

## Editorial *Ecozon@ Issue 8.1*

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Welcome to Issue 8:1 of *Ecozon@*, whose Themed Section is dedicated to ‘South Atlantic Ecocriticism’. While contributing to the journal’s general aim to address national, transnational and intercultural dimensions of ecocriticism in and beyond Europe, this number also extends the range of regional focuses of earlier numbers (4.2 ‘Mediterranean Ecocriticism’, and 5.2 ‘Northern Nature’). Like these, it asks what environmental issues, positions and communicative and aesthetic strategies distinguish individuals and cultures in the region.

As the editors of the Section, Luis Prádanos and Mark Anderson point out, Transatlantic Ecocriticism has already gained recognition as a body of scholarship engaging with movements, theories and cultural production from countries around the Atlantic Basin, to study “the ways in which environments and cultures are affected and transformed by the multidirectional circulation of animal and plant species, capital, commodities, development and land management practices, forms of activism and resistance, and people.” However, it has hitherto been largely limited to the North Atlantic. They are thus breaking new ground with their substantial introduction and collection of seven essays on Iberian, Latin American and African Lusophone historiography, prose writing, poetry, art and film.

Given the historical relations between the ‘mother’ countries, Spain and Portugal, and their former colonies, social and political issues naturally play an important role here: ‘subaltern environmentalism’ is a principal focus of South Atlantic Ecocriticism, which stands at the interface of Postcolonial and Ecocritical studies. The writers and artists whose work is examined here by Rebecca Jarman, John Trevathan, Maryanne Leone, Victoria Saramago, Anne-Laure Bonvalot, Carlos Fonseca and Palmar Álvarez-Blanco stem from Angola, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Mozambique, Spain and Venezuela. (The Creative Writing and Art Section of the Issue features related work by artists and writers from Chile, Colombia, Guatemala and Peru.) Social justice, social movements, critiques of an economic system that exploits the environment and marginalised peoples alike, the Anthropocene, disaster narratives, epidemics, depictions of landslides, islands and archipelagos, ‘backlands’, the colonialization of knowledge and video activism are among the many themes addressed in these essays.

The General Section of this issue consists of two articles (written in Italian and French, respectively): Miriam Aloisio’s “Impegno Ecologico: Malerba e Calvino a confront” and Nicolas Picard’s “Les biographies animales: histoires naturelles, histoires personnelles.” The first compares works by Italo Calvino and Luigi Malerba, illustrating their textual and ideological “ecocentric” dialogue about the

environment and society. Both Malerba and Calvino bring to the fore the urgency to unmask dominant ideologies and to boycott perceived binary oppositions of nature versus culture. The latter essay consists of a zoopoetic exploration of non-fiction and fictional animal biographies in French-language literature, examining the writing of Maurice Maeterlinck, Jacques Delamain, Louis Pergaud and Maurice Genevoix, and asking to what extent animal life is individualized and personalized, and to what ends.

In the Creative Writing and Art Section, we are delighted to present a series of striking images (including that on the cover of the issue) and a poem by Regina José Galindo, whose work has gained her prestigious international awards. Further art work by Rember Yahuarcani López is described by Serenella Iovino in her informative introduction as drawing on the cosmology of the artist's native community in the Peruvian Amazon. The short prose piece by Juan Carlos Galeano is similarly based on oral narratives from Colombia. Poems by Lilianet Brintrup Hertling and Mark Anderson round off the Section.

The Issue closes with the usual reviews of recent publications: Ian Morris's study of energy regimes and their shaping of political structures and political values, *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels*; *Sense of Place: Transatlantic Perspectives*, a collection of essays in English and Spanish with a bilingual introduction which draws attention to the historically and culturally shaped connotations of place and sense of place; Hubert Zapf's extended theoretical exposition and case studies illustrating his unique contribution to ecocritical theory and practice, *Literature as Cultural Ecology*; a collection of essays on *Ecocriticism in Taiwan* which offers fascinating insights into the island's colonial history, its experience of rapid post-war industrialisation and environmental destruction, and its vibrant eco-literary, cinematic and artistic culture; and finally Sybille Machat's study of the narrative structure of post-apocalyptic novels, *In the Ruins of Civilization*.

