

Bolivarian Landslides? Ecological Disasters, Political Upheavals, and (Trans)National Futures in Contemporary Venezuelan Culture

Rebecca Jarman
University of Leeds, UK
rebeccajarman@gmail.com



Abstract

In December 1999, the so-called “Vargas Tragedy” destroyed the Venezuelan coast after days of torrential rain caused over fifty landslides in the greater metropolitan area of Caracas. The disaster coincided with a referendum to redraft the Venezuelan constitution during the first year of Bolivarian Socialism, and was conceived of as a punctual political event that marked the beginning of a new historical period for Venezuela. This understanding of the landslides has been contested by authors and filmmakers who negotiate ecological crises as complex multitemporal, transnational processes. Focusing on the use of child protagonists in *Una tarde con campanas* (2004), a novel by Juan Carlos Méndez Guédez, and *El chico que miente* (2011), a film directed by Marité Ugás, this article analyses the creative strategies employed in contemporary Venezuelan culture that foreground alternative responses to the landslides. On the one hand, I argue that adolescence is used in these texts as a figurative device that rebels against the politicisation of the disaster and thus, by extension, undermines the state’s elision of a post-catastrophic and post-capitalist future. On the other, I argue that childhood is mediated as a heterogeneous site that defies facile reification, much like the disaster, and invites a reconsideration of the ways in which we conceptualise the relationship between the human and the non-human.

Keywords: Bolivarian socialism, Venezuela, landslides, disaster studies, Vargas Tragedy, childhood studies, Latin American studies, ecocriticism.

Resumen

En diciembre de 1999, la llamada “tragedia de Vargas” destruyó la costa venezolana después de días de lluvias torrenciales que causaron más de cincuenta derrumbes de tierra en las afueras de Caracas. El desastre coincidió con un referéndum para reformar la constitución venezolana durante el primer año del mandato de Hugo Chávez y, por lo tanto, se consideró un evento histórico que rompió con la “cuarta república” y marcó una nueva era para el país bolivariano. En el ámbito cultural, esta visión del desastre ha sido rechazada por varios autores y directores venezolanos, quienes señalan al desastre como un proceso no cronológico cuyos efectos e impactos trascienden las fronteras nacionales. Este artículo analiza el trama pos-catastrófico protagonizado por niños en *Una tarde con campanas* (2004), una novela de Juan Carlos Méndez Guédez, y *El chico que miente* (2011), una película de Marité Ugás. Por un lado, argumento que estos textos recurren a la infancia como un mecanismo narrativo que confronta la politización de la supervivencia y, por extensión, desautoriza las visiones de un futuro pos-capitalista/pos-catastrófico. Por otro lado, sugiero que la infancia se ve como un sitio heterogéneo que niega la

codificación y el dualismo sociedad/naturaleza, exigiendo así una reconsideración de las relaciones entre lo humano y lo no-humano.

Palabras claves: socialismo bolivariano, Venezuela, derrumbe, estudios de los desastres, Tragedia de Vargas, estudios de la infancia, estudios latinoamericanos, ecocrítica

Recent advances in disaster studies have rejected what Elizabeth DeLoughrey terms the “eventist model of history,” or a mode of organising time according to punctual and finite events, that obscures the notion of ecological disaster as a complex and intertwined set of processes (473). Particularly within the environmental humanities and the social sciences, scholarship has demonstrated that the devastation wreaked by ecological catastrophes is contingent on pre-existing systemic factors, including precarious urban infrastructures, short-sighted environmental policies, the dominance of extractive industries and accumulative changes to ecological cycles.¹ Correspondingly, the afterlives of natural disasters are long-lasting: they transcend the instantaneity of the singular moments in which the material expression of the disaster is most apparent, as well as the national boundaries of the areas immediately affected. Responses to environmental crises can change the geopolitical organisation of multiple countries, stemming from the massive displacement of climate refugees to the opportunities they create in (re)negotiating international relations, whether in the immediate form of disaster aid or, later, in the expansion of what Naomi Klein has famously termed “disaster capitalism” (*Shock Doctrine* 6).² Such an approach has been particularly prominent in research on disasters from postcolonial perspectives, which, in the words of Anthony Carrigan, sets out to “highlight problems in treating post-disaster ‘recovery’ as a linear process with a definable endpoint” (257). This strand of scholarship places ecological catastrophes within a global(ised) context, seeking to account for “the transnational dialectics of postcolonial affiliation” in responses to disasters (Carrigan 264).

In Venezuela, however, understandings of recent ecological crises have largely been framed within the neo-Hegelian march of history, a way of organising historical narratives that Fernando Coronil identifies as characteristic of Latin America’s “turn to the left” that is oftentimes said to have begun with the 1998 election of Hugo Chávez (“Future” 240).³ That the 1999 Vargas landslides

¹ See Anthony Carrigan’s “Postcolonial Disaster,” Mike Davis’s *Planet of Slums*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s “Radiation Ecologies,” and Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine* and *This Changes Everything*.

² Klein’s succinct definition of “disaster capitalism” is as follows: “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting marketing opportunities” (*Shock Doctrine* 6).

³ Coronil defines the “leftist turn” as the rise of “presidents who seek to deepen democracy by rejecting neoliberalism and proclaiming ideals commonly associated with socialist principles” (“Future” 231). Although this shift is first made visible with Chávez’s “identification of democracy

coincided with a referendum that approved amendments to the Venezuelan Constitution meant that the *tragedia* was put to work in consolidating the Bolivarian Revolution some twelve months into Chávez's first term as president. In their analysis of the state's response to the landslides that devastated the coastal state of Vargas, anthropologists Didier Fassin and Paula Vásquez have conceived of the disaster as a prompt *political* event, or "a temporally circumscribed fact that delimits two states of the world [...]: one before and the other after" (392, emphasis in original). In the early stages of state (re)formation, the energy of landslides was harnessed and transformed into a political resource, mirroring the extraction of petroleum that fuels the national economy and secures the appeal of Venezuelan figureheads with promises that their use of oil funds will transform the nation (Coronil, *Magical State* 4).⁴ In presidential discourse, the disaster was branded as a singular phenomenon that swept away the nation's past and laid the ground for the possibility of collective recovery based on the political terms set out by the new constitution, to be explored in greater depth in the pages that follow.

