

Submergence: On Transatlantic Ecocriticism, Islands and Archipelagos

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Abstract

In *Yo maté a Kennedy*, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán wrote with irony: “ecological truth drives historical truth.” Today, the direct connection between ecological and historical truths is quite serious. In his polemical essay “Four Theses on Climate History,” Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that, in order to explain anthropogenic climate change, geological history should be included in human history. In other words, “ecological truth” should be integral to “historical truth.” What is missing in this observation is a sense of socio-political difference. What is needed is not a consideration of isolated regions, whether they are national, ecological or linguistic, but rather an analysis that investigates a constellation of social movements, objects and events. This means that transatlantic ecocriticism should consider how regions are connected, thinking in line with the logics of movements such as the *indignados*, *vía campesina* or *altermundisme*. This essay approaches a series of steps between Spain and Cuba, examining various texts and terrains that are stylistically and historically distinct. I focus on the tropes of the island and the archipelago in the works of Cuban poet José Lezama Lima and the Catalan writer Francesc Serés.

Keywords: ecocriticism, transatlantic studies, Catalan studies, Francesc Serés, José Lezama Lima, hydroelectric dams, Francoism.

Resumen

En *Yo maté a Kennedy*, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán dice con ironía: “la verdad ecológica conduce a la verdad histórica.” Hoy en día, la conexión directa entre la verdad ecológica y la histórica es bastante seria. En su polémico ensayo “Four Theses on Climate History,” Dipesh Chakrabarty plantea que, para explicar el cambio climático antropogénico, la historia geológica debe ser incluida en la historia humana. Es decir, “la verdad ecológica” debe ser integral a “la verdad histórica.” Lo que falta en esta observación es un sentido de la diferencia socio-política. Lo que se necesita no es una consideración de regiones aisladas, ya sean nacionales, ecológicas o lingüísticas, sino un análisis que investigue una constelación de movimientos sociales, objetos y eventos. Esto quiere decir que la ecocrítica transatlántica debe considerar cómo se conectan las regiones, pensando de acuerdo con las lógicas de movimientos como los indignados, *vía campesina* o *altermundisme*. Este ensayo aborda una serie de pasos entre España y Cuba, examinando varios textos y terrenos que son estilísticamente e históricamente distintos. Me enfoco en los tropos de la isla y del archipiélago en las obras del poeta cubano José Lezama Lima y del escritor catalán Francesc Serés.

Palabras clave: ecocrítica, estudios transatlánticos, estudios catalanes, Francesc Serés, José Lezama Lima, centrales hidroeléctricas, franquismo.

In *Yo máte a Kennedy*, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán wrote with irony: “In the same manner in which a rotten apple contaminates the others in the bag, ecological truth drives historical truth” (18).¹ As the Barcelona-born writer suggests, ecological necrosis infects surrounding networks and connections. Ecosystems, within and beyond human communities, are interconnected, after all. Today, the direct causal link between ecological truths and historical truths is quite serious in its scale and implications for (non)human survival, insofar as the loss of biodiversity—of species and ecosystems—will continue to have profound impacts in the long and short run for the planet. In his widely read “Four Theses on Climate History,” Dipesh Chakrabarty claims that, in order to account for anthropogenic climate change, geological history must be incorporated into human history. “Ecological truth” must become integral to “historical truth” in order to offer new alternatives to global neoliberal regimes, which have largely refused the entanglement of human and natural history. This, in turn, requires us to revise our notions of both history and ecology. If human history now dominates the geological present of at least the last several centuries, its re-telling requires the inclusion of ecological necrosis: species extinction, deforestation, hurricanes, floods or the deaths of lakes and rivers. As Édouard Glissant put it, “the woes of the landscape have invaded speech, rekindling the woes of the humanities” (196). There is a need, then, for narrative and analysis to descend into the depths, to submerge in ecological devastation in the hopes of contemplating other future alternatives.

How does one begin to narrate environmental disappearance, loss and extinction during an era dominated by neoliberalism? What is needed is not *merely* a consideration of regions in isolation, whether they are national, ecological or linguistic, but rather investigations into singular histories of social movements, objects and events in conjunction and, on occasion, in collision or conflict with one another. This means considering how regions are connected as well as set apart in their differences in the hopes of uncovering alternative remedies frequently left out of debates on the multitude of environmental crises facing humanity today. Thinking, then, in tandem with movements such as the *indignados*, *vía campesina* and *altermundisme*, transatlantic ecocriticism is an important route to establish connections and to draw out differences in the complex linguistic matrices of the Iberian and Ibero-American contexts. This requires literary and cultural analysis that operates comparatively between texts and their situations. As the editors of *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities* have recently pointed out in their introduction to that volume, narrative and esthetic practices help shape how we understand our surrounding world (DeLoughrey 1-2). At its best, literature can

¹ “De la misma manera que una manzana podrida contamina a las restantes del saco, la verdad ecológica conduce a la verdad histórica” (18). All translations in the article are mine.

be understood as a meeting place for different creatures, objects, actants, forces and processes. In my view, this literary meeting place allows us to imagine Vazquéz Montalbán's reflection on the consequences of the entangled—and often rotten—historical and ecological situations. This essay takes up the task of laying out a few “stone rafts,” as José Saramago put it, to cross the Atlantic between seemingly disparate texts and situations. This essay investigates the figures of the island and the archipelago, especially in relation to the past or present threat of disappearance, and focuses on the work of the contemporary Catalan novelist Francesc Serés and the Cuban poet José Lezama Lima. Though both authors certainly come from different stylistic and historical moments, I hold that they offer up examples that engage literature as a meeting point, not only for human and nonhuman beings, but also between turbulent and violent ecological histories of empire and dictatorship that allow contemporary readers to connect and re-assemble human activity via alternative understandings of nature and culture as intricate and entangled histories and networks. In the end, these island narratives and regions come to resist the imperial and Francoist networks of power, built to centralize and control social and natural forces.