## Transatlantic Iberian, Latin American, and Lusophone African Ecocriticism

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Transatlantic ecocriticism engages cultural production from nations around the Atlantic Basin to study the ways in which environments and cultures are affected and transformed by the multidirectional circulation of animal and plant species, capital, commodities, development and land management practices, forms of activism and resistance, and people across the Atlantic Ocean. Until very recently, transatlantic ecocriticism has been synonymous with North-North (that is, North American and Northern European) approaches to the representation of environment and ecological discourse. The incorporation of perspectives emerging from other transatlantic circuits has the potential to enhance significantly ecocritical debate, particularly with regards to the geopolitics of socioenvironmental degradation and coordinated environmental activism. Although there are substantial numbers of activists, artists, and scholars from the Iberian Peninsula, Latin America, and Lusophone Africa involved in intercontinental collaboration and dialogue on issues related to ecocriticism, little critical attention has so far been devoted to this phenomenon. This collection of essays looks to draw attention to the transatlantic socioecological movements that have arisen in response to the drastic environmental and social transformations, displacements, and transplantings that the colonial and postcolonial history of the Southern Atlantic has entailed.

Since the late 1980s, a variety of theoretical correctives to neocolonial, hegemonic Euro-American strains of environmentalism have appeared, prominently among them Ramachandra Guha's seminal essay "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique." In this essay, Guha deconstructs the inappropriate claim of universality and the unrecognized cultural bias ingrained in one of the most radical strains of Euro-American environmentalism, deep ecology. Guha exposes deep ecologists' lack of concern with social equality and the preservation of livelihoods in peripheral regions in the world economic system. In their 1997 book *Varieties of Environmentalism*, Guha and Joan Martínez-Alier developed the concept of "the environmentalism of the poor" to highlight further the unequal social distribution (asymmetries between benefits and risks, responsibility and vulnerability, etc.) of the ecological depletion caused by economic growth and capital accumulation.

These asymmetries are often ignored, if not concealed, by Euro-American dominant environmental discourses. The fruitful convergence of ecocriticism and postcolonial thought in the last decade has further contributed to critique Westernized and Anglophone ecological discourses and their often neocolonial, ethnocentric, militarized, managerial, and technocratic approaches to environmental issues.<sup>1</sup> Mainstream Euro-American environmentalism—an offshoot of the epistemology of North Atlantic hegemony in the capitalist global economy—focuses on ecological modernization, eco-efficiency, green growth, and sustainable development, grossly overlooking or minimizing Southern Atlantic ecological practices and semiotic realities that do not align with its cultural hegemony. This politically toothless—when not overtly perverse—dominant environmentalism has been consistently challenged and contested by decolonial, ecofeminist, and anti-capitalist socioecological movements and theories (e.g., the environmentalism of the poor, climate and food justice movements, degrowth, postdevelopment, and indigenous movements) that bring to the fore the interlocking structural causes of environmental destruction and social injustice. These movements target the disaster-manufacturing power asymmetries that arose from colonization and continue to underpin globalizing capitalist cultural practices, modes of thinking, infrastructural inertias, and modern institutions.

In order to be transformative, decolonial, and diverse, ecocriticism must openly dialogue with and learn from these counter-hegemonic socioecological movements as well as open itself to be infused with ecological philosophies that are external to the dominant Euro-American environmentalism (Prádanos, “Toward a Euro-Mediterranean” 31-38). As Ursula Heise has remarked, the global turn in ecocriticism has significantly expanded the theoretical, temporal, and geographical scope of ecocriticism since 2000 (637). For this global ecocritical turn to be emancipatory, and not a mere multicultural version of the dominant neocolonial system of socioecological relations based on systematic exploitation of humans and non-humans, it must be epistemologically diverse. As Santos, Nunes, and Meneses argue, this project entails the “recognition of the epistemological diversity of the world, that is, of the diversity of knowledge systems underlying the practices of different social groups across the globe” (xix). Furthermore, according to these authors, the “reinvention of social emancipation” requires “replacing the ‘monoculture of scientific knowledge’ with an ‘ecology of knowledges’” (xx). This special number of *Ecozon@* seeks to provide a platform for discussing diverse ecocritical perspectives from regions and epistemologies usually ignored or suppressed by mainstream Northern Atlantic ecological imaginaries.

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<sup>1</sup> Huggan and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Environmentalism* (2010), DeLoughrey and Handley's *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011), and Caminero-Santangelo and Myers's *Environment at the Margins* (2011) have been particularly influential in catalyzing postcolonial approaches to ecocriticism.



