le importara su familia?" (93). When Claudia has the chance to look at the magazine herself, she is moved by the photos of Grace's daughter at the funeral and empathizes with her grief.

With each story, the anxiety and fear that Claudia feels intensify. Claudia's mother also attributes Karen Carpenter's

death to discontentment with life. She is both a tragic and frightening figure for Claudia, as she describes how "en una de las fotos Karen Carpenter salía con los huesos de la cara marcados. La mandíbula, los pómulos, los arcos de las cejas. Los ojos, redondos y oscuros, parecían ya huecos. Era por poco una calavera" (Quintana 2021, 99). Karen Carpenter becomes a skeleton, and she represents the unrealistic pressures and expectations that push women to their breaking point. Beauty standards are something that upset Claudia frequently throughout the novel, as she is never described as a conventionally beautiful little girl. Thus, we can see that women in *Los abismos* face a variety of challenges that go beyond that of maternity. Each story seems to hit closer and closer to home, and the deaths of Gloria Inés and Rebeca intensify the fear and anxiety produced by the novel's mothers.

### Dead Mothers Close to Home

Claudia is struck by the deaths of the mothers in her immediate and extended community. When Claudia is pulled from class early, she feels her stomach sinking. She fears the worst. When she learns that Gloria Inés has died, she is relieved to know that her mother is safe. Gloria Inés was her mother's cousin and best friend. Claudia's mother is devastated when she learns that Gloria Inés plummeted to her death after falling from her balcony, but she is also unsurprised. Although Gloria's husband claims that she fell while pruning her plants, Claudia's mother is certain that it was suicide. According to Claudia's mother, she stopped taking her medication. Claudia imagines Gloria Inés falling and draws parallels between her and the dead women from the tabloids: "Gloria Inés dando botes en el aire. Cabeza abajo, cabeza arriba. Igual que la princesa Grace de Mónaco dentro del carro mientras se despeñaba" (Quintana 2021, 113). These explicit images occupy the imagination of young Claudia, but her concern has more to do with what death leaves behind: abandoned and devastated children.

After months of a persistent "rhinitis," Claudia's mother suggests that they stay at the country home of a family friend located outside of Cali. To get there, they must travel on steep, winding roads. The drive feels sinister, and any deviation threatens to throw them into an abyss. The image of Princess Grace's accident immediately comes to Claudia's mind. The country home is another element used to employ the Gothic as it is reminiscent of a haunted house. It belongs to the family of Rebeca, a woman who had disappeared more than twenty years prior. Rebeca was the mother of Claudia's mother's childhood friends, Mariú and Liliana. At the country home, Claudia's mother describes Rebeca's disappearance with an admirable commitment to detail. She even makes a comparison between Rebeca and herself when she says, "[t]eníamos tu edad y Rebeca, la mía" (Quintana

2021, 149). This comment increases the intensity of Claudia's fear of losing her mother, and Claudia tries to defend that Rebeca would never have disappeared on purpose as if to reassure herself that her own mother would not do the same. She tells her mother that Paulina, her very much so inanimate doll, "[le] dijo que una mamá nunca abandonaría a sus niñas, menos si son pequeñas" (149). Here, the haunted house, the disappeared mother, and the whispering doll all work to install the Gothic genre. Near the end of the family's stay, as if by magic, Rebeca's wrecked Studebaker is found in a chasm near the property. Her bones are all that remain in the driver's seat. Rebeca may not have abandoned her daughters on purpose, but she still abandons them in death. For Claudia, a bad mother and a dead mother, once again, are one and the same.

Although *Los abismos* is filled with dead women, Claudia's mother is the most ominous figure of all. She is a gothic character in that she provokes fear with her morbid fascinations and ghost stories. The effect of gothic maternity reaches its climax when Claudia wakes in the middle of the night and realizes that her mother is not in bed. She finds her outside with a glass of whiskey in hand, looking down into the chasm at the edge of the property. Her mother turns towards her and promises that they will spend more time together going forward, "Mañana salimos los dos. Te lo prometo" (Quintana 2021, 194). It is the promise of a "good" mother to be present for her child. As Claudia looks at her mother, so close to the edge, images of Karen Carpenter, Grace Kelly, and Gloria Inés surface. She grips her mother's arm and notices that it is just as thin as Karen's. Her mother stands just steps away from the abyss, an abyss not dissimilar to the one where Grace met her demise. When Claudia finally peers into her mother's eyes, it becomes clear: "el abismo dentro de ella, igual al de las mujeres muertas, al de Gloria Inés, una grieta sin fondo que nada podía llenar" (194).