While existing scholarship has deconstructed the state's disaster strategy so as to critique such opportunism, it has also run the risk of strengthening its teleological framework by overlooking counterhegemonic responses. Many of these responses are to be found in contemporary forms of cultural production that oppose the fetishisation of the "Vargas tragedy" that, as we will see, was used as ideological currency in purchasing national regeneration with Bolivarian socialism. Significantly, this interpretation of the "Vargas Tragedy" has been contested by authors and filmmakers who critique the politicisation of the disaster and its victims. Offering a comparative analysis of *Una tarde con campanas* (2004), a novel by Juan Carlos Méndez Guédez, and *El chico que miente* (2011), a film directed by Marité Ugás, this article foregrounds the creative strategies employed in contemporary Venezuelan culture to nuance conceptualisations of the Vargas landslides.

with the welfare state, a strong rejection of neoliberalism, and the promise of radical change," its roots lie in the 1989 electoral defeat of Chile's Augusto Pinochet (Coronil, "Future" 240).

⁴ This is the argument made by Coronil in his seminal work, *The Magical State* (1997). Key to this premise is the claim that "the arduous establishment of state authority was achieved in intimate relation with the exploitation of petroleum. Throughout the nineteenth century the fragile Venezuelan state, chronically assaulted by regional caudillos, was unable to impose its control over the fragmented national territory. It was only when it was transformed into a mediator between the nation and foreign oil companies in the early twentieth century that the state acquired the political capacity and financial resources that enabled it to appear as an independent agent capable of imposing its dominion over society. Thus, the state itself was produced as an ensemble of practices, institutions and ideologies of rule in the course of contests over its regulation of oil production and its control over oil-derived money" (4). Coronil's insight that the state's power derives largely from its capacity to control the oil industry might be extended to account for its efforts to control and profit from the natural environment in all its complex articulations throughout Venezuelan territory. This includes an increasing number of state-led interventions in the mineral sector—most recently the rental of the "arco minero" that covers 111,000 square kilometers south of the Orinoco river overseen by incumbent president Nicolás Maduro—in addition to the discursive pledges made by Chávez to subdue "nature" in the aftermath of Vargas.

Building on work by Fassin and Vásquez, I outline how the state fused the ecological and the political in ways that permitted the discursive construction of a revolutionary subject attached to the figure of the survivor during a “state of exception” that permitted the outgrowth of the state deeper into the social fabric. I go on to demonstrate how Méndez Guédez and Ugás explore alternative experiences of the catastrophe with their use of child protagonists who have survived the disaster, and who figure as the new citizens of Bolivarian Venezuela. Recourse to arguments in childhood studies developed by theorists such as Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman will highlight the conceptual intersections between the discursive treatment of childhood and environmental catastrophe as “time-space made available for occupation” within the terms of representation set by dominant agents and actors (Castañeda 149).⁵ On the one hand, I argue that adolescence is used in these texts as a figurative device that rebels against the ideologies and values attached to survival and thus, by extension, undermines the state’s elision of a post-catastrophic and post-capitalist future. On the other, I suggest that childhood is mediated as a heterogeneous site that defies categorisation or facile reification, much like the disaster, and so invites a reconsideration of the ways in which we negotiate the relationship between the human and the non-human.

“Un fin y un comienzo”

Historically, the Vargas region has been vulnerable to the effects of maritime climate cycles and unstable geology, as Venezuelan historian Rogelio Altez underscores in his article “Historia sin memoria: la cotidiana recurrencia de eventos desastrosos en el estado Vargas-Venezuela” (317). Beginning in the seventeenth century, he records the cyclical occurrence of extreme weather events, landslides and earthquakes that have affected the area, while noting that the landslides of 1999 had an impact previously unseen in terms of mass media attention and heightened political and public interest. Due to persistently low atmospheric pressure over the Caribbean that met with the tail end of Hurricane Lenny, in December 1999 the coast received around three times the usual annual rate of rainfall in the space of a fortnight. Fassin and Vásquez note that the disaster itself was produced by two phenomena: “First, the swelling of the soil from so much moisture caused instability and landslides (*derrumbes*) that carried away entire neighbourhoods. [...] Second, with the buildup of water, swollen rivers carrying rocks and mud (*deslaves*) flooded their banks, gushing through streets

⁵ I refer here to the theoretical frameworks laid out in Lauren Berlant’s *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), and Claudia Castañeda’s *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds*. Castañeda critiques theorists such as Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and Lyotard, who, she claims, “use the figure of the child as a site of possibility from which the (adult) subject gains the capacity for transformative change, while the child as an embodied entity that might itself be realized disappears altogether” (149). A more horizontalist approach, she suggests, would be to engage with the child on her own terms, thus expanding and diversifying adult perspectives.

and in between houses” (392). Although the *derrumbes* and *deslaves* engulfed seaside resorts and high-rise apartments, their effects were felt most acutely in the *barríos* built on high slopes and next to swollen riverbanks, where “brush clearance and cut-and-fill construction have destabilized the densely inhabited hillsides” (Davis 122). Over the course of 48 hours, some 53 landslides and 8 million cubic meters of detritus buried entire urban sectors and permanently changed the shape of the coastline. Due in part to the inflation of statistics, the number of fatalities remains unclear, with estimates fluctuating between 200 and 50,000.⁶

The mass attention granted to the 1999 landslides in the public sphere in comparison with previous disasters can be explained by a range of different factors. These include the high number of casualties linked to the growth in urban population, the expansion of global mass media coverage facilitated by technological development (especially aerial photography), and the fact that the landslides coincided with the constitutional referendum. Called by Chávez within his first year as president, the vote was designed to garner public approval to amend the 1961 constitution, allowing for structural political changes that enabled the development of what was called “participatory democracy,” as opposed to the “representative democracy” of the political system that preceded it during the period known as the “Fourth Republic.” Participatory democracy, it was argued, would include sectors of society previously marginalised by formal politics, most notably the urban poor, indigenous communities, leftist activists, and groups of *campesinos*. The new constitution would permit these groups greater influence on the actions of the state while fertilising the growth of grassroots groups and community committees that, for the first time, would be granted access to influence governmental institutions.⁷ On the fifteenth of December, these proposals were approved by over seventy per cent of the voters, allowing for the upheaval of administrative powers and the subsequent rebranding of the public domain: the country’s name was changed from the “República de Venezuela” to the “República Bolivariana de Venezuela,” and the incumbent historical period was baptised the “Fifth Republic.”