The conceptualization of the "Anthropocene," or the geological epoch of humans, exemplifies to a large degree the apolitical, managerial, and technocratic mannerisms typical of anthropocentric and hubristic cultural hegemony, particularly as it is manifested in Euro-American Atlantic environmental articulations. In contrast, Jason W. Moore's contestational term "Capitalocene" opens the floor for a meaningful, decolonizing political ecology and calls for enacting diverse alternatives to "capitalism as a world-ecology of power, capital, and nature" (Moore 6). As Sharae Deckard observes,

the world-ecological perspective of humanity-in-nature enables an extension of environmental criticism beyond its usual boundaries to encompass the whole historical range of regimes of organizing nature that constitute the capitalist *oikeois*. Finance and maquiladoras, haciendas and mass urbanization, free trade agreements and resource nationalism, global empires and world markets are all forms of environment-making that knit together human relations and extra-human processes, and are thus ripe for analysis with respect to cultural form. (4)

Given that the capitalist world-ecology emerged in the long sixteenth century from predominantly Southern transatlantic circuits, we believe that a comparative ecocritical approach to cultural production from these regions can contribute to a nuanced, epistemologically diverse, historical understanding of the ongoing processes that sustain the capitalist world-ecology, as well as the recognition, development, and visibility of alternatives to it. It would therefore be useful to expand and go beyond the environmental imaginary of the dominant Northern Atlantic conceptualizations of modernity, not only geographically, but also temporally, by considering the drastic transformations in the ecological organization of the world wrought by the expansion of capital not only in recent decades, but also prior to the industrial revolution. If the current global structure of combined and uneven development, that is, of the continual expansion and rescindment of capital on frontiers of commodities and labor and its accumulation in centers of finance and geopolitical power, began as a Southern Atlantic circuit more than five centuries ago, the Atlantic Basin continues to serve as privileged site not only for the development of new technologies of capitalization, extraction, and exploitation, but also for resistance and alternative world-making.<sup>2</sup>

### Approaching the South Atlantic

As Horacio Legrás has noted in his discussion of Hegel's conceptualization of world history and the historical subject, the Mediterranean Sea is usually conceived of as linking Europe, Asia, and Northern Africa, while the Atlantic Ocean is portrayed

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<sup>2</sup> As Deckard summarizes, "The early modern appropriation of the 'Great Frontier' in the Americas provided an astonishing wealth of uncommoditized ecological surpluses that reduced production costs and increased profitability, jumpstarting and fueling the engine of capitalist accumulation for centuries" (7).

as separating the Americas from Europe (135). For Hegel, Europe embodied the geographical "end" of History; it had manifested the universality of humanity (the *Weltgeist* or World Spirit) through encompassing the globe. As a mere extension of European historical agency, colonized America could not position itself antithetically to European world history and therefore had no possibilities for producing a new historical subject. For this reason, Legrás continues, "the Atlantic cannot occupy the third position in the Hegelian system, that is, the position of medium, the place of inscription of the contradictions, the very surface of the ontological *Aufhebung*. In spite of being a region of passage, nothing actually comes to pass on the Atlantic" (135). And, of course, Hegel dismisses summarily any agential role for Africa within world history as well, a posture that Legrás traces to the master/slave dialectic underpinning the bourgeois grand narrative of subjectivity as proprietary production (137).

While Hegel's imperialistic conceptualization of world history—which, as Marx would subsequently argue, relied on the willful negation of the dialectics of capital accumulation—has largely been dismantled, there remains this sense that the Atlantic Ocean is itself little more than an hours-, days-, or weeks-long lag in the transit of people and goods between continents. To be sure, that lag has been costly in terms of efficiency and even human lives, but it has little bearing on how the territories on either side are perceived. The ocean's vast distances operate as a disconnecter that partitions the continents into seemingly discrete entities, turning opaque the economic, political, and ecological connectivity that binds the Atlantic's multiple shores into a single geopolitical assemblage that has, in fact, played a paradigmatic role in configuring modernity as a world economic system and ecology (Quijano and Wallerstein 552; Mignolo 3). As Legrás points out, citing Susan Buck Morss, it is precisely the discreteness of distance that allowed Hegel to downplay the reality that the rise of the European bourgeois subject of history relied almost entirely on the inflows of capital from the Americas (136). Nearly the entirety of this transatlantic capital was produced with enslaved African or indigenous American labor, either from raw materials extracted from American environments or, in the case of export agriculture, American monocultures transplanted from African soils, as occurred with coffee, bananas, and sugarcane.<sup>3</sup> For Hegel, history was made by the Master; there was no form of historical agency beyond colonialism.

