

Vampires in *Balún Canán*: The Monstrous and Dzulum

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This essay studies the significance of the Dzulum, a venerated supernatural presence of indigenous origins, as it pertains to the lives of the women in Rosario Castellanos's *Balún Canán* (1957). It is an examination of the Dzulum as a kind of monster created by the feminist author in her celebrated Indigenista novel, which protests the abuses of the Tzeltal-Mayan people by nonindigenous (or Ladino) Mexicans. *Balún Canán*, which takes place during the agrarian reforms of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) and the confiscation of large estates and redistribution of lands to the rural indigenous and mestizo poor, focuses on the violent tensions provoked by these socioeconomic changes. But it also tackles the question of the marginalization of women in rural Mexico in a post-Revolution period when Cardenismo also promoted women's rights and suffrage—unfulfilled promises, contends Anna Macías, until 1953, and not fully exercised until 1958, a year after the publication of *Balún Canán* (*Against All Odds* 145–46). Citing an inventory of stereotypes and myths as evidence, in addition to the legal maze into which Mexico consigns its women citizens, Macías concludes that “in general, Mexican men view women as ‘others,’ not as equals” (158).

Is the Dzulum a symbol of the indigenous insurrection placed at the center of the novel, a consequence of the 1930s agrarian reforms and indigenismo politics? Could the Dzulum represent Mexican masculinity

and the power it holds over the nation's women? The representative qualities of the Dzulum pivot on whether one reads *Balún Canán* as an Indigenista or a feminist novel (about the gendered subaltern). A key characteristic of Castellanos's monster is its predilection for taking as victims the Ladina women of the elite landowning Argüello family, who, like their indigenous counterparts, are neither models of "normal" social behavior, nor satisfied with their social lot; they are characters that literary critic Nuala Finnegan finds to be easily interpretable as monstrous. The issue at hand cannot be resolved without understanding Castellanos's grasp of the "monster" or "monstrosity" in *Balún Canán*.

In this essay, I will interpret the Dzulum as a monster representative of the process proposed by Castellanos, by which Mexican women reach a breaking point and jettison the mythological constructs defining womanhood, so as to embrace more "authentic" identities. In *Balún Canán*, Tzeltal mythology functions as a locus of Other identity, becoming a shared space in which the Dzulum's indigeneity—symbolic of a people at the point of rebellion—can represent the existence that turns nonconformist women into social monsters. For my analysis, I draw on the field of monster theory and rely on a blend of Castellanos's essays for insights into her ideas regarding the monster, and of the vampiress figure specifically, as potential archetypes for the representation of women. The final part of this essay explores Bram Stoker's *Dracula* for generalized models—in the lady in white and Lucy Westenra—intended for socially noncompliant women in *Balún Canán*.

Debunking the Dzulum as Tzeltal Mythology

In *Balún Canán*, the Dzulum is introduced by the Tzeltal nana who cares for the seven-year-old girl narrator, and is representative of an indigenous oral tradition (Negrín Muñoz 62). In the kitchen of the Argüello house in Comitán—a delineated women's space—she describes the Dzulum to the girl narrator and other indigenous servants as "un animal" of the wilderness always wandering his territories and motivated not by hunger, but by "the will to command" (*Balún Canán* 21). The Dzulum's presence is marked by decimated flocks of sheep and the fearful wail of Lacondonian monkeys—even the jaguar flees in fear upon sniffing its presence (20). He is incorporeal, for no one ever to have seen him has lived, yet the nana believes him to be beautiful and very powerful since "even the people of reason," as white/Ladino Mexicans are referred to, must pay their tribute to the indigenous creature (20). This tribute becomes evident in the family story of Angélica Argüello, who, after ignoring various good marriage suitors,

falls prey to the Dzulum. After long aimless walks into the wilderness, Angélica simply vanishes, “bewitched” by the Dzulum’s beauty and power: “Ella lo miró y se fue tras él como hechizada. Y un paso llamó al otro paso y así hasta donde se acaban los caminos. Él iba adelante, bello y poderoso, con su nombre que significa ansia de morir” (21) (She set her eyes on him, and she followed him like she was bewitched, and every footstep beckoned to the next one, on and on, to the road’s end. He went ahead, beautiful and strong, with his name that means a yearning to be dead; Nicholson 24). Dzulum means “death wish” and, like Angélica, the equally unwed Argüello cousins Matilde and Francisca will succumb to the Dzulum’s power.

The Dzulum, writes literary critic Joanna O’Connell, is at face value, “literally, a magical being [that] carries off a Ladina,” a “demon lover” (99–100). The trope of a supernatural creature that seduces or takes “civilized” white women is not a new. The incubus is an ancient creature that seduces women into sexual activity, thereby impregnating them (Cohen, *Of Monsters* 53). Bram Stoker’s titular vampire, Dracula, is a monster from the east who uses his supernatural powers to seduce the characters Lucy Westenra and Mina Murray in his “incursions into civilized London” (Eltis 452). But we are burdened with the Dzulum’s possible mythological-religious origins.

For it is perhaps irresponsible to claim the Dzulum as a monster in the contemporary Western sense: a supernatural monster, when placed in the realm of vampires, zombies, and mummies come to life, hardly exists in a modern imaginary. Werewolves and zombies, perhaps once truly feared myths in some societies, are now the stuff of mass-consumed scary movies. Due to our historical distance, Greek mythological creatures like the satyr and the faun—members of ancient religious pantheons—might more easily slide into the category of monster, than a divinity from a living indigenous culture.¹ Potentially categorizing a figure of the Tzeltal mythological-religious belief system in this way could be paramount to casting St. Francis of Assisi as a monster for performing the miracle of stigmata, or St. Joseph of Cupertino for achieving levitation during prayer. O’Connell notes Castellanos’s decentering of the dominant focus on Ladino culture and Western perspectives through epigraphs originating in ancient Mayan culture and religion, in which “Each epigraph asserts the cultural survival of a Maya ‘we,’ a collective voice and history that filter through the text” (86). Within a 1930s Indigenista context, argues Kelley Hargrave, the Dzulum acts as a Conquistador-like beast, but representative of Tzeltal nationalism through violent political activism steeped in Mayan culture (467). Yet another critic sees the Dzulum as a possible harbinger for the social changes sweeping across rural Chiapas

(Goss 35). Within this context, the Dzulum could denote the politicization of a venerated Native American deity.

