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Women Driven “Mad”

An Exploration of the Mad Woman Trope in Latina¹ Accounts of Environmental Horror in the
United States

Abstract

In view of the climate crisis, some are drawing parallels between the horror genre and reality. Certain media exploring the everyday impacts of environmental catastrophes may focus on communities disproportionately affected, especially when the devastation experienced by these communities is ignored. This essay examines how this variant of horror is expressed in LatinX² environmentalist media and defines the mad woman trope (referring to characters whose fears and traumatic experiences are dismissed as hysteria or paranoia) in the context of LatinX environmentalist media to reveal how suffering is intensified when individuals and communities who voice their concerns are ignored by society.

Key Terms

Horror, LatinX Studies, Women's Studies, Environmentalist Literature, Climate Crisis

Preface

Due to time and length constraints, this essay focuses primarily on women in LatinX communities in the United States. This exploration is on the horrors women face and the dismissal of their expressions of lived horrors. There are various other identities which should be

incorporated into the examination of lived horror, including (but not limited to) other people of color and the Queer community. There are also non-environmental horrors LatinX women in the United States face which should be investigated in future research. This is the beginning of a conversation which should be expanded globally, meaning that future research should investigate the matter of lived horror in countries other than the United States. Finally, this essay is not meant to undermine the definition of horror or compare the amount of devastation caused by various catastrophes, but instead widen the scope of what is considered horror in order to highlight the voices of those who have been struggling for long periods of time. Also important to note is that this essay includes spoilers for *Barbarian*, *Us*, *Beloved*, *Heroes and Saints*, and *So Far From God*.

Horror and the Mad Woman Trope

When protagonists in horror films kill monsters, they are not meant to seem crazy. Even when they express fear and other characters deem them paranoid, the audience witnesses the horrors the protagonists face. Therefore, the audience completely understands why the action of murder is taken and may even feel a sense of pleasure when the monster is killed. Why then are individuals judged differently when they have “extreme” reactions to horrors that do not exist as literal monsters? What happens when horrors occur as gradual catastrophes? For some, gradual horrors (threats which develop over time) are normalized and voicing of this devastation is often dismissed by society. Additionally, gradual horrors disproportionately affect certain groups. This essay will expand on these ideas by investigating experiences of lived horror and the depiction of the mad woman trope in LatinX environmentalist literature. The mad woman trope (referring to characters whose fears and traumatic experiences are dismissed as hysteria or paranoia) in LatinX environmentalist literature reveals how harm is intensified when individuals and

communities who voice their suffering are ignored by society, leading to reactions which appear extreme to some, but make sense to those who understand the suffering.

In a lecture on the Black Horror genre, Dr. Haylee Harrell noted that there is a trend in horror films of not believing female characters. This trope may be called the “mad woman,” a female character who vocalizes her traumatic experiences only to be ignored and deemed as crazy. For example, Tess, the protagonist in *Barbarian* (directed by Zach Cregger), tells the police that she has just been held prisoner in the basement of her Airbnb, and the police immediately dismiss her claims, clearly identifying her as deranged. In *Us* (written and directed by Jordan Peele), protagonist Adelaide grows increasingly anxious when she returns with her family to her childhood home, and her husband initially dismisses her fear, assuming that she is merely paranoid. In both of these films, the protagonists’ fears are validated in the eyes of audiences who can obviously see that these women are speaking the truth about the horrors they face. These are just two examples of the mad woman trope, but there are many other instances in the horror genre which reveal the failures of “protective” systems, whether they are other characters, the police, or society at large. Through the obvious presence of danger threatening female characters deemed paranoid, the mad woman trope exposes the systems which fail to protect individuals.

The mad woman trope is also present in narratives which do not traditionally fit into the horror genre. It is important to first define what is included in the horror genre, as recent scholarship has begun to investigate the gray area between horror and reality. In his essay on horror, Wald demonstrates a parallel between the bizarre events occurring as a result of the climate crisis and narratives within the horror genre. Wald mentions perturbing incidents, such as “fire tornados” in California during the summer of 2020 and “hypothermic iguanas tumbling out

of trees” in Florida that same year, in order to encourage a reconsideration of realism. If such strange events occur in reality, Wald argues, then why limit the scope of what is considered horror? Some stories complicate the definition of horror further, such as *Beloved*, a supernatural film about a formerly enslaved mother who is haunted by a reincarnation of the daughter she tragically lost. The portrayal of slavery in *Beloved* is just as terrifying, if not more, than the portrayal of supernatural horrors, which invites horrors based in reality into the horror genre. In an interview, Hector Tobar stated that “anything you could imagine will probably pale in comparison to what the world has to offer if you go out and explore” (Hall 81). Though he made this claim in a different context than horror, the principle can be applied to horror, supporting the idea that the horror of lived experiences may exceed the horror of supernatural or imagined horror. In fact, supernatural horror has even been used as a tool of oppression. In her lecture, Dr. Harrell explained that “cosmic horror,” a subgenre of the traditional (fictional) horror genre which features the unknowable, is written by those who have never been othered, so they “have to go to the supernatural to find horror.” These narratives fail to acknowledge the lived horrors present in reality, ignoring the voices of marginalized communities. According to Dr. Harrell, writers of cosmic horror even claimed that the othered individuals “worshipped” the supernatural horrors, further marginalizing othered communities.

