COMPANION SPECIES IN BORDER CROSSINGS: “MEDIODÍA DE FRONTERA” BY CLAUDIA HERNÁNDEZ

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Abstract

In Mesoamerican cultures, dogs occupied a central role for daily practices, spiritual rituals, and mythological configurations. Pre-Columbian societies valued canine figures as companion species capable of guiding souls during their journey into the underworld. Dogs were perceived as nonhuman entities with a powerful connection to death, capable of taming darkness. In this article, I analyze the way in which the role of dogs as companion species in harsh journeys has been reformulated in the short story “Mediodía de frontera” (2007) by Salvadoran author Claudia Hernández. Through the analysis of interactions between a stray dog and a tongueless woman that meet at a border crossing, I study how the story challenges ontological boundaries without erasing each species’ specificity.

Keywords: Central American literature, border, Mesoamerican culture, animal-human studies, gender studies.
Populated by human and nonhuman characters, *De fronteras* (2007), a short story collection by Salvadoran author Claudia Hernández, depicts the trauma endured by El Salvador’s most vulnerable population in the aftermath of the 1980s’ civil war. Rooted in the reality of the country’s reconstruction, the narratives account for the historic debts that resulted from more than a decade of continuous human rights violations. Because of this, scholars such as Misha Kokotovic, Alexandra Ortiz, and Hilda Gairaud have framed Hernández’ work within the category of postwar literature. In the words of Kokotovic, the stories “allude to the conflict’s enduring effects in the troubled and paradoxically violent peace of the 1990’s” (54). However, the collection also “attempt[s] to be read as universal literature” (53-54), which is why Hernández avoids adding geographic or temporal specificities to her stories.

Such a lack of referentiality allows for different interpretive approaches, although as Sophie Esch asserts, because of Hernández’s nationality, the stories tend to be read within the context of El Salvador and Central America (572). This is true not only in terms of spatiality but also regarding temporality. While, as a growing body of scholarship attests, these short stories are central for the critical understanding of postwar trauma, as Esch argues, they can be read “in the context of violence, past or present” (573). Furthermore, the stories tend to be studied in relation to one another to provide a comprehensive sense of the collection. While this approach is enriching in many ways, some of the specificities and details of each narrative remain overlooked or superficially addressed in favor of a more holistic understanding. Steering away from the postwar framework and following Esch in the reading of these stories as universalist literary devices that question what it means to be human/humane, in “Mediodía de frontera” I explore the human-nonhuman connection that arises in a precarious encounter framed by a border location.

The concept of the border as metaphor and materiality is at the center of each narrative. The human and nonhuman protagonists tend to be portrayed in situations where the boundaries between gender, species, and affects are often challenged. However, “Mediodía de frontera” is the only story that fully incorporates the material presence of a border. Although the exact location is unknown, in this narrative the border zone appears as a central, explicit reality. This geopolitical presence, combined with the intimate encounter between a human and a nonhuman character, magnifies the boundary-crossing theme that permeates the stories. Furthermore, because the main characters are a dog and a woman who is about to kill herself in a hopeless scenario, the story evokes the Mesoamerican belief about dogs’ spiritual abilities to guide souls through harsh journeys. In what follows, I argue that this story reformulates the role of dogs as companion species in critical crossings. Moreover, focusing on the complexities of interspecies companionship allows me to examine how the story exposes systemic forms of violence and underscores the frailty of ontological divides through the depiction of two vulnerable characters; this is achieved without erasing the positionality of the existences involved.

The fragile human-animal boundary portrayed in the stories has also been studied by other scholars. Sophie Esch analyzes how *De fronteras* challenges common understandings of humanness and the means by which the narratives think through animals in order to imagine another form of living-together in the context of violence. Nanci Buiza focuses her argument on the nonhuman characters’ ability to show humane-attributed responses in scenarios where humans have been desensitized. Although not focused on ontological divides, Hilda Gairaud studies the role of animals as symbolic representations of hegemonic structures and their effects on oppressed beings in the postwar framework.