That the “Tragedia de Vargas” coincided with the referendum is, of course, just that: a coincidence. Yet having served as the backdrop to the constitutional consolidation of the new Bolivarian government, it also created a specific set of conditions that saw political meaning fixed to the disaster, alongside an

⁶ Altez and Revet suggest that a variety of different organizations were responsible for inflating the number of fatalities. Figures in the media began at 25, reaching 50,000 by the end of December. This number was based on estimations released by George Weber of the Red Cross, though not sustained by any material evidence. Similarly, Lenin Marcano, then the mayor of La Guaira, suggested 25,000 dead as newspapers still touted figures of 250. Official declarations made by the Civil Defense varied from 337 to 30,000. Statistics offered by politicians were equally confusing. On December 20th, Chávez announced 342 known fatalities, which four days later had become 20,000 in another government statement.

⁷ Regarding this process, see López Maya and Lander’s “Participatory Democracy in Venezuela.”

Althusserian interpellation of its victims. In his presidential speech televised live as news from Vargas was unfolding, Chávez spoke at length of both his electoral success and the consequences of the *tragedia*, bound together rhetorically as “un fin y un comienzo” (Servicios Webmedia). This was the end of “un regimen nefasto” and the start of a “renacimiento” that had revitalised Simón Bolívar’s independence movement, transforming his stand against Spanish imperialism into a nationalist struggle against the global dominance of neoliberal capitalism. Drawing on the force of Christian symbolism in the political management of the crisis, Chávez’s fusion of Marxist and Catholic tropes summoned a “second coming” for a collective historical agent, applied both to the survivors of the landslides and more broadly to a population that had been held by the chains of capitalism (Fassin and Vásquez 399). Now liberated by Bolivarianism and its engendering of “Twenty-First Century Socialism,” the nation could look forward to a utopian future whose commencement was signalled dramatically by this timely intervention from the force of nature.

The links between state-formation, salvation and the control of the environment were thrown into sharp relief by the state’s discursive construction of the landslides in the public arena. In the commemorations of Venezuelan independence some eighteen months after the disaster, a group of dirt-covered civilians re-enacted the rescue procedure in Vargas, lifted to safety from their “float” by soldiers in helicopters along the military avenue of Los Próceres (Vásquez, “Rituales” 129). The landslides themselves, meanwhile, featured as an “othered” and aggressive nature to be overcome by Bolivarian socialism, while the torrential rainfall was said to have cleansed the nation-state from its primordial sin of free-market governance. In a live television appearance prior to the referendum, Chávez urged citizens to vote, despite the bad weather, with recourse to the mantra erroneously attributed to Bolívar: “Si la naturaleza se opone, lucharemos contra ella y haremos que nos obedezca” (Marcano and Tyska 57). The phrase, connoting the tropes of sexual violence and patriarchal domination that informed literary constructs of the colonial American landscape, was said to have been uttered by Bolívar after the calamitous earthquake of 1812 obstructed efforts to establish a First Republic (Altez, *Si la naturaleza* 96-97).⁸ Historically, these words have been taken as evidence of Bolívar’s courageous and masculine attributes; attributes that were put to work in subduing the unruly tropical terrain prior to its emergence as an independent nation.⁹ Similarly, the rapid expansion of the *chavista* project in areas including education, healthcare, welfare and communications has been largely dependent on revenue from the oil industry; a

⁸ Regarding the gendered construction of the landscape in colonial and postcolonial nation-building projects, see Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* and Kate Soper’s *What is Nature?*.

⁹ On this point, see Carlos Fonseca’s “Shaky Grounds: Bolívar, Humboldt, and the Birth of Catastrophe Politics.”

source of income that, in turn, requires figurative domination over an abstraction of the natural environment.¹⁰

Because the disaster mostly affected the poorest areas of greater Caracas, recovery from the landslides became part of the class struggle that informed the Revolution. Correspondingly, the notion of survival was entangled with social antagonisms. In her book-length study, *Poder y catástrofe* (2009), Vásquez notes how in referring to the victims, Chávez rejected the term *damnificados*, claiming that such a marked term with its negative connotations further marginalised those already at a disadvantage with echoes of Franz Fanon's wretched or Marx's lumpenproletariat. Instead, Chávez proposed the use of *dignificados*, claiming that the survivors would receive "dignified" and "dignifying" treatment from the recovery support programmes established by the government, such as the "Programa de Dignificación de la Familia Venezolana" that provided state-built housing for those left homeless by the landslides (23). Many of these *urbanismos* were located on the physical ruins left by the mudflows, as the *tragedia* quite literally laid the ground for the construction of Bolivarianism. In the short term, the Venezuelan military was mobilised to lead rescue efforts and evacuations, while the declaration of an unofficial "state of exception" facilitated the militarisation of the social fabric, as the army occupied affected areas and controlled movement throughout Vargas.¹¹ In the medium term, the landslides allowed for infrastructural and social recovery to be done in the image of the revolution, including welfare programmes, food distribution, and the mass construction of low-cost housing that formed the basis of the military humanitarian programme, "Plan Bolívar 2000," that, three years later, evolved into the celebrated state-run *misiones*. In this way, the *dignificados* were brought into an embrace with the benevolent state and its charismatic president, thus inserted into the national narrative as the first beneficiaries of Twenty-First Century Socialism.¹²

Children of the Revolution?

