

Introduction: Animals that from a long way off look like flies

Liliana Colanzi
Debra A. Castillo

Cornell University

The famous first paragraph of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* offers one delightful point of entry into the topic of speculative fiction in Latin America, and how it crosses continents and languages. Without any of the tedious scholarly apparatus common to academic work, Foucault cites "The Analytic Language of John Wilkins," one of the great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges' short texts, most often described as an essay. Wilkins was a historical person, whose life and works Borges soberly discusses through reference to other verifiable sources, giving this text the veneer of scholarly writing that is so familiar to us from many of Borges' best fictions, and reminding us once again that in the Argentine's writing, the line between fiction and scholarship is often intentionally blurred. The passage that so charmed Foucault comes by way of a comparison Borges makes between Wilkins' vagaries and those of the *Celestial Encyclopedia of Benevolent Knowledge*, attributed to the real-life translator Franz Kuhn. This Chinese encyclopedia, as we know from Borges scholars who have done exhaustive searches, is an entirely fictitious invention. Here's how Foucault starts his preface to the 1966 book:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought.... This passage quotes a "certain Chinese encyclopaedia" in which it is written that "animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies." In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that. (xv)

Foucault never names the Borges text, nor does he make any statement about its genre, so we have no internal evidence in *The Order of Things* as to whether Foucault understood the text to be scholarship or fiction. What is clearly important to the French thinker is that these words by the Argentine master “shattered . . . all the familiar landmarks of my thought,” making possible the imaginative leap that stimulated Foucault’s rethinking of the structures of Western epistemology, inspiring this highly influential cultural history.

Speculative narrative is often understood as an umbrella term to define genre fiction that takes technological advances as its point of departure. (Yet, in the Latin American context, as Foucault intuited, and is evident in the touchstone works of the great Argentine writers Jorge Luis Borges and Angélica Gorodischer, speculative fiction stands out as a framework from which to explore philosophical ideas and to extend literary styles and formats.) It provides complex reflections on the changes that are produced in the subject and society, by positing and making possible other structures of thought. And Borges, in the mid-twentieth century was also teaching the West to reflect upon and deconstruct our ideas about the form and style for effective meditation, whether through academic registers, or other kinds of fictional constructs. More recently, twenty-first century work by writers, bloggers, and speculative thinkers in texts as varied as Martín Felipe Castagnet’s *Los cuerpos del verano* [*Summer Bodies*], Naief Yehya’s *Tecnoculturas* [*Technocultures*], and Rita Indiana’s *La mucama de Omicunlé* [*Omicunlé’s Maid*] have moved the genre to ask more contemporary questions in forms that are as flexible and fluid as the media in which they share their writings.

This issue of *Paradoxa* examines the role of speculative fiction in conversations about possible presents and futures in Latin America. Thus, this issue offers explorations of how the digital era is reinventing the way we think about subjectivities, and how biotech is creating new kinds of bodies and kinships, how authors reach into the deep past and explore imaginary futures to reflect upon the challenges of the present. In short: the contributors to this issue analyze how experiments in form and style made possible by speculative works open new possibilities for thought.

Given this deep and textured Latin American history of recognizing and appreciating thought in multiple forms and genres, in our original call for papers we explicitly highlighted our interest in micro-essays and free-form contributions, as well as non-standard formats, including image-based ones, and are delighted to be able to offer the readers of this volume exciting examples of speculations that range from more traditionally formatted academic articles to creative interventions. This

volume is, in its own way, a modest taxonomy of animals that from a long way off may, indeed, look like flies.

We have organized the contributions in three sections, each of which includes both conventionally academic work alongside free-form contributions. These sections are: 1. Landscapes/territories; 2. Monstrous bodies; and 3. Digital realities. We are under no illusion that these rough groupings represent the only possible lines of conversation among the contributors; however, in re-reading their pages, we found ourselves almost automatically putting them in implicit dialogue with like-minded thinkers.

We begin the section on *Landscapes/territories* with two studies that look at texts from earlier periods, as a corrective to the presentist bias in many studies of speculative fiction. Carolyn Fornoff studies the relation between late nineteenth-century Modernismo and what we now call speculative fiction in the work of the Mexican writer Amado Nervo. Nervo's work responds viscerally to the shift in thought arising from scientists like Cuvier, Lamarck, and Darwin. These scientific thinkers made a new paradigm visible: ecosystems rise and fall; extinctions occur. In Nervo's world, clouds have disappeared, along with any trace of modernity. For his part, Giancarlo Stagnaro focuses on the utopian impulse evident in two 19th century novels, one anonymous, and one by Peruvian Juan M. Portillo. In these speculations into an Andean future, the Inca Empire has been restored, and modern consumer society coexists with indigenous social organization, in a clear critique of the violence and corruption of the authors' contemporary society.