Considering the intimate encounters between human and nonhuman
characters, my reading expands on these discussions. However, by focusing on only one narrative, this article delves not just into the relationship that characters establish across species differences but also into the social specificity traversing the materiality of each character. This approach permits studying the narration from two perspectives. On the one hand, although I follow Buzas’s argument regarding the centrality of the development of empathy with the suffering of the Other in Hernández’s short narratives, narrowing my analysis down to one story allows me to go one step further. I explore how such empathetic participation underscores similarities between social structures that generate species and gender-based violence. On the other hand, while my approach shares major points of interest with those exposed by Esch—particularly pertaining to how being in the company of animals can help reinstate the ability to empathize with those who are different and suffer alone—I read this companionship as a reinvention of Mesoamerican myth and legend. I argue that Hernández’s depiction of the connection between a dog and a human can be traced back to pre-Columbian cultures not just because of the embodiment of her protagonists but also because these specific characters are situated in a context that highlights precarious journeys and border crossings.

Besides the myth that explains the belief in the ability of dogs to navigate the underworld and guide humans through it, the bond between them and people in pre-Columbian societies has also been described from an external perspective. In the book XI of the Florentine Codex friar Bernardino de Sahagún describes the Mesoamerican cultures’ “natural history” and attempts to create a taxonomy of the nonhuman pre-Hispanic world. The friar describes the plants, birds, fish, and mammals composing the indigenous landscape. In “Párrafo sexto,” de Sahagún lists different dogs bred by the indigenous people, highlighting the only one that used to be indulged in a special way: “otros perrillos criaban que llamaban Xoloitzcuintli, que ningún pelo tenían, y de noche abrigabanlos con mantas para dormir” (164). This remark underscores the relationship established between this specific breed and their human companions. By mentioning the way in which people used to protect Xoloitzcuintli dogs from the cold, de Sahagún is describing both reciprocity for the help these dogs were supposed to provide in the afterlife and a form of empathy displayed by their human companions. The recontextualization of this bond is one of the main elements for Hernández’s recreation of the Mesoamerican myth.

The action starts with a stray dog entering a women’s public restroom. According to the narrator, the nonhuman character intends to lick urine from the floor to reduce his hunger. However, once the dog enters the bathroom, he encounters “una mujer con sangre en la blusa y una lengua en las manos” (101). The dog becomes terrified by the sight of a woman holding her own tongue between her hands. Fearing for his life, he tries to leave, but the wounded human begs him to stay and “el perro accede ante los ojos temblorosos de ella” (101). Besides the self-mutilation, at least three more things are worth noting in this initial scene: first, the area where the action is taking place; then, the role of gender; and finally, the characters’ first interaction.

The opening words of the narration are: “Tres minutos antes del mediodía. Un baño público en la frontera. Mucho calor” (101). Even though “Mediodía de frontera” is not explicitly tied to a specific time or territory, it is not devoid of social or geographic context either. Hernández’s interest in conflicts arising from border and migratory systems is evident in her other writings, such as the short novel La han despedido de nuevo (2002). Because of this, it is fitting that while the rest of the stories included in the collection lack geographic markers, in “Mediodía de frontera,” a geopolitical point is one of the first details specified. Moreover, while La han despedido de nuevo explores the social
implications of women’s migration, “Mediodía de frontera” also includes a female protagonist. However, although the human protagonist’s story is linked to a border crossing point, she is not trying to traverse it. Instead, she is getting ready to die there.

For civilizations such as the Aztec (Mexico), Toltec, and Mayan, dogs occupied a central role for daily practices, spiritual rituals, and mythological configurations. One of the most well-known examples of this centrality is the Xoloitzcuintli dog. This breed takes its name from “two words in the language of the Aztecs: Xolotl, the god of lightning and death, and Itzcuintli, or dog” (Romey 2017). According to Aztec mythology, Xolotl, Quetzalcóatl’s twin, created the Xoloitzcuintli from the Bone of Life, which was also thought to be the root of all humankind. The god of lighting and death did this under the condition that humans would take care of the breed to receive the gift of their guidance during the afterlife. These pre-Columbian societies valued the Xoloitzcuintli as a companion species capable of guiding souls during their journey into Mictlán, the underworld, thus perceiving them as nonhuman beings with a powerful connection to death, skilled to tame darkness.

