



# **Desde el Cuerpo: Contemporary Explorations of the Body Authored by Latin American Women**

**FEATURING WORKS BY: LINA MERUANE,  
SAMANTA SCHWEBLIN, GUADALUPE NETTEL,  
AND MARIANA ENRÍQUEZ**

**20TH MAY-7TH JUNE, 2019, TAYLOR  
INSTITUTION LIBRARY, VOLTAIRE ROOM**

**EXHIBITION OPENING TIMES: MON-FRI, 9:00-  
18:30; SAT, 10:00-15:00**

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## *Desde el cuerpo*

### Contemporary Explorations of the Body Authored by Latin American Women

In 1990, famed Canadian author Margaret Atwood published a list of seven captivating, short formulations on the female body in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*. The list, titled “The Female Body”, and full of semi-autobiographical and feminist-motivated dark humor and imagery, was written in response to a letter sent in to the magazine. Atwood quips within this list that the female body is a “hot topic,” a sort of pre-packaged toy meant to be pinched, pierced, and prodded with all the contents of a dress-up trunk. The female body is a network of transparent plastics that “lights up when you plug it in.” It is a shape with many uses: “a door-knocker, a bottle-opener...as something to hold up lampshades, as a nutcracker,” just to name a few. It is a shape that sells things, but one that is also sold. Finally, Atwood—in an effort to mockingly assuage any concerns about the durability and the lifecycle of this shape—writes that “She’s a natural resource, a renewable one luckily, because those things wear out so quickly. They don’t make ‘em like they used to. Shoddy goods.”

With similar biting humor—mordancy emanating from a place of deep frustration and keen observational skills—and a flair for structural ingenuity, the contemporary Latin American authors and women featured in this book exhibition explore questions of the body in pieces of both long and short fiction. Many of them also write in what often seems a strange, specific, itemized, and almost edible Spanish. The limitations, frustrations, mechanics, materiality, and ambiguities of the body—touched upon in Atwood’s witticisms—are transplanted to and contemplated within the cultural, political, and historical particulars of the Argentina(s), the Mexico(s), and the Chile(s) that burst forth from the respective imaginations and experiences of Samanta Schweblin, Mariana Enriquez, Guadalupe Nettel, and Lina Meruane. All of these women were born during the 1970’s, a decade of great tumultuousness and instability for the Spanish-speaking countries of the Americas—a time period drenched in the blood that was hemorrhaging out of a series of dirty wars, dictatorships, and ascending numbers of citizens ‘disappeared’ (*los desaparecidos*).

And all four of these authors—likely inspired by these events and their resonances within the national(istic) narrative-making of contemporary Argentina, Mexico, and Chile—infuse their works with the politically-charged horrors of bodies present and bodies absent, bodies remembered and bodies forgotten.

The ambition of this book exhibition is to allow these various fictions—authored by women who are not only contemporaries, but also who know of and read each other—to dialogue with one another. Schweblin, Enriquez, Nettel, and Meruane each demonstrate talent for constructing sometimes fantastical storyscapes where men and women alike are afflicted with body problems. But there is feminist energy coursing through all of these authors' works that renders darker, bigger, and maybe more urgent the shadows cast by the literary bodies residing within these same works. In number 7 of her list, Atwood mentions the female brain and how it diverges in function from the male brain (of course, to satiric effect). The female brain is “Handy. Makes things work. Stick pins in it and you get amazing results. Old popular songs. Short circuits. Bad dreams.” Inspiration for the plots of these four authors' fictions—novels and short stories that are replete with episodes that feel pulled from the weirdest and worst dreams—could be argued as product of this patriarchal pin-sticking.

The inclusion of illustrations and watercolors by Mexican artists, Monica Loya and Rachel Levit Ruiz, seek to enrich and visually reimagine all of these bodily themes, facilitating a cross-medium dialogue. This book exhibition marks the first formal showcasing of these authors and a selection of their works in the Taylor Institution Library.