Given that the landslides and the constitutional amendments were said to deliver the "renacimiento" of Venezuela, it is perhaps unsurprising that much of the cultural material dealing with these themes features adolescence as a salient

¹⁰ See Kingsbury's "Oil's Colonial Residues: Geopolitics, Identity, and Resistance in Venezuela."

¹¹ Fassín and Vásquez note that timing of the landslides meant that the military declared an unofficial "state of emergency" that was neither accounted for in the incumbent constitution nor ratified by the president. So as to minimise looting and violence in the days that followed the disaster, the military implemented checkpoints and a curfew, and ordered troops to open fire at anyone outside at night without identity documents (Fassin and Vásquez 400).

¹² Vásquez writes: "Al brindar una atención fundamentada en la acción humanitaria, por definición temporal y excepcional, se construyen sujetos políticos—por ejemplo los "dignificados"—pero a la vez se somete al sujeto a las limitaciones inherentes de la acción humanitaria para el ejercicio de la ciudadanía. La dignidad, entendida como la manera en que se ejerce la autonomía, queda pues en entredicho por esa contradicción inherente a las políticas sociales estudiadas" ("Rituales" 151).

thematic focus. Like Gustavo Valle's novel *Bajo tierra* (2009) and Alejandro Bellame Palacio's film *El rumor de las piedras* (2011), *Una tarde con campanas* and *El chico que miente* both feature child protagonists as survivors of the disaster. *Una tarde con campanas* is narrated by José Luis, a young boy of about seven or eight, who has moved with his family to Madrid from Caracas following the loss of their home in the landslides. In the style of a *Bildungsroman*, the book details José Luis's maturation, including a sexual awakening and the process of becoming accustomed to his new life in exile, where he struggles to make sense of an alienating and sometimes hostile Spanish culture. Though mostly narrated from the child's first-person perspective, the text is interspersed with a series of fantastical episodes that tell of his adventures in an alternative dimension, in which a landlocked Madrid is periodically flooded and populated with mythical creatures. *El chico que miente*, meanwhile, stars a nameless adolescent whose stubborn father refuses to leave their ruined high-rise apartment in an unrecognisable part of Falcón, the state neighbouring Vargas, and whose mother disappeared during the landslides under somewhat mysterious circumstances—his father claims that she is dead, although *el chico* suspects otherwise after finding a picture of her in a magazine with the heading "Los sobrevivientes del deslave se recuperan." The film tracks the boy's search to locate his mother as he travels, alone, along the coastline of the Caribbean, documenting his encounters with dozens of coastal communities in his determination to locate the mangroves where he believes she cultivates oysters. Ultimately, the boy is refused recuperation of the lost family unity: he finds his mother alive but she is remarried with young children and has little interest in re-establishing a relationship with *el chico*.

The use of child protagonists in these texts are of interest because they gesture towards concerns surrounding the infantilisation of the *dignificados*. In so doing, they critique the concept of victimhood as it is appropriated for coercive political purposes while underscoring the limitations that this coercion places on revolutionary praxis. In these texts, the subject of the survivor is associated with the figure of the child as the embodiment of national ideals, although he also rebels against the symbolic paternal figure who is, for the most part, notable in his absence.¹³ Méndez Guédez and Rondón both load the child protagonist with potent narrative symbolism by placing him centre-stage in the drama of recuperation. In this sense, they are not (re)presented as actual, living and breathing children but, rather, as figments of the adult imagination geared towards idealised visions of the nation's future.

¹³ This is also noted by Luz Marina Rivas, who writes: "Llama la atención que la mayoría de las ficciones de Vargas, aunque quizás sus autores no lo hayan notado, tienen relación directa con la pérdida o el abandono del padre" (145). For Rivas, this represents the lawlessness unleashed by the landslides, followed by a search for order, instead of an intent to unfix congealed representations of the disaster as argued here.

This identity attached to the child converges with Lauren Berlant's theory of the "infantile citizen."¹⁴ Berlant conceptualises the limitations that nationalist belief systems and patriotic desires can place on individual actuations of citizenship, where certain political subjectivities can compel adults to act like children. She writes:

The infantile citizen of the United States has appeared in political writing about the nation at least since Tocqueville wrote, in *Democracy in America*, that while citizens should be encouraged to love the nation the way they do their families and their fathers, democracies can also produce a special form of tyranny that makes citizens like children, infantilized, passive, and overdependent on the "immense and tutelary power" of the state. [...] The infantile citizen's ingenuousness frequently seems like a bad thing, a political subjectivity based on the suppression of critical knowledge and a resulting contraction of citizenship to something smaller than agency: patriotic inclination, default social membership, or the simple possession of a normal national character. (27)

Both *Una tarde con campanas* and *El chico que miente* imagine a politicised social domain that links nationalism and solidarity with passivity, a reduction of agency and over-dependence on state tutelage that strengthens specific identities, hierarchies of power and mechanisms of exclusion. Such critiques are articulated via the medium of their fictional child figures, acting in the narrative to highlight the imbalanced relationship between the Bolivarian state and the landslide victims, particularly in the aftermath of the disaster. Yet Méndez Guédez and Ugás also cast their child protagonists against the grain of the "infantile citizen" to satirise the state's response to the landslides and its handling of the recovery process. In so doing, they attempt to expand the agency of the *dignificados* to cast the survivors of Vargas as sophisticated, proactive and critical, using irony to summon both versions of the child as rebellious and obedient.