The Xoloitzcuintli is present in a vast array of cultural configurations, including several of Diego Rivera’s murals, such as “La civilización Totonaca” (1950), and Frida Kahlo’s paintings, for example, “Escuintle y yo” (1945). In literature, echoes of the Xoloitzcuintli can be seen in Juan Rufio’s “No oyes ladar a los perros” (1938), and Yuri Herrera’s Señales que precederán al fin del mundo (2009) introduces a character reminiscent of the mythical dog. In film, Alejandro González Iñárritu’s Amores perros (2000) presents dogs as central figures for the personal journeys of the human characters, and more directly, the Xoloitzcuintli figure appears as one of the central characters of Disney animated film Coco (2017).

In the Central American region, the famous Leyenda del Cadejo is also configured around a canine manifestation. Although versions vary, the legend is thought to have its origins in Maya-Quiché beliefs, which situate the fantastic Cadejo dog in two scenarios: “desde su perspectiva negativa, el Cadejo usurpa la confianza de los seres humanos mediante el terror, el Cadejo encarna, en su faceta positiva, el poder regenerativo de la naturaleza y protege a los seres humanos del peligro” (Jaec 299). Whereas in the Aztec mythology the Xoloitzcuintli arises from the most popular breed of the pre-Hispanic world, in the Maya-Quiché tradition, the Cadejo is a fantastic, supernatural dog that can take the role of either a monster or a protector.

If in Mesoamerican beliefs, certain canine figures were configured as companion entities with a protective mission in difficult scenarios, Hernández’s short story echoes the main characteristics of such a configuration; these are the circumstances in which the need for companionship takes place and the role of the nonhuman species. In Dividing the Isthmus, Ana Patricia Rodríguez already points out that “Mediodía de frontera” draws on Salvadoran legends that portray “Cadejo dogs mediating the passage of humans from one world to the next” (226). While the author does not explore this connection further, her observation highlights another central element of the Cadejo’s legend, that the powerful dog was central for the human passage from life to death. In other words, in the legendary tale, the supernatural figure can transit through a spiritual border. Since migrating can become a life-threatening journey endured by people trying to escape precarious scenarios, such as extreme poverty, violence, and climate-related difficulties, in the context of the Central America-US border corridors, the border can be interpreted as a space encompassing similarities with what the Aztecs used to call Mictlán, the harsh afterlife zone that souls needed to traverse in order to get to paradise. Furthermore, with the phrase “mucho calor” (101), which appears on the very first line of the story, the...
narrator sets the tone of the atmosphere and accentuates the similarities between the narrative landscape and infernal-like scenarios.

Crossing the Lacandon forest, riding La Bestia, interacting with criminal groups and walking on the desert are some of the most prominent risks associated with clandestine migration. The border zone is far more dangerous for women, who “experience disproportionately high rates of sexual violence, and can be victimized by actors such as smugglers, gangs, cartels and police” (Hallock et al). Similar to the journey through Mictlán, the border tends to be crossed in fear and with the hopes of arriving to a better territory. In the case of the protagonist of Hernández’ short story, she does not cross the border for unknown motives and, instead, opts to end her life. This choice underscores the border’s presence as a space loaded with sociopolitical meaning and highlights the journeys’ significance the tropes for the narration, and the canine figure’s recontextualization as a companion.

Whereas in pre-Columbian accounts dogs were, on the one hand, a purebred, and on the other hand, a fantastic, powerful articulation of a canine being, Hernández introduces a stray dog. In addition, the dog gets other attributes that place him in a particular, embodied interspecies relationship. Besides being a stray, famished dog, the most important aspects of the nonhuman character are his gender and his ability to speak. Furthermore, gender, unlikely linguistic capabilities, and physical decimation are also central in the formulation of the human character. Since both protagonists share important characteristics that situate them in parallel scenarios, it is possible to draw connections that defy their ontological divisions. Because such an interpretation is based on challenging ontological distinctions between a female character who is situated in a context of profound gender disparity and a stray dog, comparing them could seem problematic. Nevertheless, the connections that can be drawn do not imply the erasure of the characters’ specificities nor the amalgamation of their tribulations. Instead, these connections identify the biopolitical constructions that produce “the inhumanity [they] exclude” (Iman Jackson 675). In the intersection of women and animal studies one of the most latent problems associated with challenging the human-animal boundary is that such a challenge can be interpreted as the animalization of women and the humanization of animals, as Vint puts it:

There are many parallels between the ways in which women have been constructed, controlled, spoken for and objectified by patriarchal culture, and similar constraints placed on animals by Western culture more generally. Achieving better insights into this overlapping and intersecting oppression is valuable for both feminism and those interested in animal welfare. (111)

However, before making evident the parallelsisms between both protagonists, the narrator highlights the gender divide that arises at the beginning of the story. In “Mediodía de frontera” both characters lack a name, they are presented only as “un perro macho” and “una mujer” (101). Because the human character is introduced only in terms of her gender, this narrative articulation has been closely read in the context of the civil war. Since the organ removed by the woman is necessary to speak out, in the words of Misha Kokotovic, this self-mutilation references “[the] silencing of women in the transition to peace and postwar ‘normalization’ of gender relations” (71). This, given that women who took more active roles during the war had to return to a context of deepened gender inequality. In the framework of female figures at border intersections within the Central America-US migration corridors, the character’s self-mutilation can also be read in a symbolic way inasmuch as “en el contexto de la migración [...] uno de los principales impactos es el silencio debido a la vergüenza que sienten las mujeres por [la violencia sexual]” (Cleriga Morales et al. 70). To this reading it can also be added the gender violence...

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6. In El Salvador, the origins of mass migration movements can be traced back to “the late 1970s and early 1980s [as a] response to the repression and violence associated with the onset of civil war” (“Uprooted in Central America”).

7. In the article “In Search of Safety, Growing Numbers of Women Flee Central America,” the Migration Policy Institute presents a broad study regarding this topic.
Eduardo Hernández

endured by women in El Salvador, where femicides continue on the rise⁸. In this way, the narration situates a character whose gender can be read within the scope of both the space where her body is being placed and the social context and history of the country most closely linked to her story.

The importance of gender is also shown through the nonhuman character. Describing the moment in which the dog enters the public restroom, the narrator states: “entra disimulando aunque está de más hacerlo porque a nadie le importa que entre un perro macho en un baño de mujeres en la frontera” (101). The story draws attention to a male figure trespassing a women’s space, also noting that “nobody cares” about this transgression. However, while the male/female gender opposition highlights the context of gender disparity surrounding the narrative, looking at the nonhuman character only as the representation of maleness would constrain the dog to a metaphorical level; this is, the nonhuman protagonist would be read merely as an artifact to represent masculinity. However, because of the nonhuman character’s development, this initial narrative limitation changes.

When the dog first sees the female character covered in blood he develops a feeling of disgust: “Mira. Vuelve sobre sus pasos. Está asqueado” (101). Moments later, after their first interaction, his perception becomes more compassionate. At the same time as the woman changes when seen through the dog’s eyes, his individuality surpasses the initial metaphorical articulation of a male figure. Therefore, while in their initial encounter the dog’s primary instinct is to leave (“el perro comienza a abandonar el lugar porque una mujer que es capaz de cortarse la lengua es capaz también de acabar con la vida de un perro de frontera” (101)), this attitude quickly disappears, and the bond across species begins to form. Just as the dog attempts to leave, the woman stops him: “ella le pide que regrese, que no se vaya, que no la deje” (101). Noticing her solitude and desperation, the nonhuman character agrees to stay with her. This is the first step towards the blurring of not just gender disparities, but also of the ontological divide that seems to place both characters apart, which, as the narrative progresses, “flatten[s] into mundane differences” (Haraway 15). After the blurring of gender-based differences, the narrator accounts for the empathy experienced by both characters, in this case particularly by the dog who agrees to accompany the woman in a clear moment of pain. This process is central for the reformulation of the Mesoamerican myth in Hernández’ story.