## **Sawnie Smith**

MPhil Candidate, St Cross College

MML Graduate Network (Library Officer)

## About the authors

### **Lina Meruane** (Santiago de Chile, 1970)

Lina Meruane is one of the most prominent and influential female voices in Chilean contemporary literature. She is part of the generation of writers who grew up under the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1990). Much of her literature explores the pains and possibilities that characterize childhood and adolescence, and often with focus on young girls and their transgressions of cultural norms during these developmental periods. One such example of this thematic preoccupation in her oeuvre is her debut volume of short stories, *Las Infantas* (Planeta, 1998), which revolves around the adventures of two young princesses. Her characters portray and *embody*—often in grotesque, bodily, and deeply frank detail—new and expanding female identities. The pursuit of knowledge, sexual freedoms, and self-expression by these female, fictive persons allow them to disrupt the patriarchal order (but not without enduring emotional and fleshly pain). The women and girls of Meruane’s fiction suffer both mentally and physically in defending their choices—some patriarchal price still paid. Meruane’s engagement with the written word is structurally diverse; she has published novels, essay, plays, and anthologies. She currently teaches at New York University.

## Works

### ***Fruta podrida* (Chile: FCE, 2007)**

In this novel, the protagonist Zoila is a young woman with diabetes who refuses to take medical advice or accept treatment in order to manage her condition, much to the annoyance of her elder half sister María who looks after her. Rather than controlling her diet, Zoila binges on sugary foods and sweets, deciding that she would rather die than submit to the control of a medical professional whose work contributes to a “*gran fábrica de cuerpos exportables*” (“big factory of exportable bodies”). The difference between the two sisters is emphasised, as María works for the family fruit export business, using pesticides to combat nature in order to grow perfect, unblemished produce. Zoila’s resistance to medical intervention can also be seen as a rejection of Chile’s post-dictatorship economic model of consumption. She prefers her wounded body under her own control, as opposed to the clinical, profit-driven world of the fruit factory inhabited by her sister.

### ***Sangre en el ojo* (Barcelona: Literatura Random House, 2017)**

This semi-autobiographical novel—considered by some scholars as a work of pathographic autofiction—draws on the author’s experience of developing temporary blindness due to a haemorrhage—a risk tied to her medical status as a type 1 diabetic. The narrator/protagonist is also named Lina. Structured episodically, with the location of plot shifting between New York and Santiago, the novel explores themes of bodily struggle and authority, sexual intimacy, and unconditional love. The central concern of the novel is that of a woman finding a new way to be herself in a world where she has lost her independence and must rely heavily on her family and her partner Ignacio. Her sight compromised by “*hilos de sangre*”

("threads of blood"), this Lina of the novel must reconceptualize both her relationship with her body—how she inhabits her form—, as well her sensorial connection to the material world. Her sense of taste and touch grow heightened, and that which makes contact with her mouth and hands—which include with increasing frequency Ignacio's eyes—is described in provocative detail. The reader acts as textual witness to this Lina who is blindly pushing and exploring the bodily boundaries that exist between her and those in her intimate circle. All the while, the reader is compelled to consider questions of identity, wholeness, and the body as a commodity.

## **Mariana Enriquez** (Buenos Aires, 1973)

Mariana Enriquez is journalist, novelist, and short story writer who is considered part of Argentina's wave of new narrative literature (*nueva narrativa argentina*). Her fictions are filled with sometimes politically-charged and often geographically-grounded grotesqueries—with bodies present and bodies absent: groups of young people attempting to make paranormal contact with "*los desaparecidos*" ("the disappeared") of Argentina's Dirty War (1974-1983), a woman provided with nothing but inscrutable talk about dead children as explanation for the odor of rotting flesh that pervades the air in Barcelona, and ardent fans of an Argentinian rock star, Santiago Espina, moved to act literally on their idol's urging in his suicide note, which reads: "*Carne es comida. Carne es muerte. Ustedes saben cuál es el futuro*" ("Flesh is meat. Flesh is death. You all know what the future is."), and feast on his unearthed remains. Enriquez received a degree in communication studies from the Universidad Nacional de La Plata in the city of La Plata, Argentina. Her first novel, *Bajar es lo peor*, was published when she was 21. And in her career, she has contributed to a number of international publications, including: *Granta*, *The New Yorker*, and *Asymptote* (to name a few).

## **Works**

### ***Los peligros de fumar en la cama* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2018)**

With this collection of 12 short stories—Enriquez's first to be published—the Argentinian author has been described by literary critics as weird-ing the quotidian. The motions of inoffensive body parts, the familiar layouts of urban spaces, and the rhythms of mundane, daily life are turned slightly on edge, made lopsided and creepy by and through Enriquez's language. These products of Enriquez's literary imagination are also suffused with subtle supernaturalisms and demonstrate preoccupation with the lives led by female characters. The women and girls residing in this collection variously dig up human bones in their back gardens, develops fetishistic fixations with ailing hearts, and swim unwittingly in dark, infernal waters. And these are but entry points into stories whose atmospheres and evolutions are easily spoiled with too much detail. Each story—many of which, again, are narrated by female characters—is distinct in specifics and boasts a self-contained plot. But there is a through-line of ambient terror achieved through similar, stylistic means that threads through the collection's 12 stories.