Frederic Mistral's prologue begins the 1905 edition of the Catalan poet Jacint Verdaguer's *L'Atlántida* (1876) with an epigraph from Plato's *Timaeus*: “Great earthquakes and floods fell across the land, and in the short space of a night, Atlantis plunged into the open earth” (n.p.).² Verdaguer's text is an epic poem emblematic of the nineteenth-century Catalan *Renaixença* movement, which sought, as its name suggests, to reinvigorate the status of Catalan culture and literature. Verdaguer's poem is a descriptive epic, establishing lineage between Hercules in Iberia after the demise of Atlantis. Verdaguer then perpetuates the myth into the early modern era, utilizing Christopher Columbus as an epic hero tracing the lineage of this past into the Americas. What interests me here is Verdaguer's stylistic approach to the myth of Atlantis, which places geologic history as central to understanding human history. In fact, this attention to geology terrified Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, who wrote:

I am with those that believe that the description of inanimate nature should only appear in art as an accessory, which serves as a backdrop for the human figure. This is the only or principal defect that I find in the admirable poem by my friend Verdaguer. Man is absorbed by the grandeur and catastrophes of nature, and neither Hesperides nor Hercules are as interesting as they should be. Furthermore, the great and huge physical forces of Alcides and the Titans harm the moral value of those personalities and cause one to look at them more like natural agents than like human beings, given analogous passions to our own. (n.p.)³

² “Acaecieron grandes terremotos é inundaciones, y en el breve espacio de una noche, la Atlántida se sumió en la tierra entreabierta” (n.p.).

³ “Soy de los que creen que la descripción de naturaleza inanimada sólo debe aparecer en el arte como accesorio, y cual sirviendo de fondo a la figura humana. Este es el único o principal defecto que hallo en el admirable poema de mi amigo Verdaguer. El hombre está como absorbido por las grandezas y catástrofes naturales, y ni Hesperides ni Hércules interesan como debieran. Además, las grandes y descomunales fuerzas físicas de Alcides y de los Titanes perjudican al valor moral de

Menéndez Pelayo is concerned about the literary absorption of humans into the “deterministic” backdrop of nature. Literature that dwells too long on the agency of nature or nonhuman, nonliving objects, turns humans into ghosts of their own “true” form, denying their apparent “freedom” as humans. Though the critic does not go so far as to claim that Verdaguer is guilty of demolishing an attitude that we would describe as anthropocentric, Menéndez Pelayo seems concerned that the Catalan poet might be on the brink of dehumanization. His style, it seems, implicitly says something dangerous about the intimate connections between human drama and its “natural” surroundings, or, as Vázquez Montalbán put it above, that turbulent ecological truth makes for rotten historical truths. More recently, critic Ludres Estruch rightly describes Verdaguer’s supposed dehumanization as a “science fiction-like” idea that geology might well be a major actant in the historical formations and disappearances of human society (59). If Verdaguer’s emphasis on geology, plants and animals makes him a science fiction author, then many contemporary novels about twentieth-century rural Spain possess similar inventiveness. Several novels that share concern for the slow death of rural communities include: Jesús López Pacheco’s *Central eléctrica* (1958), Jesús Moncado’s *El camión de sirga* (1989), Julio Llamazares’s *La lluvia amarilla* (1988), and Juan Goytisolo’s *La changa* (1985). These texts tend to include contemplation about how any human manipulation of ecological circumstance—such as Joaquín Costa’s project of *regeneracionismo* put to work in Francoist Spain—affects agricultural production and human wellbeing. Indeed, in the contemporary geological era dominated by human activity, it is not that we wield the forces of volcanoes or fault lines, but rather the irony that, in the Anthropocene, we are unable to control the sphere of our own influence on these forces.

While the Atlantis myth is often relegated to a distant past civilization, I would like to consider the phenomenon and literary trope of disappearance on a more temporally proximate scale. In fact, Antonio Benítez Rojo has already made such a suggestion in the Caribbean context to consider the geographically disparate as a unified, yet fragmented cultural and political unity. In the Caribbean case, Benítez Rojo ties this to the geography of archipelagoes, which allows the insular to become contiguous, united through a shared series of colonial events and disasters (215-224). The Cuban author conceptualized “these islands” as the New Atlantis, the ultimate archipelago for a comprehensive study of “ocean territory” that would not necessarily enter into a detailed analysis of differences (217). This comprehensive study would have advantages for the Caribbean within the constraints and demands of neoliberalism because insularity paradoxically becomes a basis to consolidate identity and economic interests. The same might be said of ruined or deserted Spanish towns, left in the wake of Franco’s massive

sus caracteres e inducen a mirarlos más bien como agentes naturales que como a seres humanos o dotados de pasiones análogas a las nuestras” (n.p).

hydroelectric makeover of the Basque and Catalan countryside. They are figurative “islands,” or fragments, that can be analytically placed into an archipelago, or constellation, to understand the common ground in their histories.