While much has been done to recover the historical agencies of both the colonized and postcolonial subjects at locations around the Atlantic Basin, little attention has been paid to the roles that the oceanic environment itself played in those same histories. The modern imaginary of the ocean as a dead space of transit has the effect of negating the realities of currents, that is, the imbricated natural and sociopolitical processes that inform and govern intercontinental circulation.

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<sup>3</sup> Although sugarcane was cultivated in Persia as early as the seventh century CE, it came to the Americas via Northern Africa and Southern Spain ("Map 2").

Without an understanding of the fluidity of currents, transcontinental movement appears as a static fixture; the ocean becomes a piece of infrastructure whose paradoxical function is to deterritorialize everything that passes through it, transforming materials into commodities and people into commodified labor. Very little thought is given to the multiscalar dynamics that emerge from these interconnected, synchronous natural and sociocultural movements.

The Atlantic Ocean clearly possesses a unique set of attributes that both channel and contravene political and economic projects in ways that are quite often entirely beyond human control. As a case in point, the Atlantic's ocean currents not only determine climactic conditions on its three inhabited continents, but they have also coordinated the spatiality and chronology of European colonization of Africa and the Americas, from dictating Columbus's point of arrival in the Caribbean to the routes of transatlantic trade, which in turn set the vectors of conquest and settlement, including the locations of all the major African, Latin American, and North American cities on the Atlantic seaboard.<sup>4</sup> It is particularly illuminating to consider the roles that ocean currents have played in the geopolitics of the slave trade, determining the parts of Africa in which enslavement would be most intense as well as the enslaved peoples' destinations in the Americas.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the human geographies and economies of enslavement depended directly on the Atlantic's currents, both in their aspect as shipping lanes and in their climatic influence, which governed population distribution in Africa as well as the kinds of monoculture plantations that could be established in specific regions of the American colonies. On the other hand, the Atlantic's frequent hurricanes have also played powerful roles throughout the history of the Americas, sinking commercial and military ships, severely damaging infrastructure and cities, and transforming politics at local and even national levels.<sup>6</sup>

It is not our intention to dwell at greater length here on the historical agency of the Atlantic as an assemblage with its own particular ontological status; nonetheless, the Atlantic is clearly much more than an inert border between continents, and any consideration of the human history of the Atlantic Basin cannot discount its environmental history. At the same time, however, the emergence of a "transatlantic" framework for approaching African and Latin American cultures has garnered extensive critiques, particularly from scholars invested in decolonial

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<sup>4</sup> This relationship is transparent when one juxtaposes maps of Atlantic port cities and ocean currents. See, for example, Maps 4 ("Wind and Ocean Currents of the Atlantic Basins") and 5 ("Major Regions and Ports Involved in the Slave Trade, All Years") of Emory University's *Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*.

<sup>5</sup> Again, this relationship is transparent when one compares Map 1 ("Overview of the Slave Trade Out of Africa, 1500-1900) and Map 4 ("Wind and Ocean Currents of the Atlantic") of Emory University's *Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*.

<sup>6</sup> On this point, consult Stuart B. Schwartz's *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* and Chapters 1 and 2 of Mark Anderson's *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America*.

projects. Beyond the problem of non-human historical agency, scholars have questioned both the theoretical underpinnings and the political economy of transatlantic studies. Transatlantic hispanism in particular is suspect as a facade of cultural fraternity concealing the ways in which Spain has sought to reassert cultural, linguistic, and economic dominance over Spanish America following the collapse of Franquismo and the turn to a neoliberal political economy (Gabilondo 91-92; Monasterios 147-48; Trigo 25-36). Additionally, many Latin American scholars view the transatlantic approach as simply the latest North American intellectual fad, particularly since most of the scholars developing the field work at universities in the US or the UK.<sup>7</sup> While most of these same critics laud Guyanese British scholar Paul Gilroy's seminal attempt to rewrite the cultural history of the Atlantic Basin from a subaltern perspective in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), many of them feel that the triangular connections that Gilroy finds between African modernity and diasporic populations in Britain and the US are much murkier in non-English speaking nations in the Atlantic Basin. Furthermore, some of these scholars contend that Gilroy's and subsequent "transatlantic" scholars' focus on transcultural hybridity downplays the violence of colonial encounters through a kind of multiculturalist discourse that they see as a neoliberal palliative for the social dislocations of capitalism; they feel that these encounters may be addressed more adequately through existing theoretical frameworks such as postcolonialism, decolonialism, and subaltern studies. Indeed, as Abril Trigo points out, these approaches already examine the circulation of people and commodities through the lens of colonial power relations, while the term "transatlantic" seemingly would do little to deepen the critique of these same highly asymmetrical and coercive power relations (40-41).