However, César Rodríguez Chicharro's work on *Balún Canán* questions the origins of the would-be Tzeltal idol. In his anthropologically inspired research, the literary critic contends that Castellanos invents the Dzulum (64). Not finding the “dz” phoneme in either the Tojolabal language (of the people residing near Comitán) or the Tzeltal language (of the people of Chactajal), he instead links the Dzulum's origin to the *Popol Vuh*, the ancient Mayan book of origin stories: “ya que la estructura del vocablo es perfectamente posible, y aun la dz, si bien aun el término *dzul* significa ‘señor’ en esta lengua” (64) (since the structure of the word is perfectly possible, and even the dz, and yet the term *dzul* means “lord” in this language). Similarly, literary critic Edith Negrín Muñoz finds the term “dzul” in the sacred book of *Chilám Balám* in reference to the merciless Conquistadores (60). Another possible source for the Dzulum, suggests Rodríguez Chicharro, is the *j'ijk'al*, a black creature who steals women and children to devour in traditional stories (64).² They are introduced as creatures from the times when mountains dominated the landscape, and “Es por eso que la gente vivía en la selva, donde había muchos negritos malos que entraban a robar niños acabados de nacer” (*Relatos tzeltales y tzotziles* 133) (That is why people lived in the jungle, where there were many evil *negritos* who would come in to steal newborn children). But the dimwitted *j'ijk'al* creatures, though feared, are neither worshiped nor respected. It would appear that Castellanos—an ardent reader of the *Popol Vuh*—creates her Dzulum as a sort of supernatural lord loosely based on sacred Mayan texts. Referring to the translated epigraphs of the *Popol Vuh*, the *Libro de Chilám Balám*, and the *Anales de los Xahil*, O'Connell cautions that “they are always necessarily mediated through her voices, and through the language and conventions of nonindigenous culture” (87). While critic Kelley Hargrave argues that the Dzulum symbolizes a cultural-nationalist Tzeltal-Mayan revolt (467), Sylvia Bigas Torres is quick to point out that Tzeltal revolt is based in the material-ideological realities of 1930s Cardenismo despite pre-Columbian prophecies of the waiting gods and impending revenge (365). As such, we can, with some certainty, read *Balún Canán*'s demon lover as a monster created by Castellanos. So, the question remains; what kind of monster would this woman make?

Monster Theory and Interstitial Identity

What constitutes monstrosity in the works of Rosario Castellanos, Mexican feminist and Indigenista author? And how does she conceive the production of monsters in 1930s rural Mexico? For Castellanos, the monster describes a phenomenon deemed so socially offensive as to merit exclusion from a community's register of "the acceptable." In an examination of her philosophical and social commentary essays, we find that Castellanos refers consistently to two groups deemed monsters by Mexican society; the first is women and the second indigenous people.³ This consistency is evident in her novelistic work as well, in which women and indigenous people occupy Other spaces in Mexican society. Both embody impending threats to the patriarchal-normative social order. In her works, women and indigenous people who cannot, or will not, adhere to ascribed social roles, face (1) the inability to define their roles within their communities, and (2) the burden of redefining themselves in a way that is consistent with their personal existences. Undefined by the standards of rural Mexican society, they become socially determined monsters. I will turn my attention toward the literary use of the monster as a recurrent theme exploited by Castellanos in writing about women in Mexican society. Below we will also consider what so-called monster theory can offer in an analysis of *Balún Canán* and Castellanos's own monster theory. We will focus on Castellanos's conception of the monstrous as an interstitial and culturally determined, symbolic presence.⁴

Monstrous Women in *Balún Canán*

Castellanos's belief that women can be considered monsters in Western culture is evident in even her earliest work. In her published Master's thesis in philosophy, *Sobre cultura femenina* (1950) (On Feminine Culture), she accuses male intellectuals and writers of considering their female counterparts as strange sea monsters, but only from afar since they have never been truly interested in them or their works (42). Castellanos provides evidence of women's monstrosity not only in contemporary Mexican examples but in a convincing Western epistemology as well.⁵ In *Mujer que sabe latín . . .* (1973) (Woman Who Speaks Latin), she argues the Mexican understanding of women to be based in an androcentric social construct in which all social values, such as truth, justice, history, politics, the socially significant and their discourses, belong to an exclusively male perspective (9).⁶ She cites the belief of St. Thomas Aquinas that a woman is like a "varón mutilado" (17), a sort of disfigured man. He is accompanied by a litany of like-minded Western thinkers, among them nineteenth-century philosopher

Arthur Schopenhauer, who describes grown women as large children, and neurologist Paul Julius Moebius, who argues that women possess “a mentally weak physiology” due to their tiny cranium, a monstrous development in itself (16). Here, women are judged to be monstrous through what Foucault called a “juridico-biological” understanding of normality; Foucault’s research on nineteenth-century criminology reveals how the monstrous was used to categorize the unintelligibly different, or as a way “of discovering the core of monstrosity hidden behind little abnormalities, deviances, and irregularities,” be they physical or behavioral (56). This history of intellectual misogyny also demonstrates a process through which the abnormal (women’s bodies) is naturalized, resulting in the hegemonic belief in women’s infantilism, insanity, and biological impropriety. Foucault’s sociohistorical contextualization of the monstrous is seconded by Cohen in “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” for whom the monster signifies a zeitgeist of sorts: “The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and dependence. The monstrous body is pure culture” (4). In the case of monstrous women, men’s failure to conceive an “authentic” and egalitarian idea of their female counterparts, and their insistence on naturalizing women’s inferiority, writes Castellanos, moves them to perceive unconventional women as physically and socially threatening, giving birth to the woman as monster.