My interest, however, is not to consider the economic integration of these insularities but rather to draw out the ruins of ecological histories and their “possible futures that never came to be,” as Svetlana Boym put it in her prognosis of twentieth-century “ruinophilia.” These alternative futures remain unrealized events, narratological markers that Gerald Prince has referred to as disnarrated occurrences. Moreover, following Derek Walcott, insularity should avoid the “high pitched repetition of the same images of service that cannot distinguish one island from another.” Indeed, socio-ecological insularities underscore differences in the midst of reassembling a constellation of histories across the Atlantic. To agree with Ottmar Ette, then, exploring insularities in the Iberian Peninsula and Ibero-America will be less about stable processes and equivalencies and more about “oscillating movements between various regions” (134). In this sense, insularity is neither about isomorphic difference nor about collective erasures of difference but rather, to return to Boym’s language on ruinophilia, about the “exploration and production of meaning” from one side of the Atlantic to the other. Re-considering Atlantis, in this sense, is built out of re-routing sites from one side of the Atlantic Ocean to another, to bring the disnarrated to the forefront of analysis. To repeat, then, I conceive the critical task for transatlantic ecocriticism as a process of submergence in these “oscillating,” turbulent histories of ecological ruins and disappearance with the hopes of turning to better alternatives.

This approach to the Atlantis myth resonates with contemporary Catalan language author Francesc Serés’s (1972) recent trilogy of novels, *Des femmes i marbles* (2003). The Aragon-native seems to ask: where is it that we, as spectators and implicit participants in today’s world, witness or fail to witness the disappearance of human and nonhuman collectives? How do we tell the stories of these disappearances? Serés documents the radical changes witnessed in the rural Catalan-speaking region of Aragón, known as *La Franja*, a strip or borderland between Catalunya and Aragón. He has stated that these fictional terrains were efforts to get closer to his hometown of Saidí (Serés “Quién soy”). The town is situated along the bank of the río Cinca in the Ebro Valley just north of where the Cinca flows into the río Ebro. Its climate is largely dry and hot, driven by the geological depression of the river valley. These climatological factors, especially the river systems, become central actants in Serés’s trilogy. Just as William Faulkner created Yoknapatawpha to capture his vision of rural Mississippi and Gabriel García Márquez invented the magical Macondo to invoke his own childhood experiences on the Colombian coast, or Juan Benet’s re-writes *La Región*, Serés has invented a literary world in order to convey life in northern rural Spain in the twentieth century. While reading Serés, one garners new insights about the land’s ability to dominate all aspects of those who reside there. It is, in this sense,

how Serés qualifies his Verdaguerian use of landscape not as a backdrop for human or literary activity, but rather as a collection of powerful actants that sway the novel's human protagonists long after they have left the region. He seems to echo Benet's haunting title, *Volverás a Región*. The land has marked "you" and your formation and you will return to it—in spite of Menéndez Pelayo's concern.

Serés himself has recently commented on the value of the Atlantis myth for considering how to write a rural novel:

What did they write about, the Atlanteans? What were their stories? We do not know, we never will know. We can think that they wrote a literature that had to do with their insularity, about their relationship with the continent, with land-based literature. They would complain about their isolation and, at the same time, would celebrate it as one of their culture's distinctive traits... There would be masterpieces that someone may have translated or copied, but most of the literature of Atlantis would have been lost. (Resina 183)

Serés's speculation about Atlantean literature and culture functions as a paradigm for disappeared literatures as well as for others potentially lost in the future. Even if there were literary remainders of Atlantis, we would not recognize these ruins today in their copied or translated forms. They are withdrawn or insulated from the reader. This conception of insularity echoes Verdaguer's emphasis on geology as a central actor in human activity, insofar as it can "isolate" or "erase" the literature of a place from the rest of literary history. Re-considering the site of the rural as Atlantis is about speculating on what may have been lost and to consider what it means to tell the stories of a place of insularity, one that, in this case, has no literature. In other words, storytelling about such a site is, to use the metaphor again, about reconsidering the insular and then reconnecting it to a larger archipelago of futures that never came to be.

In the first novel in Serés's rural trilogy, *Els ventres de la terra* (2000), one might consider the insularity of ruined towns in two interrelated registers. There is of course the specter of Francoism, which imposed a ban on the use of Catalan, Galician and Euskera for public discourse. Additionally, Franco's public works, as we will examine in depth below, drastically altered the distribution of resources and, indeed, the very composition of the landscape—especially in the Basque Country and Catalunya. For attentive ecocritical readers, such a literary project allows a consideration of how objects, landscapes and ecological histories are residues that help reconstruct memories of lost places.

Els ventres de la terra approaches rural landscapes of the unnamed protagonist's childhood, as well as other family episodes, through a series of interconnected memory pieces, which relate the family's flight from their farm, the main character's vocation as an engineer in Barcelona and a final return after the sale of the family farm. Each chapter is marked with a particular infinitive, such as: *mirar*, *sentir*, *ser* or *desconocerse*. The generative stance of each verb investigates a particular impression of quotidian rituals ranging from labor and love, to writing and harvesting. Additionally, the infinitives trace a sentiment or physical

movement with respect to the town, whose name is not mentioned in the text. The novel does not simply index the development from childhood to adulthood but works through prolepsis and analepsis, documenting leaps of 2 to 72 years. Francisco Solano points out that these sketches and short interrelated narratives are not so much written but are instead whispered to the reader (Solano). Indeed, they seem to be faint etchings of a much larger, untold story. These narrative gaps offer separate episodes while also ambivalently blurring the boundaries between each of the narrative passages ranging from the years of 1893 to 1998. In the present time of the novel, the protagonist works as an engineer near the town of Lleida. Coinciding with these time lapses and leaps, Serés moves from rural to urban settings as well as throughout the family's genealogy and, therein, through the history of a town that has ceased to exist as it once was. Due to multiple public works projects in the Franja region, the town's natural water supply dissipated and destroyed the region's agricultural potential. Simultaneously, factory jobs became a more lucrative option in Lleida and Barcelona. These economic developments shifted the agricultural viability of the town and left in its wake only "those waiting to die."