In “Mediodía de frontera,” Hernández recreates the reciprocal dog-human relationship portrayed in Mesoamerican myth and legend, however, in the Salvadoran’s version, their connection is framed by contemporary social instances. While the relationship developed by the human and the nonhuman characters unveils how suffering and vulnerability can transcend boundaries across species and bring them closer, it also exposes systemic forms of violence based on difference. This relates to Esch’s statement regarding that “at the core of these animal-human relationships are questions of Otherness, of being different, and of empathy” (574). It is interesting to note that even though during the story’s opening pages the gender dissimilarity between these two characters is emphasized, the species divide is not stressed. The fact that the dog speaks fluently with the woman is something that the narrator does not question. Scholars such as Nanci Buiza, Linda Craft and Alexandra Ortiz have argued that this articulation is largely due to the adherence of the short stories to narrative strategies linked to the fantastic genre tradition, which in words of Buiza offer a path to “despertar y agitar las sensibilidades del lector y así sacarlo de su entumecimiento afectivo” (12). Besides the affective shock that these fantastic representations can produce, in the case of “Mediodía de frontera,” this scenario functions as the principal element to depict the bond and empathy gradually established between both characters.

8. Louise Donovan writes extensively about this issue on “Men Kill Women Because They Can: Inside El Salvador’s Devastating Femicide Crisis” (2019). In this article she focuses on femicides perpetrated by domestic partners.
After agreeing to stay and accompany the woman, notably interested in her situation, the dog “le acerca con la pata un trapo para que se cubra la boca y le pregunta, por cortesía, qué sucedió y quién pudo hacerle eso. Ella, que sabe que él conoce las respuestas, no responde quién, sino por qué” (102). The dog takes on an active, independent role, directing the story and showing signs of genuine interest for his human interlocutor. In addition, two other aspects of this scene are worth highlighting: not only the dog is able to speak, but the tongueless woman, whose mouth is badly hurt, can emit words without trouble. There is an implicit, deep understanding between these two characters from different species, one of them belonging to a dominant ontological category and the other one to a secondary one. Although this episode could be interpreted as a part of the fantasy-like atmosphere of the narration, by not reading the narration only through the lenses of genre this interaction can be understood as a becoming together, an experience through which, in terms defined by Sherryl Vint, “is it possible to identify “connections and affinities that reject the distinction between human and animal” (53). If Hernández starts to recuperate the dog-human relationship depicted in Mesoamerican mythologies by placing the characters in an area that can resemble either Mictlán or a dangerous setting where Cadejo dogs would have to adopt their protective facet, by rejecting ontological distinctions the author starts to reinvent the pre-Hispanic imaginary. It is precisely because of the vulnerable circumstances in which these two beings meet, that they are able to communicate across species. Related to this ability, and following Derrida, Cary Wolfe states that “[radical finitude] is shared by humans and nonhumans the moment they begin to interact and communicate. To ‘respond’ [...] by means of any semiotic system” (571). In this narrative, the impossibility of having a human and a nonhuman character communicating with each other comes into effect precisely because of the mutual understanding of such radical finitude and vulnerability.

As presented in the story, the link between the precariousness that the human and the nonhuman characters face is exposed through a semiotic multispecies system. Through the analysis of this system, it is possible to establish connections between the problems experienced by the protagonists and the extent of the bond they share. Although the narrative presents the main characters speaking to each other using human language, the dialogue’s semiotics is hybrid. At several key moments in the story, the narrator underscores other communicative approaches. This happens, for example, when the nonhuman character reads the woman’s eyes and obtains vital information for the story’s development: “sabe que la lengua es de ella porque sus ojos aún le tiemblan de dolor” (101). Another example of a similar approach occurs when the human character hears the dog’s stomach rumbling, learning yet another crucial detail for the story that the protagonists do not share by using words. Overall, while it might seem that human language is the only communication channel in the story, in fact, the characters use a hybrid, multisensorial language based on signs and symbols that allow for mutual understanding across species boundaries.