Castellanos claims the trope of the monstrous woman, in the form of feminine myths and the vampiress for her own literary-philosophical purposes. For Norma Alarcón, the reappropriation of Mexican feminine myths is a characteristic strategy discernible in the author’s poetic works dealing with Eve, Salome, Judith, and la Malinche (*Ninformania* 15). Feminine myths demonstrate the masculine tendency to fix women’s identity into limited frameworks of what Alarcón calls a “sistema onto(teo)lógico” (onto(theo)logical system) in which women’s objectified existences orbit around a masculine socio-cultural subject (14). Women are men’s social allies but not their equals, their partners but also gender subalterns. This interstitial classification places non-maternal and intellectual women in Nepantla, that land between where Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was born (*Mujer* 30). As with women’s elusive bodies, the minds of women intellectuals become what Harvey Greenberg has called a “Linnean nightmare” that frustrates society’s attempts to think within its pre-established models (qtd. in Cohen, *Of Giants* 6): “And so, the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions.” An as of yet to be realized phenomenon, Castellanos’s empowered woman-subject also resides in a Nepantla of the desired and possible (Alarcón 15).

El uso de la palabra (1974) (*The Use of the Word*), a collection of newspaper essays published the year of Castellanos’s death, offers

examples of Castellanos's use of the representational power of the monster, ranging from the intimate and humorous to the socially critical and philosophical, and in which vampirism holds special meaning. "Monstruo de su laberinto" (Monster of Her Own Labyrinth) is a humorous depiction of her navigation of the Kafkaesque Mexican legal system after her family is involved in a traffic accident. After a series of legal statements and frustrating endless waits, the author dominates the situation by causing a shameless scene of such accusation and name-dropping that she turns into "una redomada histérica" (a cunning hysteric) on the verge of becoming "una plaga insoportable" (197) (an unbearable plague). "The law finds itself acutely embarrassed," in the form of a panicked clerk, when Castellanos (the titular monster) narrates herself through the stereotype of the hysterical woman (*Abnormal* 64). In "Génesis de una embajadora" (Genesis of an Ambassador), a humorous autobiography, we find Castellanos a ten-year-old gorgon: "Y los muchachos evitaban mi presencia como podían haber evitado la de Medusa porque me suponían una cabellera paralizante hecha de serpientes" (221) (And the boys avoided my presence as they would've Medusa's, since they imagined my head to be a paralyzing mass of snakes; Allgood 126). While masculine counterparts confer on her a hideous Medusa identity, she plays with the possibility of assuming a sexually empowered femme fatale one: "Con la de vampiresa, por ejemplo, de esas que van dejando tras de sí un reguera de cadáveres de hombres que se suicidan ante la imposibilidad de ser correspondidos en su pasión" (221) (with that of the vampiress, for example, like the ones who go along leaving behind them a trail of the bodies of men who have killed themselves in the wake of unrequited passion; Allgood 126). Castellanos alludes to the commanding vampiress again in "La puerta estrecha de la tv" (The Narrow Door of the TV) when mocking her "obvio fracaso como vampiresa" (214) (clear failure as a vampiress).⁷ Here, Castellanos's vampiress excludes the bloodiness and infanticide in Stoker's *Dracula*, instead representing an empowering sexual identity opposite her Medusa figure. In Castellanos's book *Mujer que sabe latín . . .*, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, whose intellect stuns a colonial society incapable of subduing her genius through traditional women's classifications—wife, courtesan, nun—becomes "ese monstruo devorador" (that all-consuming monster) that mocks the laws of nature and patriarchal society (164). Nuala Finnegan observes that the "view of herself as a monster expands and transforms itself into a metaphor for femininity as a whole" which is why her "women characters are grotesque, aging, diseased and disfigured monsters that flounder in their vicious worlds of patriarchal oppression" (*Monstrous Projections* 1). And yet, Castellanos's monstrosity, and especially through vampirism,

also reveals an empowering symbol for potential feminist identification through intellectualism and sexuality.

But monstrosity becomes dark and ambiguous when Castellanos confronts the myth of the self-sacrificing Mexican mother. Motherhood is regulated through marriage, a cruel institution into which women dogmatically march in order to achieve their full sociobiological potential (*El uso* 54). But behind the myth lay a complex of defiant realities:

Desde la que soporta el advenimiento de los hijos como una catástrofe inexorable, hasta la que se desentiende de ellos y hasta la que no se siente satisfecha con abandonarlos en manos de personas extrañas o de instituciones oficiales, sino que se deshace de ellos por medio del infanticidio. Prefiere la condena universal y la reclusión en una cárcel antes que mecer una cuna. (54)

(From she who bears the arrival of her children like an unyielding catastrophe, to the one who ignores them, and even she who does not feel satisfied abandoning them in the hands of strangers or official institutions, but rather rids herself of them through infanticide. She prefers universal condemnation and the reclusion of a jail cell to the rocking of a crib.)

Not only are some women disgruntled recipients of maternity, a biological requirement they must fulfill for social integration, but Castellanos draws attention to others for whom infanticide poses a terrible but acceptable alternative. Mental health experts—Western society’s authority “of normal and abnormal behavior,” according to Foucault (307)—and moralists declare them “aberraciones . . . monstruosidades” (aberrations . . . monstrosities) and deem these women’s diagnosed incompatibility as “excepciones que confirman la regla” (exceptions that confirm the rule) thereby reestablishing the momentarily questioned maternal myth (*El uso* 54). While the imposition of a self-sacrificing maternal myth is itself monstrous, Castellanos is keenly aware of the maternal myth’s power to produce monsters to perpetuate its very normative functions.