The novel, moreover, also moves beyond the locale of the town and looks at the effects of public projects built on the dream of so-called regenerationism: the hydroelectric dams throughout the entire Franja region, among other areas throughout Spain. For the regenerationist proponents, including the Aragon native Joaquín Costa, water redistribution would not simply improve agricultural production on the Iberian Peninsula, but also transform rural social structures predicated on antiquated forms of *latifundismo* (Swyngedouw, "Modernity" 454). One moniker Franco picked up during his reign was "Paco Rana" (Franky the Frog) because of his persistent campaign to re-invigorate the countryside through a series of public works projects, more often than not, involving hydroelectric dams and re-distributing the nation's water supply. Franco's deployment, however, imposed new configurations that were meant to centralize Spain's waterways and display the power of the dictatorship. For geographer Erik Swyngedouw, reading the history of water in twentieth-century Spain offers revealing stories about the technonatures forged during Francoism ("Producing Nature" 122-23). Swyngedouw writes: "Parts of nature become enrolled in and reconstituted through the 'networks of power' that animate this process" (123). Under these auspices, water displays ambivalence as the source of social inequalities as well as the potential remedy. It cannot, then, remain politically neutral but rather becomes entangled in Franco's struggle for power. Territory, then, was remade to a scale indicative of the dictatorship's network of interest (122). *Els ventres de la terra* examines the islands left in the wake of these projects, suggesting that Franco's version of regenerationism caused massive forced migrations to urban centers after towns were either flooded or cut off from their water supply. Indeed, at one

point Serés's narrator explains that the history of the town's disappearance is a history of floods and water scarcity due to "el maltrato del agua" (99).

Franco puts to work the discourse of rural regenerationism as a central aspect of geologically reforming Spain as one nation instead of many. Other "regionalist desires" are drowned out through the "maltrato del agua." Swyngedouw describes this project not simply as redistribution but rather as the birth of a violent and transformative technonature.

In the Spanish post-war context, the re-making of Spain's hydrosocial landscape was part of an effort to create a socio-culturally, politically and physically integrated nationalist territorial scale and to obliterate earlier regionalist desires. Yet, this nationalistic socio-physical remaking of Spain was predicated upon forging networked national and, in particular, transnational socio-political and economic arrangements. ("Technonatural" 11)

Simultaneously, the projects abandoned the radicality of the vision, which would have supposedly redistributed resources with more equity throughout the countryside and instead perpetuated oligarchic networks solely interested in serving the needs of Spain's metropolises and eventually, the emerging project of neoliberalism, especially after Spain began to receive money from the United States government in the early 1950s ("Producing Nature" 135-36). As Swyngedouw explores in greater detail in his recent *Liquid Power*, water becomes a central actant in the "repeating" story of erasure, isolation, abandonment and fugue throughout Spain's projects of modernization. In his novel, Serés surveys this double erasure and uncovers "islands" and ruins of towns and offers up stories that help connect them through a shared ecological history of disappearance due to the mistreatment of water.

Franco's hydropolitics seep into Serés's chapter "Beber. Cada una de las botellas de agua (1985)." In 1985, the narrator returns to his family's deserted property in order to gather a few belongings including twelve bottles before the final sale.

One accesses the terrace, which is on the other side of the attic, through a small wooden door eaten away by worms from top to bottom. Once the cord is untied, one must push with force so that that door scratches the top a quarter of a circle that, with the passage of time, has been etched into the floor, and pass with one's head down, less because of the height and more because of the spider webs that hang from the ceiling. (82)⁴

Household objects are covered with markers of time passed. Though "nests" of spider webs, dust and sheets of plastic cover the daily objects, they seem to "communicate" through these layers. There is, for instance, a machine for grinding

⁴ "A la terraza, que está situada al otro lado del desván, se accede a través de una pequeña portezuela de madera punteada de arriba abajo por la carcoma. Una vez desatada la cuerda hay que empujar con fuerza para que la puerta rasque por encima el cuarto de circunferencia que con el paso del tiempo ha rayado en el suelo, y pasar con la cabeza gacha, más que por la altura, por las telarañas que cuelgan del techo" (82).

meat, pitchers, jars and bottles used for canning fruits and vegetables, a stack of old western novels and a bottle of liquor the narrator is justifiably afraid to drink. They have, according to the narrator, a strange, unaccustomed tonality to them. He taps on a railing, which, though it has “the same sound,” he only hears it as an uncanny sound as if it were a broken bell. The uncanniness arrives with fear and vertigo: “It is troubling to look through the eaves of the penthouse, a sensation mixed with vertigo and fear, difficult to describe, a shiver that wants to escape from my chest, my chest hands and jolts from me inside” (84).⁵

The house exhibits aspects of Freud’s discussion of the uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*): it is the familiar that seems most strange, causing the sensation of vertigo and dizziness the narrator references. In “On the Uncanny,” Freud teases out the semantic particulars of the word, likening it to a haunted house: “This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning” (15). For Freud, psychoanalysis interprets this familiarity as an association to the mother’s womb, to a familiar body once inhabited to which one cannot return. “Un” as a prefix is a sign of “repression” of the memory of this place. In terms of the novel, this repression arises as an inability to return to a previous environment or *ventre*. The reader follows as the narrator goes inside the site of memory, creating a palpable yet absent recollection of what has gone before. The remnants of the *ventre*, then, points back to Serés’s above conception of Atlantis as an insulated place, withheld from participation in literary history. The narrator works to decipher these “nests,” “empty containers” or ruins of a place transformed by Franco’s hydropolitical mechanisms.