Even though the narration depicts multisensorial semiotics, this can only be identified by the reader as the result of a story written in human language. Because of this, it could be argued that a narrative that questions human exceptionalism is construed around an anthropocentric excess. Given that the dog is imbued with human linguistic capabilities, the act of transferring human subjectivity to a nonhuman figure can be seen as an act that undermines its specificity. This conundrum also translates to the woman, who emits words despite not having a tongue. Thus, although with phrases such as “‘comprendo’ dice el perro,” (my emphasis 102) it seems the characters are having a conversation, such a dialogue is the only way through which she can interpret and tell the story. While this premise also implies an anthropocentric-centered
approach, the importance of multisensorial modes of communication speaks to how the characters are not communicating eminently as humans, but through hybrid, affective, and empathic signs. Because of their success at transmitting meaningful information without using signs inherently human, these semiotic systems challenge the human-animal divide.

Regarding the content of the human-nonhuman communication modes, an insightful moment ensues after the dog asks the woman “qué sucedió y quién puedo hacerle eso [y ella] que sabe que él conoce las respuestas, no responde quién, sino por qué” (101-102). The human character recognizes the profound knowledge held by the dog about her suffering, thus exposing a level of intimacy only explainable by a cross-species empathy. Given that this knowledge, which is both affective and intellectual, arises from painful experiences, it relates to two terms explored by Haraway: “sharing suffering” and “intersubjectivity.” In her Companion Species Manifesto (2003), Haraway defines intersubjectivity as “paying attention to the conjoined dance of face-to-face significant otherness” (133). If, conventionally, the term intersubjectivity refers to the process of human minds making meaning of things and beings together, Haraway pushes this notion to frame it beyond anthropocentric views. For the cultural theorist, cross-species intersubjectivity is made possible when two embodied beings, regardless of species, become with each other. This experience would lead them to make meaning while recognizing their co-existence. Such a recognition implies acknowledging “cohabitation, coevolution, and embodied cross-species sociality [to] inform more livable politics and ontologies in current life worlds” (96). In a parallel way, “Mediación de frontera” identifies how both characters develop this sense of intersubjectivity to the extent they form a nonhierarchical attachment. If, as stated by friar Bernardino de Sahagún in the Florentine Codex, indigenous societies used to care for Xoloitzcuintli dogs in a distinctive way due to their belief in the breed’s spiritual abilities, archaeological research has shown that such belief also had a different type of material implications. Kristin Romey reminds that precisely because of their high status, the meat of Xoloitzcuintli was thought to have powerful medicinal benefits. This contrast addresses the material facets derived from a spiritual conviction through which Mesoamerican cultures used to regard this breed. In Hernández’s short story, the nonhuman character’s materiality is also taken into account.

At the beginning of the story, the woman is presented with brutal signs of violence on her body and because of this violence, the focus of the narration seems to be only her. However, the focus shifts to the character of the dog. This is especially evident after the first exchange between the protagonists. The woman tells the dog the reason she decided to cut out her tongue: “los ahorcados no se ven mal porque cuelguen del techo, sino porque la lengua cuelga de ellos, la lengua es lo que provoca lástima [además] los que se ahorcan siempre están solos antes del acto [...] Comprende, dice el perro, y en realdad lo hace” (emphasis is mine, 102). This conversation foregrounds the connection between both characters and underscores the dog’s capacity to relate to the woman’s decision.

Commenting on the woman’s choice of cutting out her tongue, Kokotovic explains: “it is difficult not to interpret it [as] a silencing of women in the transition to peace and postwar ‘normalization’ of gender relations” (71). While it is true that the tongue’s removal is highly symbolic in the context of gender disparity, considering what the character explains, this action can also be read a display of her agency. She removes her tongue because she refuses to become a pitiful image and a horrible corpse. The protagonist is able to exert control over her body and, given the context surrounding the narrative, this might not have been a possibility before that moment. Although for Kokotovic, “the manner she kills herself would appear to be a form of submission […] for in death she meets several
Evident is Hernández’s abandonment, the context in which the woman offers her tongue, an organic object that can help alleviate the dog’s hunger, she is also using the cloth, the inorganic article the dog gave her to help ease her physical pain. The notoriety of these two objects in the description speaks to the reciprocity enacted by this interspecies relationship, which is based on the recognition of each other’s suffering and mortality, to paraphrase Haraway. Furthermore, whereas Mesoamerican civilizations such as the Aztec used to eat dog’s meat and believed in the healing powers of the Xolotlitzcuintli’s body, in Hernández’ story the nonhuman character is the one healing while eating a piece of the human’s corporeality. This healing is carried out through the alleviation not only of the dog’s hunger but also and perhaps most significatively, of his solitude.