The depth with which Castellanos writes about the monstrous, especially when dealing with questions of women’s roles in Mexican society, reveals her awareness of the malleability of the monster as a concept and of the sociocultural contextualization it obeys. As such, women are constantly reminded of their inferiority in *Balún Canán* to white male landowners, in their political marginalization and, Nuala Finnegan reminds us, in their monstrous bodies—via their mysterious sexuality or the equally mysterious corporal ravages of age (24).

Because the characters of the novel (the girl, Matilde, Francisca, Angélica) are Ladinas, like Castellanos herself, they are subject to the cultural-scientific accusations of monstrosity that all Western women confront.

The Dzulum and the Monstrous Indian

The Dzulum is a monster that resides within the Tzeltal cultural space, unequivocally linking women's monstrosity to indigenous marginalization and insurgency. Analisa Taylor asserts that in *Balún Canán*, and later *Oficio de Tinieblas*, "essentialized white feminine otherness is conceived as a way to gain access to the secrets of an equally essentialized indigenous otherness" (55). Concentrating on the autobiographical nature of the celebrated Indigenista novel, Elena Poniatowska proposes:

Balún Canán, que más que la vida de los chamulas relata su soledad de niña. Los indígenas son un apoyo, la injerencia de la nana es definitiva, pero lo importante para Rosario es esta niña que mira caer la lluvia contra la ventana y se siente culpable de la muerte del hermano menor, Benjamín Castellanos, el consentido de los padres. (*¡Ay vida, no me mereces!* 90)

(More than the lives of the Chamulas, *Balún Canán* narrates her childhood solitude. The indigenous people provide support, the insertion of the nana is definitive, but what is important to Rosario is this girl who watches the rain fall against the window and feels guilty about the death of her younger brother, Benjamín Castellanos, the parent's favorite.)

Just as Taylor here centers on the Indigenista themes of the novel, Poniatowska contends the novel to be essentially a work dealing with the realities of a Ladina girl, the daughter of a rural elite family in Chiapas. Although various Tzeltal characters have storylines in their own right, the girl's narrator function and namelessness suggests her allegorical function in representing other women brought up (and socialized) in 1930s rural Mexico. While the cultural-historical context, 1930s Cardenismo, is a moment in which indigenous possibilities were opening, the condition of rural Mexican women remained one of arrested promise under a conservative patriarchal order (Macías 146). The novel demonstrates a similitude in women and indigenous oppression, hope for the potential of Indigenismo and a not yet realized

social recognition of Mexican women. This focus implies a unique role for the Dzulum as a shared space in which the monster's indigeneity can represent women's monstrosity.

Castellanos's literary conception of indigenous culture as marginal as well as monstrous is derived from the tragic historical and intellectual violence leveled against indigenous peoples in Mexico up until 1930s Chiapas. In *Balún Canán*, landowning families in the novel accept the infantilism and overall inferiority of their subservient, noble-savage Tzeltal population, whose social role is to gratefully serve their oppressors. This is why Zoraida finds it ludicrous to provide a school teacher to the Tzeltales who cannot speak Spanish, and is doubly shocked when Felipe Carranza Pech enters their hacienda speaking casually in Spanish (44, 95). Felipe, who has ventured outside of his hacienda-Tzeltal community, seen poor white Mexicans, and experienced a brief meeting with president Cárdenas, is a complete oddity to the Ladinos and his fellow Tzeltales, who are incapable of grasping his experiences. Like the indigenous man who invades the ladino social space by attending a fair in Comitán and speaking in Spanish, Felipe too "¡Es el Anticristo!" (38) (Is the Antichrist!). Undergoing major changes, Chiapas rural society turns the insurgent Indian into a monster symbolic of the impending loss of the traditional social order that guarantees elite Ladinos cultural and material superiority. As I have noted above, these social changes in indigenous cultural and political consciousness contextualize the menacing presence of the monster Dzulum.

Castellanos will posit the representation of the rural Mexican woman in the Tzeltal legend to strategically shift the discourse of women's existence from the notion of a feminine-specific oppression into one of universalized marginality. Alarcón has noted the warm closeness between the girl, identified through her gender, and her Tzeltal nana, who is identified through her gender as well as her race, and in contrast to the cold distance of the girl's mother. Though racially different and separated by class, both are secondary figures of the Argüello family: "Aquí destaca el hecho que si socialmente nana y niña se distancian, por la marginación se asemejan. Ni una ni otra poseen una individualidad a los ojos de los otros" (Alarcón 30–31) (What is highlighted here is the fact that if nana and girl are distanced socially, they are likened through marginalization. Neither one or the other possesses individuality in the eyes of the others.). Otherness, whether indigenous or gender, presents a common ground for Castellanos's Tzeltal and Ladina characters. Still, Tzeltal cultural Otherness specifically—religious-mythological, linguistic and social—represents a place outside of the identities of Ladinas, who recognize themselves primarily through the socio-cultural space of Mexican patriarchy.

Castellanos will move the discussion of women's Otherness into this third space represented by indigenous marginality, in which the affinity between indigenous and women's oppressions becomes apparent: "Es ese espacio, donde se efectúa la diferencia que yo llamo el sitio del sujeto radical contingente, que Rosario Castellanos figura como Eva, por ejemplo, o como ente marginado, para dialogar con lo recibido, lo heredado" (14) (It is that space, in which difference is carried out I call the site of the contingent radical subject, who Rosario Castellanos figures as Eve, for example, or as a marginalized entity, to dialogue with what has been given, what has been inherited). Like the threatening Tzeltal leader Felipe, the women characters of *Balún Canán* (Francisca, Matilde, the girl) will also attempt to painfully undermine the social order after reaching their breaking point, to realize their own contingent subjectivities by aligning themselves with the monstrous Dzulum.