Being *inside* the house, the site of memory, gives faintly recognizable yet distant sensations. Take, for instance, this olfactory description:

The environment of a mix of gasoline smoke and dust, a smell that I will never forget. I still want it, even more, I still love that distant odor, the solid, greasy dust on top of the engine block, dust mixed with earth from all the fields that are cultivated, from all the roads wind around the town, from the pollen of all the trees, the plants on the mountains, dust hardened by all the heatwaves and coldspells from November to March. (90)⁶

These smells are indicative of a certain *terroir* that unavoidably comes from a particular environment of trees and plants, soil and engine oil. Moreover, the house’s uncanniness exhibits senses of insularity. The narrator gestures at this when he reflects “the attic looks at the attic, the memories look at the memories,

⁵ “Me da reparo mirar por el alero, una sensación mezcla de vértigo y de miedo, difícil de describir, un escalofrío que quiere salirse del pecho, de las manos y que me empuja hacia dentro” (84).

⁶ “El ambiente de una mezcla de humo de gasóleo y polvo, un olor que nunca olvidaré. Todavía quiero, aún más, todavía amo aquel olor, el polvo sólido y grasiento encima del bloque del motor, polvo mezcla de tierra de todos los campos que se cultivaban, de todos los caminos que salen y vuelven al pueblo, del polen de todos los árboles, y plantas de los montes, polvo endurecido por todos los calores y por todos los fríos de noviembre a marzo” (90).

the house looks at the house” (108).⁷ It is as if, even without their use value for humans, the objects persist on their own insular timescales.

These impressions are incidental to the narrator’s purpose for making the trip, which is to find his mother’s collection of bottles for transporting water from the nearby spring to the house. The bottles contain their own faint etchings of past experiences. Twelve glass bottles are wrapped in newspaper and six sit in two different wooden boxes. Their history began during his mother’s work as a maid for a republican colonel who, in the last days of the Republic, offered compensation in objects instead of money because the Republic’s currency, with the foreseeable victory of nationalist troops, would soon be worthless. The colonel had acquired them from his trips throughout Europe: “Each bottle has a different origin, geography engraved on the glass that years later I would recall in classes, maps and atlases” (96).⁸ The bottles come from places such as Brittany, Clermont-Ferrand, Scotland, and Perrier. The narrator’s favorite piece of the collection came from Eastern Europe: “The bottle is well worn, engraved by hand with grooves that still maintain their sharp borders. I do not know what it says yet I identify characters and symbols but I have never been able to translate them” (96).⁹

The etchings, though never translated by the protagonist, always conveyed a memory of ice native to Eastern Europe. His mother explained that the climate was so cold that even the wine would freeze. The bottles, then, contain recordings—or messages—of various histories occurring inside and outside of Spain; however, as indicated earlier, these histories are not readily told and instead remain embodied as “empty bottles,” which *contain* residues of this larger and frequently forgotten history of water.

The bottles also work as metonyms for the larger story of water under Franco and his particular implementation of hydropolitics. The sight of the bottles conjures a history that swells over the memory of selling his parents’ house and into the history of why they left the town in the first place: a water crisis. Though they always had running water in the house, the family used the bottles for fresh spring water, which was better to drink. However, the construction of a local highway cut off the aquifer “that gave life” (98). The highway led to a new gas station built directly over where the water reservoir resided. While the town had traditionally used wells and springs, these local developments of industry eventually made this practice impossible, creating, as the texts notes, the beginning of the end for the town. The narrator reflects: “Memory does not fail anyone when even today everyone understands the decline of the town in relation to the death

⁷ “El desván mira el desván, los recuerdos miran los recuerdos, la casa mira la casa” (108).

⁸ “Cada botella tiene una procedencia diferente, geografía grabada en vidrio que años después yo recordaría en las clases, en los mapas y los atlas” (96).

⁹ La botella está labrada, grabada a mano con surcos que aún mantienen los bordes afilados. No sé qué dice, identifico caracteres y símbolos pero no los he podido traducir nunca” (96).

of springs and the mistreatment of water” (99).¹⁰ Just as Verdaguer situates the end of Atlantis with a geologic event, the narrator reflects that the end of the town coincides with the re-organization of the rural terrain. Under Franco’s public works projects, humans geologically decimated landscapes, leaving towns no recourse except to take flight to cities. Franco’s so-called regenerationalist project, as carried out here, occasioned the sinister erasure of communities, turning this rural area into a human-induced Atlantis, burying some communities under water while cutting others off from its source.

One important aspect of *Els ventres de la terra* is that it does not remain limited to the introspective observations about the glass bottles, the house or even the town in which the house resides. Instead, each of these sites of memory compose a figure I described above as an archipelago, which begins to form a larger narrative of water in twentieth-century rural Spain. As an engineer, the narrator works in one of the dams created by Franco’s hydroelectric projects. On the day he received a call with an offer on the house, the swamp created by the dam unexpectedly drained to an extremely low level, exposing what was submerged under the water: the town of Sallàs. This town, unlike the narrator’s own, did not fold because of a lack of water, but rather because its valley would be flooded in the name of progress. The “ghost town” exposed the “human disaster” covered over by the dictatorship’s pomp and celebration of the newly inaugurated dam. The narrator notes that, along with the rock formations dynamited to create the dam, those who did not accept the initial offer to leave the town, awoke in the middle of the night with dynamite planted in their homes, prompting their immediate flight. Water, in the case of Sallàs, “cleanses” these painful memories and buries the wreckage in a swamp. Walking through the ruins of the ghost town, the narrator reflects that the water also has the function of conserving the town:

There are those that say that water rots and corrodes but water also has conserved all these trunks and branches, I thought, to the point to where these beams are still in good condition. The first house that I entered was strangely in order, as if in reality it had never happened, all the furniture was there, or at least seemed to be. The chairs were stacked in the corners, seat against seat, around the dining room. In the middle, a table still held a glass centerpiece in which remained dry residue and etchings of horizontal lines, markers of the different levels of water. (106)¹¹

¹⁰ “No le falla a nadie la memoria cuando aún hoy todo el mundo sitúa el declive del pueblo por la muerte de las fuentes, en el maltrato del agua” (99).