Whereas the precariousness of the woman’s condition can be located in a context surrounded by gender-based violence and invisibility, that one of the stray dog follows a culture of speciesism-based indifference and abandonment, as the description “un perro abigarrado y flaco” (101) indicates. In relation to this premise, Ignacio Sarmiento explores how Hernández’s stories portray “[el] mecanismo de precarización de la vida, que termina por quitarle todo valor a esta y la sentencia a la más absoluta desprotección” (4). In “Mediología de frontera,” such a mechanism is made evident through the state in which both the dog and the woman are being articulated. Because the latter experiences forms of suffering similar to those endured by the former, the story challenges human exceptionalism. In “Constructing Animals” Mango DeMello asserts:
Feminist scholars have addressed the ways that sexism and speciesism parallel each other and shape one another, and are based on the assumption that there are essential, meaningful differences between say, men and women or humans and animals [...] These differences are then used to justify the domination of certain categories of people or animals based on their supposed essential natures. (25)

These associations between sexism and speciesism, which underscore how difference is used to generate systemic forms of oppression, violence, and discrimination, are manifest throughout the story. If, as Greta Gaard states “speaking is associated with power, knowledge, and dominance” (18), the fact that Hernández portrays a human and a nonhuman characters who cannot speak, stresses the connection between them both. Furthermore, the fact that in the narration they can communicate using multi-sensory semiotics, deepens their connection and questions the divide between human and animal. It is important to note that although factors such as intersubjectivity and shared suffering are at the center of “Mediodía de frontera,” the characters are not portrayed as equals and thus their specificity is not erased. Whereas the dog faces hunger, abandonment, and emaciation, the woman’s situation can be read against the backdrop of both the border area where the story takes place and the context of gender inequality.

The human-animal linkage could be further complicated with classifications such as “animalized human, humanized animal [...] animalized woman and feminized animal, terms that foreground the gender/species/ecology connections” (Gaard 18). However, the particularities of each character’s struggle emphasize their bodies’ archaeology as sites of lived experience (Joyce) that transcends such categories. As I have discussed, these lived, embodied experiences are individual configurations that respond to some of the most pressing difficulties faced by each specific character. Whereas these circumstances underline each character’s specificity, the fact that they are able to understand different forms of pain across species shows how “common vulnerability is one of the ways that human and animals share embodied being” (Vint 10). In the story, this realization leads to an intimate, affective connection:

El perro observa el ritual. La mira ajustar la cuerda a la viga. Le gusta cómo se mira. Y, en un arrebato, le jura no dejarla sola, estar a su lado mientras se cuele, mientras patea, mientras lucha contra la asfixia. Ella suspira. Si tuviera la boca libre y la lengua puesta, le daría las gracias. Como no puede, lo acaricia como si fuera suyo. Lo abraza [...] Se cuele […] Llora el perro y permanece a su lado aunque ella ya no lo sepa. (103)

This quote foregrounds the meaningful interspecies relationship sustained by the characters, who are able to trespass ontological boundaries and build a meaningful, affective bond. As I have argued, this bond is a reformulation of the Mesoamerican belief in dogs’ abilities to accompany humans during their journey across the underworld. Ultimately, the story presents a complex facet of “the relentlessly historically specific, joint lives of dogs and people, who are bonded in significant otherness” (Haraway 108), and whose relationship continues to shed light on the understanding of multispecies companionship.


Rivera, Diego. La civilización Totonaca. 1950. El Palacio de México.