Dr. Harrell noted another key difference between cosmic horror and Black Horror: in cosmic horror, terrors are regarded as “out of the ordinary,” while terrors in Black Horror are often part of the “everyday experience.” Wald’s article expresses a similar idea of horror, stating that frightening events like the “fire tornadoes and frozen lizards” have become “increasingly common-place during the climate crisis.” The horrors of real, everyday life call for a

reconsideration of the horror genre and bringing attention to these horrors based in reality highlights the voices of marginalized communities who are most affected by them.

Latina Accounts of Environmental Horror in the United States

The 2025 Los Angeles wildfires prove that anyone is subject to horror (by Wald's definition), but it is essential to underscore the instances in which horrors are "commonplace." The devastation caused by the LA wildfires must not be downplayed; however, this catastrophe reveals key differences between "unnatural horrors" and "everyday horrors." When the homes of celebrities were destroyed by the fires, it became an international news story. For the communities accustomed to encountering everyday horrors, accounts of horror are often overlooked. Cherrie Moraga's play *Heroes and Saints* spotlights the gradual catastrophe of pesticide poisoning. *Heroes and Saints*, a fictional account based on the town of McFarland, California, exposes a devastating period in which "a highly disproportionate number of children were diagnosed with cancer and were born with birth defects" (Moraga 89). The play opens with a macabre scene: "children wearing calavera masks" carrying a "child-size cross" which leaves "its stark image against the dawn's light," the "figure of a small child hanging from it," the "child's hair and thin clothing flapping in the wind," a "low, mechanical hum" interrupting the "silence" and Cerezita, a teenager with no arms or legs, who is "transfixed by the image of the crucifixion" (Moraga 92). It is crucial to note that this description and the inclusion of this description (in this essay) are not meant to other or demonize individuals with disabilities, but rather to expose the harmful effects of gradual catastrophes. Through the image of the child's crucifixion, Moraga references the horrors endured by this community. In the following scene, Ana Perez, a news reporter, questions the disturbing scene, asking "Why would someone be so cruel, to hang a child up like that?" Amparo, an activist, answers that "They always dead first. If

you put the children in the ground, the world forgets about them” (Moraga 94). This line exposes the lack of acknowledgement of these issues and also raises a question regarding the mad woman trope: What happens when not just an individual, but an entire community is ignored?

In her book, *Heroes and Saints & Other Plays*, Moraga includes a quote from *St. Joan of the Stockyards* which explains what happens when a community embodies the mad woman trope: “Before day breaks we shall set out from these yards and reach their city... in the dawn showing in public places the full extent of our misery appealing to anything with a human look” (86). The dismissed voices of those experiencing horror may seem extreme until one examines the horror. Why do viewers easily accept and even experience pleasure when characters like Tess (*Barbarian*) and Adelaide (*Us*) murder their monsters, yet individuals resisting gradual horrors are deemed extreme? Works like *Heroes and Saints* illuminate lived horrors so that audiences can understand horrors which do not always appear as obviously as a literal monster.

An illustration by Ester Hernández titled *Sun Mad* presents a similar representation of horror. *Sun Mad* features a female skeletal figure wearing a red bonnet and holding a basket of grapes, with the caption “SUN MAD RAISINS UNNATURALLY GROWN WITH INSECTICIDES - MITICIDES - HERBICIDES - FUNGICIDES,” which alludes to the toxic chemicals used in the agricultural industry and pays “homage to the everyday experiences of the people, landscapes, politics, and histories that surround her (Hernández)” (Peacock 104). *Sun Mad*’s rich symbolism points out the harm of chemicals particularly to Chicana farmworkers; the basket of grapes “held at womb level” symbolizes “the disproportionate effects for female farm workers, particularly on their reproductive systems” (Peacock 105). In *Heroes and Saints*, Cerezita describes this situation: “The mothers dip their heads into the long rusty buckets and drink and drink while their babies deform inside them” (Moraga 99). The skeletal figure in *Sun*

Mad symbolizes “the inconsistencies—or disinformation—that the agricultural industry drew on in its advertising in twentieth-century California to create the perception of health to promote its products” (Peacock 105). *Sun Mad*, in its grim depiction of a female farmworker, supports the idea that women must do something “crazy” and extreme to be understood and heard, which shows a way in which individuals facing lived horrors fit into the mad woman trope.