¹¹ “Hay quien dice que el agua pudre y corroe, pero el agua también ha conservado todos estos troncos y ramas, pensaba, y hasta algunas de las vigas se ven en buen estado. [...] La primera casa en la que entré mostraba un orden extraño, como si en realidad no hubiese sucedido nada, el mobiliario estaba completo, o al menos esto parecía. Las sillas, arrinconadas y puestas las unas encima de las otras, asiento contra asiento, alrededor del comedor. En medio, una mesa conservaba todavía un centro de cristal en el que quedaban residuos secos y diversos haces de líneas horizontales, marcas de los diferentes niveles del agua” (106).

In its wake, water left the uncannily preserved human settlements as well as piles of dead fish, slithering snakes and hopping frogs. Moreover, water, without “morals or memory” acts as yet another insulating container, geologically burying and preserving the past life of Sallàs. Such a submerged burial—and eventual literary excavation—urges us to again reconsider what Serés means when he states that a central challenge of writing a rural novel is telling a story about a place with no literature. The stories must be excavated out of layers of dirt, sludge and rock. Significantly, such a project shares language with Plato’s mythical description of Atlantis: “That is how the ocean in that region has come to be even now unnavigable and unexplorable, obstructed as it is by a layer of mud at a shallow depth, the residue of the island as it settled” (1233). The narrator, now working at the dam, is in a privileged position to connect the history of Sallàs to the history of his own town, summed up in the phrase: “What the water gives us, the water takes away from us” (113).¹² The narrator makes the immediate connection between selling his own house and the uncanniness in Sallàs. He meditates that it is difficult to accept that, upon seeing the previously flooded houses, he realizes that people used to live here. The same goes for his own house that he is about to sell. In both cases, the literary contemplation of these situations allows us to witness the hydro-structures that erased rural communities in regions such as the Franja.

Reading Serés, we begin to reflect on the possibility of writing of a landscape after it has disappeared, or, moreover, how it might be possible to notice unifying structures and tropes in writing a novel about such places. In my view, what is remarkable about Serés’s novel is how the slow loss of communities is not as a completely effaced, forgotten history, but rather as almost illegible gaps, which Serés evokes as a fragmentary. Any return to meaning is incomplete, an event left as partially disnarrated. Yet the narrator is able to retain these fragmentary memories through careful literary excavation of insular ruins that would otherwise remain forgotten.

Serés’s novel helps to confabulate stories of towns that would have otherwise remained locked in their insularity. In his work, these rural places paradoxically connect *via* their shared histories of disappearance and insularity, sketching figures of rural “archipelagoes”, as it were. While a return to forgotten territory connects these isolated ruins, *Els ventres de la terra* does not readily offer an alternative regeneration for its forlorn places. As I noted above, the Cuban poet Lezama Lima has little in common with Serés’s style. Yet both authors share an interest in ruins as a means to approach historical and ecological decay. What Lezama brings to my discussion of entangled historical and ecological ruins is a modicum of hope insofar as ruins are always generative in his work. Lezama, put differently, helps us single out alternatives to predominant trends of ecological necrosis and disappearance. Though Lezama’s direct appeal to the myth of Atlantis is minimal, both the phenomena of submergence and insularity play integral

¹² “Lo que el agua nos da, el agua nos quita” (113).

roles in his kaleidoscopic poetics of ruined landscapes. In one essay that I will consider in detail below, he dwells on the karst topography and creatures of *Valle de Viñales* as a terrain that slowly emerged from the ancient waters that helped form it.

Emilio Bejel has rightly characterized Lezama as the poet of the image. Although Lezama's work is famously hermetic and dense, it is important to recall that image is always a point of contact between diverse literary and historical sources. For Lezama, the image unites content otherwise separated spatially and temporally, allowing fragments from cultures, whether defeated or thriving, to interact on literary and visual planes. Put differently, the image connects isolated fragments of ruins—or islands—and places them in constellations, what I have figuratively referred to above as archipelagoes. Lezama's image, then, becomes a useful paradigm for what I described above as a meeting point, which *sheds light* on the semi-visible histories and alternative ecological futures.

Despite the fact that Lezama rarely left Cuba, his notoriously difficult intertextuality frequently navigates varying transatlantic routes. Yet his mobilizations of the image are frequently tied to ecological and historical truths connected to Cuban insularity and the ruins of imperial culture.

Cultures move toward their ruin, but after ruin they live again through the image. The image blows on the embers of the spirit of the ruins. The image is interwoven with the myth, which is at the threshold of all cultures, which both precedes them and follows their funeral procession. It favors their initiation and their resurrection. ("The Image" 321)

Lezama's point of departure—the ruined—is strikingly similar to Serés's disappeared towns and drowned landscapes. It is, however, the image and *not* narrative that provides a vehicle to contemplate ruins. Seemingly in response to Serés's reflection on the dubious existence of the literature of an insular place like Atlantis, Lezama would suggest that ruins have a generative yet dormant quality to them. The image is a spark that functions as a kind of "threshold" or, in the language of this essay, as a meeting point for fragments that would otherwise be lost or set aside and forgotten. It is this generative quality that I would like to explore as a means of connecting isolated ecological histories in an archipelago of resistance to imperial desire and exploitation.