Edward King's essay brings us into the present century via his analysis of the role of photography in the Anthropocene, using as the basis for his study the book *Intergalático* by Brazilian Guilherme Gerais. Gerais' book blends text with photography to create a *sui generis* narrative about the conditions on an unknown planet; as he says, much of the novel could be read as an "archaeological survey of the ruined inhabitations of an extinct alien civilization." For King, this text implicitly challenges conceptions of what it means to be human and how our blindness had created the current planetary crisis. This concern about a planet in crisis is also echoed in Adriana Castellarnau's story, "Long," which is set on a planet called El Yerbatal, where a human colony leads a pastoral life punctuated by brutality.

While Fornoff and Castellarnau's articles focus on dystopia and Stagnaro on utopia, Andrew Brown studies uchronia in the works of Chileans Jorge Baradit, Francisco Ortega, Álvaro Bisama and Mike Wilson. In the anthology *CHIL3*, the holes left in the historical record by the predations of the Pinochet regime of the 1970s-1990s find their

explanations in fantasy, as history is re-appropriated and reinvented to question hegemonic nation-building notions. Readers of this volume will also be happy to see a story by one of the authors Brown studies, the scholar and fiction writer Mike Wilson. For his contribution to this collection, Wilson chose to share a story in the vein of “weird fiction,” that is also practiced by other members of the close group of Chilean writers studied by Andrew Brown. “Scout,” Wilson’s story, takes place on the streets of a city occupied by bands of youths on bicycles and skates, patrols of perverted “scouts,” and Asian gangs ripped from the pages of a Japanese manga.

Like Stagnaro, but jumping forward a century, Sebastián Antezana also studies the Andean region, with his reading of *De cuando en cuando Saturnina* [*Saturnina, from time to time*], by Alison Spedding. According to Antezana, Spedding’s novel carries historical echoes designed to remind readers of a pair of armed uprisings that took place in the Bolivian highlands during the colonial period; in the interplanetary future of this novel, however, the Aymara people have consolidated an independent state, and feminist terrorist Saturnina Mamani fights with the revolutionary forces to upset this still-patriarchal order.

The second section of this volume, *Monstrous Bodies*, includes texts by Justin Read, Carlos Yushimito, Giovanna Rivero, Jennifer Thorndike, Naief Yehya, and Ramiro Sanchiz. Roughly speaking, if the main impetus of the first section is ecological, in this second section our contributors focus on the distortions of the physical. Justin Read gets us off to a complicated start by putting pressure on our taxonomies of speculation with his piece on a supposedly “Brazilian” author (Vilém Flusser) and his essay about a strange vampire squid. Read performs an agile rethinking of the putatively “Brazilian” concept of anthropophagy, eventually using this speculation as an opening through which Read will direct probing questions regarding the category of Latin American speculative fiction, and even the idea of “Latin America” itself.

Carlos Yushimito shares his story “Rhizome,” about a contagion spreading outwards from a famous Lima, Peru, restaurant to unleash a zombie epidemic. The narrative is apocalyptic; the tone is academic. The story reaches back to the colonial history of Peru, while exploring anxieties about the balance between modernity and millenary traditions, Western knowledge, and indigenous customs.

Bolivian writer Giovanna Rivero’s vision is darkly dystopic, offering a ferocious critique of a government that has long since lost its revolutionary potential. She imagines a future in which Bolivian President Evo Morales has remained in power for five hundred years, to govern an ever more toxic, polluted empire featuring an endless stream

of young women who give birth to his monstrous children. Their father, and the state, are living dead.

Jennifer Thorndike also talks about the living dead, explicitly bringing together the threads relating neoliberal markets and infirm bodies in her analysis of *Fruta podrida* [*Rotten Fruit*] by Chilean Lina Meruane. Borrowing the concept of “neomorts” from Agamben, Thorndike reflects on Meruane’s depiction of third world bodies preserved in a state between life and death in order to serve the needs for organ transplants in the global north. In this way, bodies considered inapt for reproduction have value in the market, optimizing resource exploitation in the world of the novel.