Dolores, the mother of Cerezita in *Heroes and Saints*, exemplifies the mad woman trope as explored in LatinX environmentalist literature. When she describes her experience working in the packing houses, she explains that “The poison they put on the almonds, it would make you sick. The women would run out of the place coz they had to throw up” (Moraga 99). In examples like this, characters may express a feeling of obligation to remain in these harmful situations, often out of necessity; Dolores states, “Sure, I dint wannu go back in there, pero after awhile you start to accept it because you gottu have a job” (Moraga 99). In *So Far From God*, a novel about a mother named Sofi and her four daughters who live in New Mexico, Fe (one of Sofi’s daughters) expresses a similar sense of obligation to remain in an unsafe job because “the pay was real good”³ (Castillo 168). Fe’s “job at a weapon-manufacturing plant exposes her to toxic chemicals” (Ray 149) which give her health issues and eventually lead to her death. When Fe and the women she works with are “feeling almost too lousy to make it through the shift” (Castillo 169), the nurse gives them each “ibuprofen tablets, advice about pre-menopause and the dropping of estrogen levels in women over thirty, and (tells them) pretty much that it was just about being a woman and had nothing to do with working with chemicals,” even though Fe was under thirty and “had a clean bill of health” (Castillo 169). Fe and her coworkers are the epitome of the mad woman trope as expressed in LatinX environmentalist literature, as they are put in harmful positions and dismissed when they voice their suffering.

There are various moments in which Fe's worsening health issues are dismissed. When Fe is promoted and her tasks become more dangerous, her breath begins to emit a strange smell. Castillo describes how Fe's boss assumes the smell is not from the chemicals, stating that he "knew that teenagers liked those kinds of kicks but had never taken Fe for one into cheap thrills" (Castillo 172). Fe also expresses concern about working with a certain material, and the rotating foreman dismisses her concern, telling her that inhaling the chemical would make her "sleepy, but that's all" (Castillo 173). Fe tries wearing gloves to protect her hands, but the chemical destroys them, dissolving her manicure and even dissolving her nails. Just like the police in *Barbarian* and the husband in *Us*, these gloves nod to the "protective" systems which fail to actually protect individuals. When the federal government finally steps in to investigate the factory, it is too late, and Castillo's descriptions of Fe's demise are gut-wrenching.

These narratives highlight how the horror of toxic chemicals disproportionately affects LatinX communities. There are a number of explanations which answer why LatinX communities are disproportionately affected by toxic chemicals. The United States National Agricultural Workers Survey reported that "Eighty-three percent of all farmworkers were Hispanic." If a majority of farmworkers are LatinX, then it would explain why the LatinX community would be disproportionately affected by pesticides. Ray answers that "colonial-capitalist patriarchy treats people it conceives as "disposable" or expendable the same as it treats the environment" (147). Ray connects environmental issues with social injustice, which she claims have "mutually shared roots in colonialism and patriarchy" (147). Thus, those disproportionately affected by colonialism and patriarchy are disproportionately affected by these kinds of horrors. However, the exploration of "commonplace horrors" in LatinX literature is not limited to environmental dangers. Genderqueer author Eli Clare demonstrates the horrors

amplified for those disproportionately affected by colonialism and patriarchy by describing how “bodies can be stolen, fed lies and poison, torn away from us ... bodies stolen by hunger, war, breast cancer, AIDS, rape; the daily grind of factory, sweatshop, cannery, sawmill; the lynching rope; the freezing streets; the nursing home and prison” (Chiro 199). Additional research should be done on the horrors Clare describes, which occur when individuals are treated as disposable, they are ignored, and their suffering is dismissed.

As mentioned in the description of *Sun Mad*, the dismissal of suffering often results in actions appearing extreme to those who do not understand the suffering. *Heroes and Saints* concludes with a dramatic scene depicting members from the community harmed by pesticides burning the fields, shouting “¡Asesinos! ¡Asesinos! ¡Asesinos!” (Moraga 149). In this ultimate example of the mad woman trope as explored in LatinX environmentalist literature, it is not just one woman whose agony has been dismissed by society, but a whole community. This reaction may appear as madness to some, but to those who have read the book or watched the play, it may not seem mad at all.

The mad woman trope in LatinX environmentalist literature reveals how harm is intensified when individuals and communities who voice their suffering are ignored by society. This buildup may lead to actions which appear extreme, but do not seem crazy to the witnesses of these gradual horrors. As mentioned in the preface, future research should explore this situation as it relates to different identities and further expand on the genre of horror, especially in the context of gradual horrors and the mad woman trope. With a new view of the horror genre, we are able to examine the horrors of reality, but this perspective is not meant to terrify. By acknowledging real-world horrors, we begin the fight against them.

Notes

1. Though I typically use the term “LatinX” (see note 2), I wanted to highlight the intersectional identity of LatinX women in this examination.
2. The capital “X” is used in reference to Claudia Milian’s 2019 critique of the lack of “nationality or a hypostatized identity for the conceptualization of the itinerant heterogeneity of ‘Latinx’” (DeGuzmán).
3. This quote references Fe’s co-worker telling her to work for this company and is not used by Castillo to suggest Fe’s sense of obligation to remain at her dangerous job; however, Castillo does later imply that the pay contributes to why Fe does not quit after experiencing negative health effects.

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*The film was adapted from Toni Morrison's novel.