Vampiressess in Balún Canán and the Meaning of the Dzulum

Castellanos's monster theory reveals the potential of the vampiress/femme fatale figure as an archetype for women's empowerment. In her clever maneuvering of the monster concept, within the existence of a misogynist Western tradition of women's monstrosity, she proposes that socially exceptional women like herself, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and even *La Pintada* (from Azuela's *Los de abajo*), are ill-conforming women who "hace[n] estremecerse de lo establecido, para[n] de cabeza las jerarquías y logra[n] la realización de lo auténtico" (*Mujer* 18) (make the foundations of the establishment tremble, turning hierarchies upside down, and achieving authenticity; Ahern 244). They are all monsters and, why not, vampiressess, as I hope an examination of the influence of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) on *Balún Canán* will reveal. One could more easily contrast the two texts than compare their similarities, Stoker's novel being set in the late-Victorian period in metropolitan London, and Castellanos's focusing on the semi-feudal post-Revolution rural Comitán and Chactajal in Chiapas. And yet, both places are undergoing major social changes; London, in the way that educated and working women challenge English patriarchy, and Chiapas, in the agrarian reforms of President Cárdenas that limit hacienda owners' political influence and devastate the tradition of massive estates and de facto indigenous slave labor. And both deal with these social changes through the introduction of a third party, ethnic monster, be it Dracula or the Dzulum. Fixing my analysis of *Balún Canán* within a Mexican post-Revolution context, I will

employ a flexible application of some of Stoker's motifs, and enlist the work of Sol Eltis on race and gender in *Dracula* as a guide. In the spirit of the author's essays cited above, I want to examine what uses Castellanos makes of Stoker's discourses on women and how she employs the monster-vampiress as a model for nonconformist women in her novel.

In *Balún Canán*, Stoker's vampiress serves as an archetype for the Mexican woman whose transformation towards death leads her to choose herself over society. She indulges in the forbidden behaviors deemed acceptable only to males and shrugs matrimonial and maternal responsibilities. In Castellanos's ideal, women shed the myth-based identities society feeds them "para alcanzar su imagen auténtica y consumirse—y consumirse—en ella" (*Mujer* 17) (to achieve her authentic image and consummate herself—and be consummated—in it; Ahern 243). But disidentifying with normative gender expectations proves difficult for many: "Para elegirse a sí misma y preferirse por encima de lo demás se necesita haber llegado . . . a lo que Sartre llama una situación límite" (*Mujer* 243) (In order to select oneself and place oneself before others one needs to have reached . . . what Sartre calls a "limit situation"; Ahern 243). We will see how the gradual road to reaching her "breaking point" coincides with each woman's embrace of the Dzulum. Once identified with the demon lover, she too becomes a monster and is punished for shaking the foundations of the Western patriarchy (18).

The story of the Dzulum (or death wish), beginning with the legend of Angélica Argüello, is a narrative about her many gender irregularities. An orphan adopted by César's parents, she is almost a Victorian ideal, white "como una vara de azucena" (like a lily on its stem; Nicholson 23) docile and obedient (*Balún Canán* 20). Angélica's orphaned state reveals the irregularity of her upbringing and puts into question her bloodline, while the disregard for her abundant suitors presents a rejection of the gender obligations of a woman of class. But she surrenders her tranquil demeanor when she is seduced by, and then restlessly pursues the Dzulum as she wanders beyond the domestic sphere of the family hacienda into the Chiapas wilderness. The nana describes Angélica as "having lost her way": "Y cuando le preguntábamos dónde fue, sólo decía que no encontraba el rumbo y nos miraba como pidiendo ayuda" (21) (And when we asked where she'd been, she only said she couldn't find the way and she looked at us as if pleading for help; Nicholson 24). The pathological nature of her behavior is evident when her adoptive father recruits the local curandero to cure her. The Argüello patriarch and the curandero, local authorities on normal behavior and health, identify Angélica—melancholy, unwed, and in wanderlust—as dreadfully sick. This white lady, says the nana,

discovers and follows the Dzulum as if bewitched. Refusing to adhere to the “normal” women’s roles ascribed to her class and race, Angélica finds a seductive alternative in the Dzulum, that is, death. Angélica’s legend loosely parallels the one reported by Mina Murray in *Dracula*, a “legend that a white lady is seen in one of the windows” of the ruins of Whitby Abbey, “which is the scene of part of the ‘Marmion,’ where the girl was built up in the wall” (Stoker 54). Here, Mina and Lucy Westenra ponder the destiny of Constance Beverly, the disobedient nun turned mistress in Walter Scott’s epic poem, whose fate, being buried alive, presages that of Lucy. Slipping into legend as the beautiful and mad (if not defiant) white lady seduced by her own death wish, Angélica precedes other Argüello women, and resembles the white lady in Stoker’s novel, a mysterious and supernatural presence of a rebellious woman.