Making rich use of her home country's geography—Argentina's rural and metropolitan expanses often function as settings—Enríquez explores big questions (and big problems) that shape our waking lives and social collectivities through the construction of very particular nightmares.

## **Samanta Schweblin** (Buenos Aires, 1978)

Samanta Schweblin is a writer of short stories and novels, many of which have received numerous awards, including the prestigious Juan Rulfo Prize in 2012 for her short story, *Un hombre sin suerte*. Her works—which have been translated into more than twenty languages—demonstrate preoccupation with the perverse and the sinister. Within Schweblin's literary landscapes, children are infected and disfigured by agricultural pesticides, and others in this age bracket metamorphose into butterflies or develop insatiable cravings for live birds. The adults residing in her works do not escape unscathed either. They are often lampooned for their earnest and sedate engagement with the absurdities of violence—an unremarkable man tasked with beating stray dogs to death in order to ensure entry into a crime syndicate (only to fail), or another who makes his considerable living by painting portraits of human heads smashing against pavement. In 2010, Schweblin was chosen by *Granta* magazine as one of the 22 best writers in Spanish under 35. The English-language translation of her debut novel, *Distancia de rescate* (Fever Dream), published in the original Spanish in 2014, was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2017. In 2019, she was once again nominated for the Man Booker International Prize for the English-language translation of one of her short story collections, *Pájaros en la boca* (Mouthful of Birds), published in the original Spanish in 2009. Originally from Buenos Aires, Schweblin currently lives in Berlin.

## **Works**

### ***Pájaros en la boca* (Barcelona: Literatura Random House, 2017)**

In this collection of 22 short stories, Schweblin intermixes the mundane and the fantastic to unnerving effect. A merman chats up a frustrated, lonely woman by a seaside bar. Desperate couples camp out in desolate terrain to capture unnamed and undescribed prizes. A census taker inadvertently reawakens a forgotten hunger in a town inhabited by strangely apathetic people (and pets). A phantom-like band of abandoned brides seem obliged to wander a bleak highway, some with vengeance on the mind. And a woman's cadaver, hastily stuffed into a suitcase, is warmly received as an artistic spectacle. It is difficult to summarize in few words the tight, precise atmospheres of creepiness stirred in each one of Schweblin's short fictions. And to describe too much would be to ruin the visceral effect of reading her stories for the first time. But suffice to say that quiet brutalities crowd the lives of the her fictional (mer)men, women, and children. Schweblin, in particular—with her depiction and exploration of women and girls in this collection—demonstrates talent in making use of the weird and uncanny to condemn patriarchal oppressions.

***Distancia de rescate* (Mexico: Almadía, 2014; Barcelona: Literatura Random House, 2019)**

In this haunting psychological novel, a woman named Amanda lies dying in a hospital bed. A boy, David, sits next to her and presses the delirious and disoriented Amanda to answer a series of questions about a vacation she took with her daughter, Nina, to the countryside. The nature of Amanda and David's relationship is unclear, and the narrative unfolds from that ambiguity. David compels Amanda to recount to him, pace-by-pace, her memories of meeting and befriending Carla, David's mother, and all that unfolded during mother and daughter's country sojourn. Readers have described this short novel as disquieting, claustrophobic, intense, and surreal. A deep dive into Schweblin's tense, descriptive language—and the atmosphere of mounting dread she constructs in that language—does nothing to diminish the legitimacy of those descriptors. Amanda's scattered but increasingly vivid responses to David's line of questioning summon and describe a countryside town that is inhabited by disfigured children and secretive adults. A certain maternal anxiety courses through the novel, with the Spanish-language title of the novel speaking to that anxiety—“*distancia de rescate*” or “rescue distance”—what is later explained as a continuous mental calculation Amanda makes of how long it would take to rescue her daughter Nina in an emergency. Meanwhile, the English-language title of the novel, *Fever Dream*, captures in more palpable language the urgent, feverish tones of Amanda and David's back-and-forth. Exploring additional but equally central themes of ecological disaster, Schweblin creates a dreamlike and unsettling tale.