In José Luis's memories of the weeks following Vargas in *Una tarde con campanas*, the presence of state power as represented by the armed forces is most notable in public commemorations of national sovereignty and military heroism. The novel contains a classified advert with the heading "Juramentación de los niños patriotas" that invites "niños patriotas de las escuelas populares" to participate in a parade to celebrate Venezuelan nationalism. The event bears resemblance to some of the ceremonies held in memory of the landslide victims that transformed the act of mourning into highly visible and politicised spectacle, replicated in commemorations of other "revolutionary" moments that constitute the Bolivarian *telos*.¹⁵ In José Luis's account of his pledge of allegiance, we read a farcical description of his performance that incorporates mime and choreography to demonstrate nationalist affections, "como con mucho sentimiento," though is ultimately devoid of any genuine feeling (Méndez Guédez 125). At the end of the recital, he is instructed to cry with joy and embrace the president, declaring "las

¹⁴ See the first chapter of Berlant's *The Queen of America*.

¹⁵ Regarding this point, see Blackmore's "Capture Life" and Vásquez's "Rituales de dignificación."

lágrimas que generalmente derramamos los niños sobre los hombros del Presidente-Comandante no son de sufrimiento, sino de inmensa alegría, porque nuestro Comandante, como cariñosamente lo llamamos, nos devolvió la esperanza” (128). For all his performative enthusiasm, however, he cannot reach this climax: “Cuando me lancé sobre el hombro de ese señor no pude llorar nada, y además el señor olía horrible, olía a orines de gato” (129). With no small amount of symbolism, José Luis is disqualified from the competition, his performance as “un niño patriota” deemed artificial and unconvincing. Through describing his important role in the ceremony and his lack of patriotic sentiment José Luis resembles what Slavoj Žižek calls an “imbecile”; that is, he is “aware of the need for the big Other, but not relying on it, distrusting it,” even as he adheres to the rules and the norms of the system (2).

Similarly, *el chico* subscribes to Bolivarian visions of citizenship to accrue the social benefits that this entails, while also demonstrating suspicion towards the ideological subscription required by the *damnificados* to claim the support offered by the government. Focusing on the spatial re-organization of the national landscape with the mass fabrication of state-built housing for those who lost their homes during the flooding, Ugás draws attention to the state’s investment in the nuclear family as a site of political reproduction. This speaks to Lee Edelman’s concept of “reproductive futurism” that pairs Lacanian psychoanalysis with queer social theory to argue that fantasies of reality are embodied in the imaginary form of the child to ensure the perpetuation of patriarchal structures. “For politics,” he writes,

however radical the means by which the specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child. That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmic beneficiary of every political intervention. (Edelman 2-3)

While the figure of the child in *El chico que miente* is the “fantasmic beneficiary” of the state’s social housing programme, he also serves to undermine its idealisation of future citizens. Several times in his journey, *el chico* comes across the state-built *urbanismos*, at times newly occupied by recent arrivals, at others still under construction. Toward the beginning of the film, he arrives at Pueblo Nuevo No. 11 “José R. González” where he is invited into one such house that is occupied by Martina, whose son has recently drowned and who is subsequently abandoned by her husband. The neighbours come to remove her from the house “porque es mujer, y vive sola. Para vivir aquí hay que tener familia”—echoing the pro-family policies of the Bolivarian housing programmes. Buying into the homogenisation of the community, which sees the uniformity of the box-like buildings paralleled in the projected heteronormativity of its occupants, *el chico* pretends to be Martina’s godson in return for food and shelter. The deceit creates a complicity between the pair as they exchange knowing glances once the neighbours stop their looting in a

shared attitude of *savoir faire* and opportunism; equally, *el chico*'s quizzical attitude towards the rule articulates a critique of the heteronormalisation of citizenship. In this sense, neither José Luis nor *el chico* wholly conform to their roles as "Children of the Revolution": whether consciously or unconsciously, they decode their own performances to reveal a cynicism beyond their years in wisdom.

If Méndez Guédez and Ugás use creative techniques to deconstruct the concept of the *dignificado* as an uncritical subject, they also pose a challenge to the political fetishisation of the Vargas landslides. Writing on natural disasters in twentieth century Latin American literature, Mark Anderson argues that sudden-onset catastrophes are "highly useful in political discourse, as political actors easily put definitions of disaster to work in the task of forging or deauthorizing political platforms" (3). Anderson conceives of disaster as what Ernesto Laclau has termed "a floating signifier," or an empty symbolic vessel to be filled with diverse meanings. This is theorised by Laclau as a point of social coalescence that brings together divergent interests in the consolidation of political subjectivities, especially in mobilisation against dominant power structures.¹⁶ The concept of the "floating signifier," however, also highlights the fragility of the structures that house signification, held together by a communal understanding that is unstable and subject to disruption. In *Una tarde con campanas* and *El chico que miente*, the narratives exploit this instability, using the child's slippery grasp on language and representation to open up towards pluralist approaches to experiences of the landslides. Simultaneously, they gesture toward the lack of significance that requires their reification, as the destruction unleashed by natural disasters shores up the precariousness of socio-linguistic organisation. For this reason, *el chico* is obsessed with the process of naming; an obsession that, paradoxically, reveals its insufficiency as a form of representation. "If I am an orphan," he asks one of Martina's neighbours, "what do you call a mother who has lost all her children?" The question is repeated in different formulations throughout the filmic development, while the secrecy surrounding *el chico*'s name undermines what Edelman terms the "paternal metaphor" that represents the reproduction of static social formations (25).

Significantly, neither José Luis or *el chico* are reliable witnesses to the landslides. Their memories are inconsistent and often contradictory; by extension, their representations of the event often defy coherence or seem like fabrications. José Luis is confused about chronological facts and details, misinterprets terms and references, and often expresses a lack of understanding about the unfamiliar world around him. Indeed, his description of the floods nods towards tropes of magical realism, closing in on the minutiae of images and objects that are dislocated from their mundane settings: "Después ya no recuerdo demasiado (de eso hace mucho tiempo, vivíamos allá todavía), pero las calles estaban llenas de un agua color café con leche y había un ruido gigante. Entonces creo que vi pasar una lavadora y una

¹⁶ See the introduction to Laclau's *On Populist Reason*.

camioneta de papá, y el perro de los vecinos y unas chancletas azules que mi hermano usaba mucho” (Méndez Guédez 45). This toy-box description of the child’s experience of the disaster might be perceived as consisting of what Annette Kuhn calls “transitional objects” that, “pressed into the service of the child’s inner world,” blur the boundaries between the inward-looking domains of fantasy and the imagination, and the outer, material world of physical existence, thus conjuring a sense of movement between and through overlapping spaces (83). This allows for playful permeations in monolithic visions of the landslides, while undermining the distinction between human and environmental nature.