### *Se tiró sola: A Reproduction of Gothic Mothering*

After seeing her mom on the edge of the precipice, Claudia's anxieties reach an inflection point. She can no longer tolerate the anxiety that her mother provokes. Rather than waiting in fear of the possibility of death, Claudia realizes it herself by way of her double: Paulina. The presence of doubles is a common theme in Gothic fiction, provoking uneasiness and discomfort when questions surrounding identity arise. Throughout the novel, Claudia seeks comfort in her doll Paulina, who she describes affectionately as "la muñeca más linda jamás" (Quintana 2021, 36). At times the relationship seems like that of a friendship or sisterhood, but in other moments Paulina is used to help Claudia work through complex feelings of abandonment and loneliness as well as the concerns and grievances she has regarding motherhood. In one scene, Claudia proudly tells her aunt Amelia

that Paulina "[m]e acompaña a todo. A comer con mis papás, a ver televisión, a dormir" (116). Claudia takes Paulina everywhere and loves her unconditionally, and in doing so Claudia becomes the "good" mother for which she has been longing. However, she also shows the potential lability of the mothering experience.

In what will become their last night at the rural property, Claudia's parents are surprised when the beloved doll is not seated at the dinner table as usual. When they ask Claudia about the doll's whereabouts, Claudia responds with disconcerting innocence that she threw *herself* off one of the property's precipices. Quintana produces a powerful and complicated scene that intersperses a dialogue between Claudia and her parents with flashbacks that inform us of the nature of Paulina's absence. When her father tries to clarify and suggest that Paulina must have fallen accidentally, Claudia remembers:

"[n]o sentí el vértigo al pie del abismo. No sentí nada. El cielo estaba blanco, las montañas negras, y una neblina gorda cubría el cañón.

—No —expliqué—. Se tiró.

Al principio Paulina se estuvo sentada en la valla, como los niños en el muro del foso de los leones. Tranquila, como si contemplara el paisaje.

—¿Qué estás diciendo, Claudia?

Quedó en el aire y yo agarrándola por el brazo.

—Que se suicidó.

La vi caer. Primero muy derecha. Luego se ladeó y perdió un zapato.

—¿La tiraste?

—Se tiró ella.

Paulina en el aire. Los piecitos arriba, la cabeza abajo y el pelo abierto, largo y moviéndose como unas alas" (Quintana 2021, 200).

In this scene, the commentary on motherhood becomes a product of Claudia's experiences with dead mothers and bad mothers. Gothic maternity is reproduced in the relationship between Claudia and Paulina. If we understand Paulina as the mother figure, then she embodies the dead mother, the bad mother who abandons her child through death like Grace Kelly, Gloria Inés, and Rebeca. On the other hand, if we perceive Paulina to be the daughter in this relationship, then Claudia has just committed infanticide and has become a bad mother par excellence.

The act of throwing the doll gives Claudia control over the overwhelming anxiety and fear of abandonment produced by the experience of gothic maternity that dominates the narrative. The anxiety of not knowing whether her mother will abandon her through suicide is suffocating. When she tosses Paulina over the edge, she visualizes the suicide that she so deeply fears. In essence, she experiences death through her double. Instead of just imagining bodies plummeting to their death in her mother's ghost stories, she now orchestrates it herself. The murder/suicide is a response to the despair she feels regarding her mother. The flashbacks make the scene seem especially sinister in the face of Claudia's cold and calculated witnessing. The reality is that she has been desensitized to death and loss. She is surrounded by her "muertos". The reproduction of mothering as monstrous in the Claudia-Paulina relationship represents the culmination of a narrative that develops itself around the concept of gothic maternity.

### Conclusion: Quintana's Ghostly Narrative

Throughout this article, I have placed Claudia's mother as the teller of ghost stories, but I would be remiss to not bring the attention back to *Los abismos*'s caleña writer, Pilar Quintana, as the most important storyteller of all. Pilar Quintana's novel focuses on the silences of history that Wisker refers to in *Contemporary Women's Ghost Stories* (2022). She uses the dead women in her novel to provoke a conversation about the plurality of the mothering experience while challenging the myths of motherhood. Her narrative brings attention to the violence of the patriarchal system which imprisons women in the domestic sphere while presenting maternity as an inevitability or a requirement. As Wisker explains it, "[w]omen, like ghosts have historically lurked in the background, trapped in grand and humble houses, disenfranchised legally and politically, and incarcerated in domestic spaces and domestic roles by norms of family, heredity and inheritance" (Wisker 2022, 2). In Quintana's novel, these mothers are also trapped in the domestic sphere and when they try to escape or seek personal pleasure, like Claudia's mother's affair and later her retail job, they are punished and vilified. Quintana's representation of motherhood does not necessarily speak to physical violence against women or femicide in Colombia, but instead reveals the insidious social and patriarchal pressures that impact women's mental health and quality of life.