Lezama's above meditation also raises the question about what he means by culture. One might assume that Lezama subscribes to an anthropocentric view of culture, which would set it outside of nature. Yet, if we place this citation in the context of his work, ruins of decadent empires encompass more than human structures and expression. Lezama's writing is full of concern for the extinction of species and the destruction of landscapes. He worries about any culture that would implicitly or explicitly justify the disappearance of manatí, kangaroos, volcanoes or cenotes (325). He frequently echoes Pascal, to consider "the terrible affirmative force," concerning the loss of nature. As he repeats in a number of essays: "Since

the true nature has been lost, everything can be nature” (*Obras* 1213).¹³ Through poetic creation, *sobrenaturalaleza* or *contranaturalaleza* might replace nature with an alternative composition. In *La cantididad hechizada*, *sobrenaturalaleza* weaves together *paisaje* as fragments after the whole of nature has disappeared (*Obras* 1213). Confronted with the imperative to write without nature, poetry must conjure up a new vision: “It was decided for me to place the image in the place of lost nature when confronted with determinism, humans respond with the total arbiter of the image” (*Obras* 1213).¹⁴ After nature, what remains is fragmentary, yet also gigantic. This is what Lezama describes as American expression’s encounter with monstrosity, what we might consider as cultural and ecological diversity. Such a conception of nature is unmistakably baroque. In what Glissant describes as “a baroque shutter,” monstrosity shatters the rationalist view of nature as a harmonious sphere of truths that would reflect absolute scientific knowledge and order. In the wake of rationalism’s desire for depth and conquest, esthetics begins to favor the absorption of heterogeneity, what Glissant calls expansion (77).

Lezama’s *paisaje* is not merely a holistic replacement for the esthetics of rationalist nature, but rather a contemplation on the “insular” residue left in the wake of human expansion. The absence of nature is accompanied by a search for the activity of landscapes and their flora and fauna. The enigmatic poem “Las siete alegorías,” gives us a way to think about how the image is put to work. The text introduces a pig with teeth of stars, a white goddess fornicating with a kangaroo, a wheel of dew, a metallic seed, an Apollonian spirit descending from a large mouth, and light as the first visible animal of the invisible. Lezama’s allegories are vague and enigmatic, suggesting shadowy and submerged images awaiting discovery:

La luz es el primer animal visible de lo invisible.
Es la luz que se manifiesta,
la evidencia como un brazo
que penetra en el pez de la noche.
Oh luz manifestada
que iguala al ojo con el sol.
Un grupo de encinas
derribadas oculta las prolongaciones
de la luz sobre la repisa fría
con objetos inmutables.
Es lo primero que se manifiesta y será lo último manifestado.

Light is the first visible animal of the invisible.
It is light that manifests itself,
the evidence like a branch
that penetrates the fish of the night
Oh light manifest

¹³ “Como la verdadera naturaleza se ha perdido, todo puede ser naturaleza” (*Obras* 1213).

¹⁴ “me decidió a colocar la imagen en el sitio de la naturaleza perdida de esa manera frente al determinismo, el hombre responde con el total arbitrio de la imagen” (*Obras* 1213).

that equates the eye to the sun.
A group of felled oaks
hides the extension of the light over the cold ledge
with immutable objects.
It is the first manifest
and it will be the last to wither away. ("Antología" 199)

Lezama defines light as "el primer animal de lo invisible." This suggestive phrase is tied to Lezama's conception of the image as the lingering spark that might help rekindle fragments of a disappeared town or habitat. Light is the indispensable spectrum for *uncovering* what may have been lost or obscured; yet, for Lezama, it is also *animated*. Light is the visible range of electromagnetic radiation and also gestures at another range of things that often remain invisible. Light not only delivers what we see, but also underscores a submerged profundity that our gaze cannot access, much like the underside of an iceberg. It is useful here to consider one image from the poem frequently evoked by Lezama, "el pez de la noche." Following Juan Manuel del Río Surribas's analysis, the fish, among several other animals might offer a key to understanding Lezama's notoriously difficult work. "El pez" as del Río notes, is of course associated with water and, as such, represents an ambivalence similar to the one noted by Serés's narrator: "Lo que el agua nos da, el agua nos quita" (113). Water is indeed regenerative, but Lezama also connects it with the abyss of the night, that is, with the invisible.

With this "animalic universe" in mind, light not only animates the invisible but also the submerged "pez de la noche," which is meant to represent the obscured, submerged, and the forgotten. In parallel with his discussion of ruins above, Lezama focuses not only on a group of fallen oak trees but also on the sunlight that precedes and follows their demise. After Lezama names light as the sixth allegory, he departs with "a frenzy" of light interacting between objects. This baroque fantasy is a reflection on poetic creation, of uncovering what might have otherwise remained obscure or lost. Light refracts through a series of originally separate fragments and offers new composite images. The pig's teeth mix with stars, the goddess has a fateful encounter with a kangaroo, and the seed becomes metallic. The poem ends without naming the seventh allegory. Yet one may surmise that this final allegory is the poem itself: the places in which these images collide. That is, the text is another object that provides a space for these encounters to occur. The seventh allegory, then, is delivery, also animated by its contemplation of light. It reflects ways in which objects connect, diverge and cause chain reactions. In other words, the poetic image is an intermediary, or a causal point of interconnection. In my view, this is emblematic of Lezama's poetic mobilization of ruins after the loss of a harmonious and rationalist nature. Instead of merely lamenting the absence of nature, the poem composes something else entirely after this loss. Poetic creation, then, not only captures the melancholic, but also works to

renew the language needed to engage changing landscapes and others that completely disappear.