El chico, meanwhile, is older and wiser than José Luis, but, as the title of the film suggests, is even less dependable in his story-telling. Throughout the film, he offers conflicting accounts of how he survived the landslides, from being rescued by his dog to being saved by his mother, and how his mother died in his arms or was attacked by savage animals. These stories are usually told when seeking to curry favour with the listener, thus mimicking the process by which accounts of the disaster became a form of social currency to be exchanged for material goods or political benefits. Despite this, however, *el chico*’s interactions with the environment challenge this exploitation by foregrounding the affective qualities of the environment that are, for Karen Lury, more accessible to children than they are to adults. She writes: “the qualities of childish experience, which is narcissistic, fragmented, temporally chaotic, often contextless, are counter to the demands of conventional narratives of history, which construct an omniscient and chronological perspective” (110). This, in turn, “allows for a temporal dislocation, a validation of sensory experience and a promotion of the irrational to which the child has privileged access,” as she or he is especially sensitive to the natural elements of mud, fire, wind and rainfall (125). As such, the materiality that makes up the very stuff of childhood and the environment undermines their appropriation as floating signifiers, while reasserting their capability of disturbing two-dimensional representations.

The disjointed poetics of José Luis’ description of the possessions swept away with the floods in *Una tarde con campanas* is replicated visually in *El chico que miente*. The richly textured duration of the landslides permeates the cinematic experience, interrupting narrative development at unexpected and unannounced moments in a series of repetitive, dream-like sequences that vary in each instance, though they are distinguishable by long, sweeping tracking shots, a desaturated colour palette, and the accompaniment of a mournful piano and string duet. The sequences all feature deep-focus shots of the skeletal buildings that overlook the ruins of the landscape, serving as a haunting reminder of the fragility of social structures and the unruly environmental fluxes that cannot be contained by human intervention. In one sequence, triggered in “real time” by the sound of thunder, José Luis looks down from the top of the building at his ant-like neighbours scavenging for lost belongings beneath torrential rainfall. Framed like infants

playing in the mud, sliding down dunes, clambering over rocks and splashing in puddles, the residents uncover objects that once belonged to the missing. The camera focusses on a broken toy xylophone, its bonelike structure setting in motion a delayed process of grief and mourning. The retriever collapses in a muddy puddle, emitting a bestial cry that resonates across the ruined coastline. In this context, mud figures cinematographically as “both a terrifying and absorbing just-is-ness; demonstrating what is exposed, what is left, when the world is turned upside down,” gesturing to the unknown at the liminal boundaries of meaning (Lury 133). Now death is not a punctual event that affords the possibility of revitalisation or renewal with political reinvestment but, rather, seeps into the film as an excess that cannot be fully processed by narrative mechanisms. Using these cinematic techniques, Ugás reminds her viewers that natural disasters are not purely political or cultural manifestations, but instead are intricate, nonconsecutive and multifaceted interactions between human and non-human actors.

(Trans)National Futures

If this “upside-downness” demands critical re-evaluations of the insertion of disaster into social narratives, it also offers an opportunity to rethink the subjects, temporalities, and spaces that are bound up with the landslides. Jason Moore’s theorisation of *Capitalism in the Web of Life* has been crucial in reformulating understandings of environmental crises, where crises must be conceived “as turning points in the systemic organization of power and production—as bundles of human and extra-human nature” (27). For Moore, nature is the historical agent of these crises, where nature includes *both* environmental *and* human actors. As he puts it: “If humans are part of nature, historical change—including the present as history—must be understood through dialectical movements of humans making environments and environments making humans”; the former cannot be fully distinguished or detached from the latter (28). This process of world-making, Moore goes on, is inextricable from the development of global capitalism that began in earnest with the sixteenth century Spanish conquest of the Americas. This world-ecological system, in turn, is premised on the logic of extractive economies and on the exploitation of nature as labour and resources, born in part of the Cartesian dualism that abstracts society and nature (20-21). Although communities in the Global South may be most exposed to the perils posed by environmental catastrophes, our approaches to these events must destabilise hermetic categorisations that place such vulnerable regions in historic and geographic isolation. Furthermore, our interpretations of these ecological crises and their consequences should take care to consider nature in its multiple material and symbolic iterations, as opposed to overemphasising its determination either beyond or within cultural constructs.

In this vein, *Una tarde con campanas* uncovers some of the intimate processes by which humans and the environment are co-dependent and co-constitutive. Signalling a concern with the narrow spatial dimension of the Vargas landslides as it appears in political discourse, the novel transports its characters, and its readers, away from Caracas. For the most part, we accompany José Luis and his family as they navigate their new life as climate refugees, having settled in Madrid after the loss of their home in Venezuela. The text deals primarily with José Luis's quotidian experiences of Spain in all its strangeness: "pero es todo tan extraño," he writes as he attempts to master Castilian Spanish, navigate the city and mimic local customs, while failing to understand the nostalgia that his parents feel towards their homeland (21). Though mostly set in a version of Madrid familiar to the novel's readers, if not to its characters, *Una tarde con campanas* also features a series of fantastical episodes that make unannounced intrusions into José Luis's narrative. These take place in a fairy-tale setting where Madrid has sprouted a forest, is flooded by the sea, and is populated with mythical beings that pursue José Luis and his friend, Mariana. Emphasis is placed on this world as a sensorial dimension, evoking the embodied experiences of play in the environment that Lury associates with adolescence: "El olor fue invadiendo la ciudad. Un olor sin nombre. Una brasa dulce y dolorosa que se avivaba con el viento: agujas de sal, cristales, burbujas que estallaban a golpear contra las paredes. El olor rozó la ventana del cuarto y José Luis sintió cómo arañaba los vidrios, cómo entraba en su piel y la erizaba" (65). Although these episodes hint at memories of the *deslaves* in Vargas, now the environment is stripped of its apocalyptic or catastrophic properties. Rather, it inhabits the text as a site of affective, lateral interactions, bringing together the human and the extra-human in a fuller understanding of nature. Particles of wind and water are said to seep into José Luis's body; he, in turn, responds to these micro-animations by moving through the city guided by the sounds, textures and movements that stimulate his senses. Less unfamiliar to José Luis than the xenophobic attitudes he encounters among his neighbours or his parents' patriotic yearnings for their homeland, this nightmarish world of adventures undermines the nationalist sentiments attached to survival.