The three Argüello women of the Palo María ranch, the orphaned cousins of César living in their tiny community of women, follow Angélica as examples of women who will not or cannot conform to their social expectations and who assume vampiric identities. Castellanos’s exposition of nontraditional Mexican women continues in Francisca, the unwed, no-nonsense head of the hacienda who also cares for her sisters. Romelia, separated from her husband, claims to suffer from migraines, has a tendency to lock herself up in her room and for all intents and purposes is a hypochondriac (69); more than physically, she is mentally infirm. Matilde, the socially frail spinster, struggles with her hopeful delusions of meeting a handsome well-to-do man to sweep her off her feet, the realities of limited suitors, and a quickly aging body. Like the three vampiresses dwelling in Dracula’s castle who lustfully threaten to feast on Jonathan Harker’s body, the three women are devoid of maternal roles while, especially in the case of Francisca, “Traditional gender roles are reversed” in the hacienda day-to-day activities (Eltis 456). Finnegan notes that *Balún Canán*’s narrative contrasts a male/public life with a female/private sphere:

César’s story, and its link to the indigenous people’s struggle, is portrayed center stage, Matilde’s life is marginalized and recounted in parentheses. The historical grounding of public life is told as text; the tragic fate of the female characters (Matilde and Francisca) is related as intertext. (41)

Hinging on the centrality of their more powerful counterpart, César Argüello, who like Stoker’s vampire count is also a wealthy landowner, the women’s stories seem more like secondary parables than driving storylines.

The most complex of the Palo María women, Francisca assumes a vampire identity when she becomes a sorceress of the Dzulum in order to hold a grip of fear over the rebelling Tzeltal servants on her hacienda. Francisca finds herself overwhelmed by ominous seditious Indians who, encouraged by Cardenista agrarian reforms and state Indigenista policies, overrun her hacienda. Her vampirism is clear when she crafts a coffin in which she will lay, but not sleep (115). Devoid of a male authority figure, Francisca resorts to torturing the Tzeltales to death to maintain her control over them, something so cruel and criminal that César himself refuses to do it. Finally, wrapped in a black shawl and accompanied by “el vuelo de los murciélagos” (the flutter of bats; Nicholson 112), she wanders the halls nightly until abducted by the Dzulum, after which she pronounces herself a sorceress with clairvoyant powers (115–16). Doubt is cast on whether she is playing a dangerous game of manipulation with the Tzeltals’ superstitions, or has simply gone mad (221); in either case, her desperation leads her to a breaking point in which either may be possible. So, as César retreats from his hacienda in defeat, his shadow is replaced by that of another powerful landowner, the Dzulum, who exercises his power through Francisca. Even toward the end of the novel, when there is doubt in whether Francisca is manipulating the Tzeltales or is truly bewitched, her besting of the male *hacendados* in retaining her inheritance—the land and the Tzeltales—goes undisputed (238). César’s disbelief, and his accusation that she is participating in a “ridiculous farce” unbecoming of her stature, only supports his inability to grasp his cousin’s new monstrous identity which defies his gendered understanding of women’s roles and propriety (218). Significantly, O’Connell calls the Dzulum “a demonized representation of the landowner, an incarnation of the ideology of possession to which he pays tribute,” connected to “the punishment and regulation of women’s sexuality with the ‘voluntad de mando,’ the will to command” (101). If César, a wealthy landowner, embodies the patriarchal order, the Dzulum symbolizes its consequences, the ultimate sentence to women violating (willingly or not) “normal” social behavior. Like other nonconformist women, Francisca falls under the Dzulum’s spell. But in her case, the *hacendada* turned priestess realizes an identity more true (or authentic) to her existence as a member of the landowning elite: unmarried and powerful, with men obeying her every command, like a true vampiress. She pays with her isolation and becomes the mystic Black Lady, “vestida de negro, con los ojos bajos” (dressed in black, eyes lowered; Nicholson 205), of rural Mexico (217).

The spinstered and frail Matilde will resemble Stoker’s fragile sleepwalker Lucy Westenra—a figure of the “Western” women in crisis—when she attempts to realize her sexuality and is driven to

madness by her existential dissatisfaction. Lucy and Matilde are both secondary characters: of the latter's marginalization, Finnegan finds that "Matilde is also shut off, both materially (by being banished from her home) and textually (her desires are communicated almost entirely through parentheses)" (43). Matilde's monstrosity rests on the very hyperawareness of her own aging body, while her abnormality depends on the delicate psychological state caused by her inability to fulfill her marital and maternal expectations. In this sense, Matilde follows the paradigm set by Lucy, whose conjugal-maternal destiny is cut short by the vampire Dracula. Moreover, neither Matilde nor Lucy express aspirations beyond their normative gender roles. While Lucy is beautiful, and Matilde ironically not so, her sleepwalking presents a type of abnormal behavior suggestive of her potential for deviance, while both characters are "reminiscent of the traditional feminine, defenseless, and frivolous Victorian Lady" (Eltis 457). Finnegan has found that in Castellanos's prose, "The women characters are grotesque, ageing, diseased and disfigured monsters that flounder in their vicious worlds of patriarchal oppression" (1). This is true in Matilde's case, whose monstrosity is evident in the exaggerated socialized body-image:

Vieja. Ésa era la verdad. . . . Se palpó las mejillas con la punta de los dedos y comprobó con angustia que su piel carecía de la firmeza, de la elasticidad, de la frescura de la juventud y que colgaba, floja, como la cáscara de una fruta pasada. Y su cuerpo también se le mostró —ahora que estaba desnudándose bajo el cobertizo de ramas—opaco, feo, vencido. (154)

(Old. It was true . . . She felt her cheeks with her finger-tips and painfully checked the fact that her skin had no longer the firmness and elasticity and freshness of youth, that it hung loose like the skin of over-ripe fruit. And—now that she was undressing under the shelter of the foliage—her body was revealed to her too, thick and ugly and defeated. (Nicholson 147)

Desperate to discover her sexuality, Matilde turns her attention to Ernesto, César's younger bastard nephew. As in the case of Lucy, Matilde finds herself trapped in a sexual maze from which she does not have the means of escape; in Castellanos's words, she is a "monstruo en su laberinto" (monster in her own labyrinth) which she assumes only a man is capable of skillfully unlocking (*Mujer* 13). Matilde succumbs to Ernesto hoping he will serve as that "mediador masculino" (male mediator) through whom "la mujer averigua acerca de su cuerpo y de sus funciones, de su persona y de sus obligaciones todo lo que le conviene y nada más" (14) (woman finds out about her body and its

functions, about her person and her obligations, only that which is suitable for her and nothing more; Ahern 241). Before giving in to her sexual desires, she reproaches Ernesto's advances based on their class and age differences: "Mírame, mírame bien. Estas arrugas. Podría ser tu madre" (123) (Look at me, look at me well, at these wrinkles. I'm old, Ernesto, I might be your mother; Nicholas 119).