While we concur with many of these critiques, we believe that transatlantic perspectives have the potential to add important dimensions to scholarship on the ongoing socioecological effects of colonialism and capitalism as well as that of the increasingly interconnected movements of resistance that work to reimagine and

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<sup>7</sup> The basis for these critiques is immediately evident when Julio Ortega details his early efforts towards developing the field of Hispanic transatlantic studies in the mid-1990s, describing the process as beginning at Brown University, then reaching out to other US Ivy League institutions as well as British universities like Cambridge. In particular, he marks the founding of the field in a series of "Ibero-American" seminars held in 1995 and 1996 at Brown and Cambridge, thus imbuing the field with a North-North institutionality, despite the Latin American origins of many of the seminars' participants (Ortega 93-94). Of course, this special number of *Ecozon@* will be subject to similar criticisms since the co-editors and most of the article authors also work at North American and British universities; however, we feel that an explicitly decolonial, ecocritical approach to transatlantic studies can counter this hegemonic geopolitical positionality. Our twin goals are to open the field of ecocriticism to internal critique by making visible South-South circuits and collaborations as key ecological agents and producers of ecocritical knowledge and practices, and to revalidate that same knowledge and practices beyond their geographical locations as general models for alternative, sustainable modernities.

recreate modernity from decolonial points of view. As Gustavo Verdesio argues, bringing Enrique Dussel's concept of transmodernity to bear in the conceptualization of Atlantic studies endows it with a powerful critical apparatus, subverting the precept that Europe and European settler cultures are at the center of modernity (231). Indeed, Gabilondo emphasizes that transatlantic frameworks such as that developed by Gilroy insist that rather than a static metropole/colony or First World/Third World (core/periphery) dialectic, asymmetrical circulation itself is at the heart of modernity (94). A transatlantic perspective allows us to understand that modernity did not begin in Europe and then radiate outwards, albeit imperfectly, to its colonies, but rather arose as a series of interconnected socioeconomic, political, ecological, and cultural systems from the colonial encounter itself, and its successive forms and transformations emerge from the continual renegotiation and reenactment of geopolitical power relations, particularly as they relate to specific commodity and production frontiers.<sup>8</sup>

The notion of transmodernity is important because overemphasizing the binary opposition between metropole/colony obscures the historical reality that before the frontiers of extraction were expanded to the colonies, they were often internal to the "metropole" itself; they were the condition for the primitive accumulation that made the colonial expansion of capital possible.<sup>9</sup> Tellingly, many of the techniques used to subjugate indigenous populations in the Spanish colonies and exploit their labor in extractive enterprises were not unique to the colonies; they had been applied first to Morisco populations in Spain and Guanches in the Canary Islands, both of whom were used as forced agricultural labor in an *encomienda* system that, as would occur in the Americas, also involved forced conversion to Catholicism. Similarly, the ethnic division between Christians and Jews in Spain would become key to colonization as well, if one considers the role of the *pureza de sangre* concept in the implementation of the *casta* system in New Spain and the appropriation of Jewish wealth that occurred following the 1492 Alhambra Decree expelling all Jews who did not convert to Christianity, some of which was used to finance New World ventures, including Columbus's voyages. And the iconic colonial and postcolonial Latin American form of land tenure and labor organization, the *latifundio*, had its roots in the Roman *latifundia* in Iberia. Each of these cases reveals how the frontiers of forced labor and cheap (conquered) land/resources were pushed outwards to the Americas (and Africa) as their availability in the Iberian Peninsula diminished; the colonial frontiers thus arose within the core itself before being expanded outwards to the periphery. In this sense, the colonies were internal as much as external and the ecological revolution that the Iberian conquest brought about in Latin America—that is, the drastic environmental transformations

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<sup>8</sup> See Jason W. Moore, "Feudalismo, capitalismo, socialismo, o teoría y política de las transiciones eco-históricas."