***Kentukis* (Barcelona: Literatura Random House, 2018)**

With her most recent novel, Schweblin has located contemporary anxieties around our relationship with (and dependence on) diffuse social technologies—the many exhibitionist and voyeuristic practices encouraged and facilitated by virtual, social connectivity—and pulled from those anxieties the necessary makings for a truly innovative piece of not-so-farfetched science fiction. The narrative is organized around a collection of glimpses into people's lives as they explore and buy into the newest techno-craze: kentukis (plural). A kentuki—described as cute in appearance—is part toy, part robot, part pet, and yet none of those things fully. Its functionality proves sinister. A different stranger controls and “inhabits” each kentuki. Allowed to roam around homes and private, quotidian spaces, the kentukis—or rather, the people controlling them—are granted constant observation of another person's life. Drawing comparisons with the series *Black Mirror*, several characters from different continents, of widely varying ages and social status, come into contact with each other in this twisted, transcontinental labyrinth of virtual reflections and spaces—this hall of kentuki mirrors. The novel compels readers to contemplate questions around visibility, the politics of privacy, and the narrowing spaces between the animate and the inanimate.



***A review of 'Mariposas'*** (from *Pájaros en la boca*)

In this short story from the collection *Pájaros en la boca*, the parents Calderón and Gorriti wait for their respective children outside the school doors. Calderón repeatedly tells Gorriti how beautiful his daughter looks today—the colour of the dress she's wearing goes so well with the colour of her eyes, just wait until you see her. From references to the tooth fairy and to the way the children usually emerge covered in paint or chocolate, we realise that Calderón and Gorriti's children must be quite young.

While Calderón continues to dwell on his daughter's beauty, he catches a butterfly and starts to manipulate its wings, to the extent that he ends up with half a wing stuck to one of his fingers while the rest of the butterfly lies almost lifeless on the floor. Calderón laments the (inevitable) outcome and Gorriti makes an offhand gesture, encouraging him to put the butterfly out of its misery. Calderón responds by stamping on it.

Before Calderón has a chance to lift his shoe, the doors to the school burst open. Instead of the 'tumulto de colores' we were expecting as the children emerge in their different coloured clothing, 'cientos de mariposas de todos los colores' fly out towards the waiting parents. The classrooms empty, some parents continue to shout their children's names while others attempt to entrap the butterflies. Calderón, unlike the other parents, stands stock still, petrified that if he lifts his foot he might recognise the colour of his daughter's dress in the colourful wings of the dead butterfly under his shoe.

An arresting story that is only just over two pages long, 'Mariposas' encourages us to acknowledge the way women's bodies are controlled and contained from a young age with violent consequences. Calderón's young daughter is valued for her appearance, in other words for her body, but when that body becomes a site of agency—symbolised by the butterfly's attempts to escape from Calderón's grip—it is violently crushed. Yet the short story also eludes such a simplistic reading, calling for us to think about the claustrophobic relationship between parent and child, the nature of innocence and parental guilt. As readers we are overwhelmed by a series of readings that attack us in a flurry of wings but that, just like the butterflies, ultimately elude our grasp.

Christy Callaway-Gale

Lincoln College

## **Guadalupe Nettel** (Mexico City, 1973)

Nettel is a prolific young Mexican writer who has written novels, short stories, and essays in the realms of both fiction and non-fiction. In 2006 she was voted one of 39 most important Latin American writers under the age of 39 at the Bogotá Hay Festival. Her works have been translated into over ten languages and have won a number of literary prizes. Born with a birthmark on her right cornea, she has brought her own experiences of visual impairment—and the bodily dysmorphia generated within her by this impairment—into her writings. Her works are saturated with exploration of the limitations, ambiguities, and horrors of the body. Nettel also brings to her works an understanding of life on the periphery as a result of time spent in her childhood living in a largely immigrant community in the south of France (she later obtained her PhD in linguistics from the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*). Nettel currently resides in her native Mexico and acts as director of the *Revista de la Universidad de México*, one of the oldest cultural publications in the country. She is the second woman to hold this post in the eighty-plus years of the publication's existence.