Matilde's and Lucy's potential for sexual deviance are features of each novel. Courted by three different men, Lucy questions the Western theological-patriarchal hegemony—or "sistema onto(teo)lógico" (Alarcón 14) (onto(theo)logical system)—that limits women to one husband: "Why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?" (Stoker 50). Lucy dies never having married or become a mother, instead replacing the "White Lady" as the "Bloofer Lady," a vampiress who hunts for children to feed on, thereby completely inverting the maternal role she was to assume before turning. Matilde also inverts gender roles when initiating a relationship with her younger illegitimate cousin, thereby transgressing class and age norms. Her disappointing relationship with Ernesto leads her to wander into the wilderness, seduced by the idea of her own death. Nearing her "breaking point," Matilde asks herself, "Y Angélica, ¿estaría desesperada como ella? ¿O se perdió sin querer?" (140–41) (Had Angelica, she wondered, been desperate like she herself was now? Or had she simply got lost without intending to?; Nicholson 135). Matilde attempts suicide again after realizing Ernesto has impregnated her, and reveals to him her inability to outlive the stigma of her illegitimate pregnancy. When he manifests his disgust, Matilde challenges Ernesto to beat her, laughing hysterically (159). In a key moment Lucy Westenra, as the aggressive and sensual "Bloofer Lady" that preys on children, smiles suggestively as she holds a child to her breast in a mocking parody of the maternal role she is actually violating: "With a careless motion, she flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast" (Stoker 181). Similarly, Matilde brandishes her fangs not only by crossing gender borders with her newfound sexuality, but also in her attempt to kill her unborn child, through her own death wish, a complete reversal of ascribed maternal expectations.

With the help of the curandera, doña Amantina, Matilde will complete her trajectory toward the Dzulum through infanticide, the logical result of a rigid social system forcing women to choose between an unrealistic maternal myth and an identity consistent with an authentic reflection of themselves (*Mujer* 17). After discovering Ernesto's murdered body, she finally "succumbs to madness," confessing to the affair and the abortion (Hargrave 465). Evoking César's implied patriarchal right to enact justice, Matilde accepts responsibility for having dishonored the family name and asks him, "—¿No me vas a

matar?” (216) (Aren't you going to kill me?; Nicholson 201). Matilde thus embraces her existential truth, one that is unacceptable to the conservative Argüellos, and surrenders to her death wish. Symbolic of her embrace of the Dzulum, she kisses her dead lover and simultaneously surrenders to her social reality as an aging woman who has discovered her own body through an illicit affair at the cost of an aborted pregnancy. While Lucy is also punished by male authority figures—porters of Western European medical and psychological science—by “more violent means” in order “to control her sexuality,” Matilde is banished by César (Eltis 456). Like Angélica, Matilde also loses her way in embracing an identity more consistent with her existential reality.

The nameless girl and autobiographically-based narrator also reaches a deal with the Dzulum that subverts the “natural” order of things. From the beginning, the girl will recognize—though not understand—her inferiority, in part through her situation of utter abandonment by her mother. Acutely aware of her family’s predilection for her younger brother Mario, and his disregard of her, she protests: “Una vez más cae sobre mí todo el peso de la injusticia” (*Balún Canán* 10) (Once again, the full weight of injustice is brought down on me). Her difficulty in establishing a solid sense of identity is connected to her interstitial existence, as neither an integral part of the family due to her gender, nor as an indigenous person like her nana (Negrín Muñoz 71). Furthermore, Finnegan finds the girl already recognizes her body as “the source of her oppression” (24). The nana announces that the Tzeltal brujos intend to devour Mario and end the Argüello bloodline, as commanded by a “voz como de animal” (*Balún Canán* 230) (an animal-like voice), which Ruth Ward interprets as that of the Dzulum, who intends to fulfill ancient Mayan prophecy (202). The girl begins to reach her limit when, in protest to the local priest’s insistence that Zoraida resign herself to the will of God, the angry mother objects in the girl’s presence: “Si Dios quiere cebarse en mis hijos . . . ¡Pero no en el varón! ¡No en el varón!” (250) (Even if God wants to fatten himself on my children. . . . But not on the male child. Not on the boy!; Nicholson 235). Mario’s inexplicable sickness manifests itself at the beginning of the children’s Catholic indoctrination by Amalia, Zoraida’s aging friend, who by tradition is relegated to spinsterhood in caring for her senile mother until her death, and whose house smells like a cedar box (33). Mario and the girl are then both terrified by a servant’s story in which the devil Catashaná chokes a blasphemous child with the sacred host as he takes communion. The girl’s decision to steal the key to the oratory for use in their first communion further torments Mario (262). As Mario deteriorates, the girl admits her guilt: “Yo no voy a entregar la llave. Cuando vengan no podrán abrir el oratorio. Castigarán a Mario creyendo

que él es el culpable, y lo entregarán en manos de Catashaná” (276) (I’m not going to give back the key. When they come they won’t be able to open the chapel. They’ll punish Mario thinking it’s he who’s the culprit, and they’ll surrender him to Catashaná; Nicholson 258). She reaches her breaking point in realizing that her survival depends on choosing herself and betraying a tradition prioritizing the male brother: “Porque me comerían los brujos a mí; a mí me castigaría Dios, a mí me cargaría Catashaná. ¿Quién iba a defenderme? Mi madre no. Ella sólo defiende a Mario porque es el hijo varón” (278) (Because then the witches would eat me, God would punish me, and Catashaná would carry me off; Who would come to my rescue? Not Mother. She only protects Mario because he’s the male child; Nicholson 259). The girl shows her fangs not only in abandoning Mario to the Dzulum’s ravenous brujos, but also in her fantasy of leaving her mother by escaping to Guatemala.