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the processes involved in primitive accumulation, see Marx's *Capital*, volume 1, chapters 28 and 29.



that occurred with the shift from indigenous polycultures to export monoculture, mineral extraction, and cattle ranching—had its precedent in the Iberian Peninsula itself during Roman and "Reconquista" times, while these colonial practices continued to be employed simultaneously if asymmetrically in the metropole and the colonies.

On the other hand, modern biopolitics followed the rise of the liberal state wherever it took root, which occurred nearly simultaneously in Spain and Latin America. The nineteenth-century political revolutions were accompanied by socioecological revolutions arising from the gradual, uneven implementation of liberal capitalism and the construction of infrastructure linking nations to transatlantic circuits, the development of new technologies of mineral extraction, and the "modernización del campo." Agroindustrialization occurred nearly simultaneously in the Iberian Peninsula, Latin America, and Spain and Portugal's African colonies (Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Mozambique) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often financed by the same, primarily British investment firms.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the conflicts and economic pressures that resulted from the capitalization of rural areas (which often took the form of land-grabs by *latifundistas*, or large landowners) led to the massive displacement of small farmers to urban areas, generating the precipitous growth of African, Latin American, and Iberian cities in the twentieth century, and providing the labor force and consumer base that allowed industrialization to take hold. With these shifts, the sustainable farming practices of subsistence farmers were replaced by energy-intensive industrial modes of production that involved the use of heavy machinery and massive amounts of agrochemicals produced and distributed by transnational corporations. Migration from the countryside and urbanization thus implied drastic ecological revolutions on every scale.

These parallel and interconnected, if asymmetrical patterns of capitalization and development—which also implied radical shifts in the ways in which people perceived and interacted with their environments through specific labor regimes—intensified hyperbolically with the rise of neoliberalism in the second half of the twentieth century. One need not look far to note that the large-scale Iberian labor migration to Northern Europe mirrors African and Latin American northward migrations, while the same or similar transnational agro-industrial corporations produce strawberries or tomatoes in Northern Africa, Mexico, and Spain, taking advantage of cheap land, surplus labor, free trade, and lax environmental regulations. Of course, the traditional colonial distribution of capital has been somewhat complicated by neoliberalism; while Spanish investment conglomerates own hotel chains in Mexico and Africa, Mexican financiers invest in Spanish

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<sup>10</sup> Financiers from the United States had a strong hand in the capitalization of Latin America and the Caribbean as well, but they were more of a hemispheric than a transatlantic or global presence until after World War II.



corporations that have holdings in Africa, and Nigerian billionaires undoubtedly include Latin American and European corporations in their portfolios. From this angle, an important role of transatlantic studies is to scrutinize how global capital interfaces with transatlantic circuits, maintaining some intact, constructing new ones, and disrupting others. In hypercapitalism, capital and capitalized bodies not only flow along a South-North axis, but also in reverse and laterally. For this reason, the political and economic history—which is also the environmental history—of the nations on the Atlantic Basin cannot be understood independently; the circulation among them of capital, commodities, policies, cultural practices, soil nutrients, and human, animal, and vegetal bodies must be taken into account, but without downplaying the contextual differences and asymmetrical power relations that characterize these interrelations.

At the same time, in a historical moment in which transnational political consensus and neoliberal trade agreements often overwrite local governance, local popular movements and activists frequently have insufficient resources and tactical formation for sustaining resistance against the imposition of economic projects that threaten their way of life. The overwhelming weight of mobilized capital easily crushes any opposition, especially when working in tandem with the repressive apparatuses of the neoliberal state. However, the 1994 Zapatista indigenous movement in Southern Mexico led the way in developing new strategies for creating transnational communities linked through the then recently-formed internet and other forms of traditional and alternative media. Since that moment, indigenous movements, environmental activists, and social justice proponents in Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and Latin America have increasingly relied on social media and other forms of digital activism to generate international awareness of social and environmental issues, promote solidarity and alliances, coordinate local and international political action, share strategies and tactics, and raise the funds needed to maintain their struggles.