In addition to offering a broader geographical account of events in Vargas, these fantastical episodes set out to counter hegemonic holds on the post-disastrous future. Against the reaffirmation of conservative values that are imposed upon the concept of childhood in "reproductive futurism," Edelman prescribes an exploration of the death drive to disrupt the existing social order. The death drive, he suggests, "dissolves those congealments of identity that permit us to know and survive as ourselves, so the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organization as such—on disturbing, therefore, and on queering *ourselves* and our investment in such organization" (17, emphasis in original). He continues:

In a political field whose limit and horizon is reproductive futurism, queerness embodies this death drive, this intransigent jouissance, by figuring sexuality's

implication in the senseless pulsions of that drive. De-idealizing the metaphors of meaning on which heteroreproduction takes its stand, queerness exposes sexuality's inevitable coloration by the drive: its insistence on repetition, its stubborn denial of teleology, its resistance to determinations of meaning [...] and, above all, its rejection of spiritualization through marriage to reproductive futurism. (27)

One site in which to do this, Edelman suggests, is in the creativity of queer cultural production that, released from the reified narratives of historical discourse, might imagine the death of the child and, with it, the death of the symbolic subject confined to the structured fantasies of political reproduction. By embracing the meaninglessness of the death drive and its excesses that simmer beneath the sexual/political economy that regulates social exchanges, queer creativity plays a crucial role in overcoming dominant visions of survival.

Although José Luis is not a queer child in terms of sexual practice (his attraction towards Mariana and other girls is quite apparent), his "queerness" is articulated in other characteristics. These include his movements between liminal spatial/temporal dimensions in addition to his innocence that marks him as different from adults and the fantasies of death and desire that he attaches to maternal figures.¹⁷ In this fairy-tale version of Madrid, the children face death in different guises, such as the witch-like woman with "piel blanquísima, huesos afilados: una hilera de dientes amarillentos, verdosos, que destacaban en una boca sin labios" (Méndez Guédez 67). Compelled by libidinal pressures that drive the children towards ghouls, giants, wizards and warlocks, Mariana takes José Luis on a series of fatalistic challenges. In the last episode of the series, José Luis falls into "un pozo que parecía un ojo de miel oscura" (218), recalling the Freudian abyss of female sexuality that threatens the coherence of the masculine subject. This pre-empted José Luis's final encounter with *Marinferínfero*, a mythical version of a wooden-legged man who had lived in his *barrio* in Caracas, now appearing to transport the child to another dimension. Jumping over rooftops and treetops, *Marinferínfero* and José Luis eventually arrive at the ocean: "Una lámina azul, una textura brumosa. Agujas de yodo, espuma, arena. Desde el mar que aparecía entre nubes el niño escuchó un desconocido rumor: olas golpeando como un látigo la

¹⁷ In *The Queer Child*, Katherine Bond Stockton points out that *all* children in fictional narratives are inherently "queer" characters. This is so, she argues, for three primary reasons. First, "[t]he child is precisely who we are not and, in fact never were. It is the act of adults looking back. It is a ghostly, unreachable fantasy, making us wonder: Given that we cannot know the contours of children, who they are to themselves, should we stop talking of children altogether?" (5). Denoting overlapping temporalities and blurred temporal frameworks, the child in fiction is ghostly because she is a memory or an impartial rendition of childhood. Second, the child's sexuality is not easily categorised by Freudian conventions: "the child can only be "not-yet-straight," since it, too, is not allowed to be sexual" (7); "From wanting the mother to have its child, to wanting to have its father's baby, to wanting to kill its rival lover, the Freudian child (the child penned by Freud) looks remarkably, threateningly precocious" (27). Finally, the child is made strange though appealing by its innocence: "From the standpoint of adults, innocence is alien, since it is "lost" to the very adults who assign it to children" (30).

orilla” (221). This tempestuous description of the vast stretch of sea rejects the constraints of “sentimental futurism” seen with the reproductive logic of the Bolivarian Revolution in the aftermath of Vargas. Here, death is posited as a pulsating negativity that pre-empts José Luis’s elimination from the narrative, as the child is eventually sacrificed to obstruct the full appropriation of the landslides.

The motifs of childhood, death, and sexuality also cut through *El chico que miente* as the film divests from sexual reproduction to foreground the ebbs and flows of the death drive. *El chico’s* incestuous desires—to be reunited with his mother—serves as the undercurrent of the filmic narrative, resurfacing in the circulation of mnemonic yonic maritime objects. These include the oysters that he eats with disgust and a coral necklace that he has found hidden among his father’s belongings; both serve as material reminders of the boy’s libidinal displacements towards his mother and the perpetual postponement of erotic fulfilment that, later, forbids full narrative foreclosure. These items are supplementary to a series of sterile, childless or aged maternal characters, whose ghostly presence further underlines the futility of libidinal attachment. Throughout the film, *el chico* is drawn towards women deemed incapable of “successful” sexual reproduction: among them are the elderly woman who informs him of the death of the local mangroves, his mother’s friend who has died the night before *el chico’s* arrival, and a prepubescent girl who unceremoniously rejects his advances. Perhaps most striking is the scene in which *el chico* trails behind a zombie-like young woman clutching the corpse of her dead infant as she traipses across a spit of land that tears through the dramatic seascape. Framed in such a way that contrasts with the tripartite layers of the sand, the sea and the horizon that characterise Ugás’s coastal shots, this haunting vision violates the rigid composition of the landscape by creating a visual association between infancy, death, and female genitalia.