Naief Yehya reviews the history of Mexican mid-twentieth century science-fiction films, including the emblematic cult film, *La nave de los monstruos* [*The Ship of Monsters*], directed by Rogelio A. González. Yehya sees the radically democratic strand in these low-budget films, noting particularly how they upset northern understandings of how progress can be measured. Finally, Uruguayan Ramiro Sanchiz closes this section with an enigmatic story that struggles to bring together knowledge found in books, local knowledge, and the dream, as its narrator tries to understand why whales are beaching themselves on the shore near a town called Punta de Piedra.

The last section of this issue, organized around the concept of *Digital realities*, explores the cultural effects of new media and their inflection in theories of the post-human. This section begins with Cuban scholar Maielis González’s overview of the phenomenon of cyberpunk in Latin America. While the subgenre flourished and decayed in the USA in the 1980s, González argues that in Latin America it has persisted much longer, helping to reshape the post-magic-realism inherent in the current literary scene in powerful ways. Her examples include texts by Edmundo Paz Soldán (Bolivia), Jorge Baradit (Chile), Erick Mota (Cuba) and Rafael Acevedo (Puerto Rico). In her study of Brazilian speculative fiction, M. Elizabeth Ginway looks at both its cyberpunk and steampunk variants, thinking through how these works reflect on, and inflect, a reading of contemporary Brazilian politics shot through with the weight of that nation’s colonial legacy.

Argentinian scholar and poet Marcelo Díaz offered a collection of science fiction poems, from which we chose four that we felt resonated well with the themes and issues addressed by other contributors. We appreciated how Díaz brought together Japanese popular culture, especially manga, with elegant questionings of distance and time.

Such spatial and chronological questions imply the near-total disjunctions thereof for the subject who confronts virtual reality.

Consequently, Robert Noffsinger's study focuses on *Gel azul* [*Blue gel*] by the Mexican writer and graphic novelist, BEF. In this novel, the pervasiveness of virtual reality means that bodies (and their parts) have come to lack importance and can be bought and sold on the black market. Noffsinger reads this graphic novel as a ferocious critique of contemporary capitalism, and deploys startling concepts and images depicting how it also informs the ethics of cloning. For readers who are unfamiliar with this important figure, we are privileged to have secured BEF's permission to print a sample from his unfinished graphic novel, *Tin Soldiers*.

Virtual reality, the neoliberal market, and new subjectivities are likewise the issues that underscore the analysis in Kyeongun Park's contribution to this issue. She looks at novels by Martín Felipe Castagnet and J.P. Zooney, both of whom posit new social and electronic interfaces that convert bodies into public spaces for exchange. In these fictions, the death of the biological body is not necessarily the end—consciousness might well just transfer to another body, whether human, animal, or electronic. Most powerfully, novels like these serve as thought-experiments to destabilize anthropocentric perspectives and to reformulate otherwise well-worn notions such as race, class, and gender. The issue closes with Mexican Alberto Chimal's "Marina," an open-ended story that plays with the borders between realism and the fantastic. Sergio wants to trap his cousin Luisa through hypnosis, but the interface he imagines and negotiates is also mediated by video (real or fantasized), by his projection of his desires, and hers.

We end where we began, with the ripple effects of Borges, and the way that the interplay between fable and thought provoke us, as it provoked Foucault to write a preface meditating on Borges, and a book-length epistemological treatise responding to him. One thread running through the entire body of the contributions to this volume has to do with how coloniality frames worldviews, theoretical interventions, and artistic production. Walter Mignolo's observation is apposite. He states that coloniality names "the hegemonic discourse that questions the humanity of all those who do not belong to the locus of enunciation (and the geopolitics of knowledge) of those who assign the standards of classification and assign to themselves the right to classify" (8). Following Mignolo, then, we know that one function of Borges's imaginary *Celestial Encyclopedia of Benevolent Knowledge* is to take to task the entirety of western classificatory structures, indeed, all hegemonic ordering practices. For Foucault, this challenge to thought comes from outside the structuring system of ordered, western philosophy, and extends even to story: "the thing we apprehend in one

great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that.” Working from the periphery of the West, Latin American speculative fiction writers are using the genre to challenge not only traditional realism but, more ambitiously, the limits of Western systems of thought as well. The essays and fictions united here go a long way towards showing that speculative fiction in the continent is quite alive and unafraid to explore limitations and impossibilities.

Works Cited

1. Foucault, Michel. 1970. *The Order of Things*. New York: Pantheon.
2. Mignolo, Walter. 2005. *The Idea of Latin America*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.