## **Works**

### ***El cuerpo en que nació* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2011)**

Nettel's second novel is a work of autobiographical fiction and a sort of bodily bildungsroman. The narrator—in the form of soliloquy—relates her childhood experiences to a psychoanalyst from the perspective of her adult self. The reader (and the psychoanalyst concurrently) learn that the narrator was born with a visual impairment due to a birthmark on her right cornea. Medical professionals—uncertain as to whether or not the condition is curable—task the narrator during her recounted youth with performing tortuous eye exercises so that she may attempt to auto-cure this defective sensory organ. From her position on the psychoanalyst's sofa, the narrator claims that she found it easier to form bonds with other schoolmates who also boasted “differences”, other kids on the physical margins. Differently and shot through with political subtext, an important bond also develops for the narrator during her youth with a neighbour-girl—a Chilean child whose family fled the Pinochet dictatorship after her father was killed—, this relationship more rooted in shared emotional pain and loss than outward deformity. Within the literary confines of this book, Nettel explores with a searching respect the ominous undercurrents of childhood. In its totality, this story is built on the words of a woman who is attempting to look back (with both eyes) and contemplate her journey in and around the body in which she was born, *el cuerpo en que nació*.

### ***Pétalos y otras historias incómodas* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2011)**

As if seen through an x-ray, the characters in this book demonstrate all the traits that human beings usually want to hide. Each individual story highlights a different and worrying madness, where all existence is reduced to an unspeakable eccentricity. A Parisian photographer obsessed with eyelids, a Japanese office worker who discovers a strange affinity with cactus plants, a model who has been hiding something since their childhood, a girl who tries, in her own way, to fight death. With a sense of both irony and false naivety, the author introduces her readers to a line-up of men and women who appear normal but who all secretly engage in the logic(s) of misfits.

### **Full list of book exhibits**

Lina Meruane, *Sangre en el ojo*. Barcelona: Literatura Random House, 2017.

Taylor Institution Library PQ8098.23.E74 S26 MER 2017

Lina Meruane, *Fruta podrida*. Chile: FCE, 2007.

Taylor offsite TNR56205

Mariana Enriquez, *Los peligros de fumar en la cama*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2018.

Taylor Institution Library PQ7798.15.N75 P45 ENR 2018

Samanta Schweblin, *Kentukis*. Barcelona: Literatura Random House, 2018.

Taylor Institution Library PQ7798.29.C5388 K46 SCH 2018

Samanta Schweblin, *Pájaros en la boca y otros cuentos*. Barcelona: Literatura Random House, 2017.

Taylor Institution Library PQ7798.29.C5388 P35 SCH 2017

Samanta Schweblin, *Distancia de rescate*. Barcelona: Literatura Random House, 2019.

Taylor Institution Library Cataloguing in progress

Samanta Schweblin, *Distancia de rescate*. Mexico: Almadía, 2014.

Private copy

Guadalupe Nettel, *El cuerpo en que nació*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2011.

Taylor Teaching Collection PQ6147.A87 NET 2011

Guadalupe Nettel, *Pétalos: y otras historias incómodas*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2008.

Taylor Institution Library PQ7298.424.E76 P48 NET 2008

## About the Illustrators

### Monica Loya

Monica Loya (1990-) is a Mexico City-based freelance painter, illustrator, and muralist whose colorful works explore the mysteries and perversities of human, corporeal expression with a surrealist flair. In 2014, she graduated with a degree in visual arts from the *Centro Regional de Estudios Superiores Palmore* in the state of Chihuahua. Her works have received numerous awards and have appeared in both solo and collective exhibitions throughout Mexico. In the past few years, Monica has taught several classes on experimental watercolor in Mexico City.

### Works

*Bleu*, 2017. [Watercolour]

*Phases*, 2017. [Watercolour]

*Untitled*, 2018. [Watercolour]

*Untitled II*, 2018. [Watercolour]

*Ghost I*, 2018. [Watercolour]

*Ghost II*, 2018. [Watercolour]

### Rachel Levit Ruiz

Rachel Levit Ruiz (1990-) is a Mexico City-based freelance illustrator and visual artist whose works—sometimes in vivid color and sometimes in black and white—explore with clean and expressive lines both the dreamy and the nightmarish of the human body. Her illustrations also seem to take many thematic and chromatic cues from Mexico's rich aesthetic traditions. In 2012, Rachel graduated from Parsons School of Design in New York City. Her past and present clients include: *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review*, and *The New Yorker*. She was accepted into the prestigious *Alliance Graphique Internationale* in 2017.

### Works

From the series 'Shifted':

*Back Bend*, 2016. [Ink on paper]

*Male Nude*, 2016. [Ink on paper]

*Push*, 2016. [Ink on paper]

*Cara*, 2016. [Ink on paper]

This exhibition was curated by Sawnie Smith and Joanne Ferrari (Subject Librarian for Spanish, Portuguese & Latin American Languages & Literatures), with additional text by Christy Callaway-Gale.