If Méndez Guédez’s text creates an alternative dimension where *jouissance* is felt at its most potent, Ugás turns to the mangroves when visualising a realm beyond the bounds of subjectivity, meaning and order, no longer attached fetishistically to a privileged object. Having inquired about nearby mangroves along the coast and at every beach town, *el chico* is finally taken by boat to a tidal swamp of tangled rhizomes. Once the boat leaves and *el chico* is left alone, cut off from dry land, the cinematography assumes nightmarish qualities that recall the fairy-tale trappings of the Grimm Brothers’ folklorish forests. With the beams of sunlight barely able to penetrate the murky thicket, the boy clammers among the roots and pulls desperately at stubborn molluscs, his hands grappling in the mud and his feet slipping from upturned branches. The sounds of the insects intensify and a seabird screeches in the distance, its frenzy replicated in the frenetic camerawork and the fast-paced editing of the sequence. Second-long shots from among the roots skip to close-ups of *el chico’s* panicked grappling before turning overhead to the sky and kinetically replicating the invisible bird’s circular swooping movements. The combination of these effects creates a feeling of

dizziness or nausea in the viewer, using a cinematic strategy that Laura Marks terms “haptic visuality” to reach beyond the limitations of disaffected scopic pleasure, synthesising the immediate cinematic experience of the audience with the lived experience of the characters.¹⁸ Eventually, *el chico* finds his way out of the mangroves in an anti-climatic finish, rejoining his friend on the fishing boat as they sail towards more temperate waters.

In its mediation of the drives and pulsations that transverse erotic fantasies, this scene pre-empts the unsatisfactory ending of *El chico que miente*. The film’s closing scenes show *el chico* eventually finding his mother, in all her elegance, collecting oysters on the seafront just as the boy had imagined. They engage in conversation, yet *el chico* does not reveal his identity or the odyssey that has led to her retrieval, while she, too, fabricates a story about her past that refuses to recognise her abandonment of *el chico* or her previous life prior to the landslides. As she drives away with her new family, disconcerted by his presence, *el chico* takes handfuls of her money in return for her coral necklace. Turning his back on the expanse of the sea that has served as a pathway for his fantasies, *el chico* runs to the *médanos* and basks in the lifeless sand dunes. Reasserting a sterile visual discourse that dispels the myth of recuperating a lost familial unity, the ending of *El chico que miente* points toward the dissolution of patrilineal genealogy that Edelman demands. The boy’s elated interaction with the beachscape, meanwhile, acts as a final reminder that the neatness of human subjectivity, or the “otherness” of the natural environment, are abstractions that conceal the intricacies of our world as an interconnected organism.

Conclusion

In his assessment of literary fiction dealing with memories of the Vargas landslides, Venezuelan critic Miguel Gomes writes that “[l]a ficcionalización del recuerdo recategoriza a la historia como materia prima de la imaginación, la obliga a dejar de ser un hecho arqueológico, detenido en el pasado para transformarla en el presente” (114). In fictional narratives, especially those written by authors affiliated with the political opposition, this recuperation of the “national tragedy” is a form of Freudian catharsis. The collective trauma caused by the landslides is processed with creative productivity, transforming a deep-set melancholia into an efficient process of mourning. This discursive exorcism, enacted by the likes of Ricardo Blanco Calderón, Krina Ber, Ana Teresa Torres, Salvador Fleján and Isaac Chocrón, rejects the imposition of solidarity and collectivity in the aftermath of the

¹⁸ Marks’ definition of “haptic visuality” is as follows: “While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetic, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality. Touch is a sense located on the surface of the body: thinking of cinema as haptic is only a step toward considering the ways cinema appeals to the body as a whole” (163).

crisis to re-situate grief and pain at the site of the individual. Somewhat problematically, then, a sense of political loss is attached to the Vargas landslides, understood to have ushered in the foundational stage of Bolivarian socialism. For Gomes, “la condición del país herido no es terminal y hay en estos cuentos una dialéctica que depara cuotas discretas de esperanza” (129); his sentiment of post-catastrophic optimism replicates the state’s ideological appropriation of the disaster.

The readings of *Una tarde con campanas* and *El chico que miente* developed above have argued against this paradigm of healing to challenge conceptualisations of the Vargas landslides as a break in Venezuelan history. Rather, as demonstrated by Ugás and Méndez Guédez, the implications of the crisis surpass linear timelines and national boundaries, concurrently calling for an urgent reconsideration of our relationship with the natural environment that is mediated through childhood. In the wake of the landslides, the figure of the child assumes a dual function: he reveals the political subjectivity associated with survival and deconstructs the constraints of this identity in a way that is self-critical. Furthermore, his intimate connections with the landscape and the natural elements underscore the mutually constitutive relationship between “natural” and “human” history, while the texts use innovative aesthetic strategies to summon traces of the landslides’ materiality. By unravelling the tightly bound constructs of childhood, the environment, and the future, Ugás and Méndez Guédez weave the human and the non-human together as they form part of a complex and multifaceted planetary consciousness. In so doing, they call for a collective project of renegotiating the politics of survival; one that will transcend ideological demands and the constraints of identity constructs to avoid the repeated appropriation of catastrophes to buffer hierarchical power structures. This, perhaps, is the first step towards the radical change in our global order necessary to mitigate an increase in the frequency and intensity of ecological disasters. Refusing recuperation from the Vargas tragedy in a region frequently affected by landslides, Ugás and Méndez Guédez urge us to not to move on from an environmental crisis that still demands our attention.¹⁹

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