In this final analysis, the girl’s monstrosity manifests itself when she achieves an identity more true to herself—as in the case of Angélica, Francisca, and Matilde—as a victim reacting to her mother’s enactment of a patriarchal devaluing of her daughter, the broader monstrosity. The girl’s monstrous behavior here no doubt reflects the perpetuated misogyny against daughters by their own mothers, who is the first person with whom a feminist alliance may be possible. About the autobiographical nature of *Balún Canán*, Elena Poniatowska writes: “Rosario tuvo un hermano, a quien le puso Mario en la novela, y deseó su muerte” (*¡Ay vida!* 90–91) (Rosario had a brother, whom she named Mario in the novel, and wished for his death). The girl aligns herself with the Tzeltal brujos to wish for her brother’s death. But the high cost of the girl’s survival becomes apparent when she is left guilt-ridden and lonelier than ever. Her inferiority to her younger brother will continue even after his death, evident in the words of family friend don Jaime Rovelo, whose son has become a Cardenista: “—Ahora tu padre ya no tiene por quién seguir luchando. Ya estamos iguales. Ya no tenemos hijo varón” (281) (Now your father has nobody to go on fighting for. We’re in the same boat. Neither of us has a man-child anymore; Nicholson 263). Reminiscent of Francisca and Matilde, who model the distress of their white relative Angélica, the girl will take to woefully wandering but within the house’s rooms and garden, unable to escape her domestic space. Just as Francisca’s lives (not sleeps) in a real coffin, and Matilde is doomed to her declining body, the girl dwells inside a domestic coffin, like the one to which Amalia is relegated that smells like a “caja de cedro” (33) (cedar chest; Nicholson 35). The Dzulum has done his job in taking Mario’s life, and like her vampire kin, the girl too is punished.

Conclusion

The Argüello women's inability to assume a conventional social identity and negotiate the burden of redefining oneself with an identity consistent with one's personal realities, comes at a great cost. The Dzulum is the equivalent of that very cost, a "situación límite" (breaking point) that makes death an acceptable alternative to the intolerable existence of social identities—be it as mothers, wives, so-called spinsters or sisters—one cannot or will not conform to. The Dzulum, as contextualized by 1930s indigenous culture and rebellion, connects rural Mexican women's embrace of themselves (and consequently of their deaths) to a hope of overcoming social marginalization. By positing women's secondary existences, as determined by patriarchal normative roles, in a Tzeltal-Mayan cultural entity, Castellanos universalizes the repression of women and avoids the androcentric discourses of the "feminine." But the Dzulum is also symbolic of the sociocultural context of 1930s rural Mexico, a time of indigenous possibility and the unfulfilled pledge of women's equality. Castellanos seems to suggest that during this time, the Dzulum was the best unconventional women could realistically hope for. As such, the monster Dzulum represents—more than women's monstrosity—the monstrous consequences of a rigid social system exclusive of nontraditional women's roles, for which there is no silver bullet or wooden stake. For no individual can challenge the Dzulum and win.

Notes

1. However, that is not to say that gods, especially historically distanced ones, could not be successfully portrayed as monsters. The film *El laberinto del fauno* (2006) is a good example in which the faun, once a forest divinity, now becomes an ambiguous type of monster.
2. Among the Mayan Tzotzil nation, suggests Lourdes de León, *j'ijk'al* and *jmakbe* (or boogie man) stories, are part of the "scary supernatural beings" used to relate "fearful situations, dangers, and threats to life ('soul loss') to children (178).
3. In her litany of social monstrosity she includes the bastard, whose illegitimacy scars the subject in his/her community, and women who commit infanticide, whose turning against their own children is an upheaval to the normalization of the happily self-abnegated Mexican mother.
4. While one might argue that indigenous people, women and criminals are not monsters, but instead abnormal groups or individuals, each nonetheless "bears the monster's imprint," since, argues criminologist Andrew N. Sharpe, "monstrosity is no longer confined to the body" as in ancient perspectives, and also encompasses the psychological and behavioral abnormalities as deemed by society (226).

5. Following the ideas set forth by Simone de Beauvoir's text (see "Woman: Myth and Reality" in *The Second Sex*), she proposes in *Mujer que sabe latín . . .* (1973) that what Mexicans consider to be a woman is in fact an androcentric social construct, or myth: "A LO LARGO de la historia (la historia es el archivo de los hechos cumplidos por el hombre, y todo lo que queda fuera de él pertenece al reino de la conjetura, de la fábula, de la leyenda, de la mentira) la mujer ha sido, más que un criatura humana, un mito" (*Mujer* 9) (In the course of history (history is an archive of deeds undertaken by men, and all that remains outside it belongs to the realm of conjecture, fable, legend, or lie) more than a natural phenomenon, a component of society, or a human creature, woman has been myth; Ahern 236).
6. As such, Castellanos's notion of the monster is especially significant to Mexican women, in part due to the winning of women's suffrage in 1953 (over 30 years after the U.S.: 1920).
7. Castellanos creates her own monsters when, in "Anticipación a la nostalgia" she deems forgettable those "monstruos de la laguna negra" (creatures from the black lagoon) who casually dismiss her as an acceptable looking woman for her age (225).

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