Instead of reaffirming the good/bad mother binary, this article has shown how outdated and problematic these labels have become. It should be clear now that the good/bad binary

is a shortcut that presents a limited and incomplete analysis of motherhood based on fundamental myths that deny women and the mothering experience of nuance and complexity. Quintana shows the plurality of the mothering experience, and by the end of her novel, Claudia's mother recognizes her own shortcomings. She explains to Claudia that she tries to be a good mother, but it is difficult. Of course, it is difficult. Mental health plays a key role in *Los abismos*, and the depression that afflicts Claudia's mother is oftentimes debilitating. However, the use of the first person makes sympathizing with Claudia's mother challenging as readers become so invested in the feelings of anxiety, instability, and neglect that Claudia conveys throughout the narrative. Although Claudia is a precocious young girl who understands that her mother is struggling, it does not matter to an eight-year-old *why* her mother is ignoring her, it simply matters that she is being ignored.

Motherhood is a complicated experience, and although we as readers focus on the pain that Claudia feels, it becomes increasingly evident that Claudia's mother has experienced loss and disappointment time and time again. We can also notice how mothering is reproduced when daughters finally become mothers; the characteristics of the "bad" mother seem to transcend generations regardless of how conscious the daughters are of the negative impact that the same mothering approach had on them.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the novel, Claudia expresses her grievances about motherhood, but it is the murder/suicide of her doll Paulina that shows us the impact that both her mother and the other examples of mothering have had on her.

To conclude, gothic maternity denies the myths of motherhood and emphasizes the deadly impacts of maternal ambivalence both on mothers and on children. In *Los abismos*, it presents maternity as dangerous, threatening neglect for the child and suicide for the mother. Quintana's novel connects maternity to the Gothic genre and places it squarely in the Colombian context not only through her references to Colombian symbols but also by centering the narrative in Cali, a crucial space for the growth of the Tropical Gothic in the eighties. Gothic maternity is a strategy that allows us to rethink motherhood, and more importantly, it places women at the center of the story. In Quintana's novel, it challenges the silencing that has traditionally occurred in domestic spaces and reanimates women who have been forgotten. Motherhood is a scary place, but by exploring and processing the complexities of the experience, Quintana provides a fuller picture of motherhood that will help us to navigate changing family dynamics and to better understand the plurality of the mothering experience.



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### Notas

- 1 Some other examples that show the growth of literary criticism focused on the Gothic genre in Latin America include *Ecos gótico en la novela del Cono Sur* (2013) by Nadina Olmedo, *Selva de fantasmas. El gótico en la literatura y el cine latinoamericanos* (2017) by Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez, and Justin Edwards's and Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos's edited volume *Tropical Gothic in Literature and Culture: The Americas* (2016).
- 2 A great example of this can be found in the not so contemporary work of Soledad Acosta, "Dolores" (1869), when the title character becomes a leprous monster of sorts hiding in the woods. According to Felipe Martínez Pinzón, Acosta suggests the anxieties and contradictions of Colombia's nation-building projects through the gothic transformation of the title character (Martínez Pinzón 2015, 403).
- 3 Founded in 1944, *¡Hola!* is a tabloid from Spain still in circulation today that focuses on popular culture and the intimate lives of celebrities.
- 4 The "Werther Effect" is further elaborated in Tobin Seiber's article "The Werther Effect: The Esthetics of Suicide" published in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (WINTER 1993). Lisa Vargo also writes about the phenomenon in her chapter "Male and female Werthers: Romanticism and Gothic suicide" from *Suicide and the Gothic* (2019), with interest in emphasizing its impact on women writers and how it relates to sensibility in women's writing.
- 5 This topic is discussed in Almudena de Linos Escario's article "Madres e hijas: ¿Se hereda el modelo de maternidad?" *Empiria* (Madrid), no. 39 (2018): 175–199. Also, more canonically, Nancy Chodorow explores the mother-daughter relationship in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978).