This poetics of light is at work in Lezama's writing on karst landscapes, terrains eroded by ancient seas and winds. Lezama's "*Epifanía en el paisaje*" from *Tratados en la Habana* delves into the terrain of the Cuban national park *Valle de Viñales*. This karstic depression is situated in western Cuba, near the Cordillera de Guaniguanico. The terrain is replete with caves and dome-like mogotes, which steeply protrude like islands from the valley floor. In Lezama's work, the contours of the terrain guide the writing: "The land, years ago submerged, paints itself in lesions of coral, eroded by a slow green rain" (514).¹⁵ Emerging from depths, the terrain is "sketched out in gestures" of coral and rock. At this juncture, Lezama turns to emphasize the slow geologic formation of water and land as forms of creativity. Liquids again become the focus when Lezama focuses on the figure of the snail: "This is the carpet required by the snail in order to swallow the diversity. The perspective is acquired from some "threshold" liquids, suspended, while some "deep" gigantomachia, presumed quiet in its submerged memories" (514).¹⁶ In this passage the movement of the mollusk also reveals "submerged memories" of the valley. The snail is an instantiation of life after the valley emerged from the depths. These questionable, slimy materials excreted from the snail are, for Lezama, residues of the deep geological history of place etched out by ancient eroding waters. This quiet moment of a poet observing a snail in a national park is similar to the narrator of *Els ventres de la terra* contemplating the empty glass bottles at his family's abandoned farm, or submerged ruins of Sallàs accidentally brought to light by the receding waters of a dammed river. The difference between these places is the role of the human. Lezama's reflection on the snail, for example, does not reveal a devastating environmental impact brought about by human progress. *Els ventres de la terra* finds common ground amongst abandoned rural towns in public works projects carried out by the Franco dictatorship. In contrast, Lezama's descriptive images perform ecological singularities. The snail and its residue are fragments of a deep geological memory that tells the story of the valley's niche. Lezama's insular method, then, meditates on the infinitesimal. Put in the language of a recent work searching for a shared algorithm between two ecological niches, the longer we consider a valley as a single space, the more variables, contours and memories arise awaiting our analysis (Blonder). The trouble is, then, how do we draw out connections between two insular spaces that, at least in the dense prose of Lezama Lima, seem so singular?

The answer, for Lezama, is again tied to how the poetic image connects one historical situation to another. His poetic images are, after all, created for

¹⁵ "La tierra, antaño sumergida, se esboza como en rasponazos de coral, en tachas de un verde lloviznado" (514).

¹⁶ "Es la alfombra requerida por el caracol para deglutir la diversidad de sus entrañas. La perspectiva está adquirida desde unos líquidos balconetes, suspendidos, mientras unos anatilados gigantomas, acalladas presunciones de sus recuerdos sumergidos" (514).

enjoyment. Lezama writes: “So pleasure is not an exception or sickness of bodies, but rather it is a body converted into its actual magnitude and acting with the deaf gravity of things” (145).¹⁷ Pleasure draws attention to the magnanimity of an object or terrain, directing us to its contour, texture and shape. It is an *alternative* measurement that is “welcoming” and “agreeable” that is not necessarily tied to consumption, but rather to contemplation and to writing. *Placer*, following Lezama, helps us “place” our immediate surroundings as well as distant ruins. The image, as an instantiation of light, is not merely a meeting point for historically disparate cultural ruins, but also collates these fragments through literary inventiveness, which helps us trace a culture’s initiation and as well as its wake and dissolution and absorption into other contexts. Taking pleasure in the image, then, consists of appreciating the singularity of a niche as recognizing its potential dissolution.

In “Isla Incognita,” Derek Walcott recalls an old Latin grammar book to ask: “Quales est natura insulae? What is the nature of the island” (52)? To respond, Walcott attempts to forget proper names such as Atlantis and focus on the contour, temperament and interconnection at work in the terrain at hand. Walcott, in this sense, is taking pleasure in the insular. While being lost on an unknown island, Walcott notes: “It was not originally mine, but I came upon it and had to claim it by necessity, desperation even, and I’m webbed in its design. Who shakes it, however subtly, shakes me” (52). Insularity, considered here, is about intimacy and interconnection between ecological circumstance and personal history. There is no rootedness in Walcott’s conception of the insular, but only relation to what Glissant described above as the “woes of landscape that have invaded our speech” (196). This is reminiscent of the uprooted and unnamed protagonist of *Els ventres de la terra* returning to his family’s ruined farm to collect empty glass bottles, or of Lezama’s focus on the infinitesimal expression of a vast geological history of submergence and karstic reappearance. Yet these relations to a place are also centrifugal as they extend outwards in routes through larger archipelagoes of different events, histories and creatures. To recall the twelve bottles from *Els ventres de la terra*, these stories are like a message in a bottle, meant to communicate the fate of islands long thought to be submerged or forgotten. As we place these histories in figurative archipelagoes, alternative tropes and similarities arise. These responses, as I have noted throughout this essay, offer insights into future methods for transatlantic ecocriticism, which would shed light on often forgotten ecological histories and forge new exploratory routes between them.

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¹⁷ “Así el placer no es como una excepción o enfermedad del cuerpo, sino que es el cuerpo convertido en magnitud y actuando con la gravitación sorda de las cosas” (145).

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