Initially, much of this work was done in English through translators; they used the language of globalization to pressure power from within. In this sense, this kind of activism was not specifically informed by South Atlantic geopolitics, but more generally by North-South relations. However, recent years have seen the rise of more and more Spanish and Portuguese language sites and social media networks, often with bilingual translations in indigenous languages and/or English, dedicated to social and environmental activism. This rise of transnational activism in the languages of the former empires has constructed networks that do not depend directly on the mediation of Northern activist or NGO networks, even if they do often continue to rely on social media platforms (such as Facebook and Youtube) owned by Northern corporations, which necessarily affects the form that these collaborations will take.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> It also subjects them to surveillance by the Northern governments, although it has not been clear to what degree that surveillance has been employed. By subpoenaing these corporations' records,

In reality, the history of transatlantic social and political activism can be traced from the present back to the earliest moments of the colonial period, if one considers the diverse corpus of work advocating indigenous rights in the Iberian colonies, which was written between indigenous American, *mestizo*, and Iberian authors, or the parallels between the *comuneros* movements in Spain and popular uprisings in the colonies. Even if there was no direct communication between these movements, they shared tactics whose similarities arose from the uniformity of the structures of power and repression throughout the Spanish Empire (which thereby generated similar forms of resistance) as well as whisperings of resistance spread by word of mouth. Transatlantic collaboration intensified in subsequent centuries in the liberal political activism that led simultaneously to the independence movements in the Spanish colonies and the 1812 Constitution of Cádiz in Spain, the independence of Brazil under Portuguese Prince Dom Pedro in 1822, and the transatlantic flow of migrants and political exiles due to civil wars and dictatorships in Iberia and many Latin American nations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well as political collaboration between socialist guerrilla movements and sympathizers throughout the Atlantic Basin. Likewise, we must recognize the effects of the international pressure exerted on the Spanish regime to recognize the independence of Equatorial Guinea in 1968 and the role of the Portuguese military following the 1974 overthrow of the Estado Novo in supporting the Carnation Revolution that ended Portuguese rule in Mozambique as well as the Alvor Agreement that ended the war for independence in Angola. Most recently, there have been several highly visible transatlantic collaborations. These include the transnational alliances working to achieve justice for the human rights abuses committed by military dictatorships in Argentina, Chile, Guatemala and Spain and others coordinating dissent movements against neoliberal capitalism like the "Indignados," which appeared in response to austerity measures in Spain but spread within a matter of days to Argentina and Mexico as well as other Latin American nations. Finally, there are many similarities between the degrowth movement in Southern Europe and postdevelopment projects in Latin America, as well as between the notion of ecological time embraced by Andean indigenous cosmopolitics and the "slow" movement in Mediterranean Europe.<sup>12</sup>

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North American and European security agencies have an unprecedented ability to monitor activism on a global scale, which, given these nations' history of economic, military and political intervention in other nations' affairs, is a frightening prospect indeed. Nevertheless, this is not an issue that this volume is designed to address.

<sup>12</sup> See Luis I. Prádanos's "Decolonizing the North, Decolonizing the South," which studies the commonalities and possible alliances between current Euro-Mediterranean socioenvironmental radical movements and the current revival of Andean indigenous movements and postcolonial environmental thought in Latin America.

## Toward a South Atlantic Ecocriticism

As scholars of popular movements have argued, fostering global alliances of diverse counter-hegemonic movements may be our best chance for remaking the world in a way that ensures its continued inhabitability for all (Martínez Alier 66; Escobar 31; Santos, Nunes, and Meneses viii). In a global context of unacceptable social inequalities and ecological collapse, it is urgent to confront the assumptions behind capitalist ecological relations through the promotion of diverse emancipatory and decolonial imaginaries able to change the power differential in a socio-ecologically desirable, just, and viable way. For that purpose, it is crucial to forge “alliances between diverse forms of knowledge, cultures, and cosmologies in response to different forms of oppression that enact the coloniality of knowledge and power,” but these alliances “presuppose mutual intelligibility” (Santos, Nunes, and Meneses xlv, xxv). To nurture intelligibility across diverse ecological knowledges, narratives, and discourses, it is paramount to advance a transnational, comparative, decolonial, post-capitalist, and epistemologically diverse ecocriticism.

Many scholars in recent years have engaged in postcolonial ecocriticism related to Latin America and, with less intensity for a number of reasons, to Africa and the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>13</sup> Although the transatlantic connections among these regions could be both theoretically illuminating and politically relevant, they are often mentioned only in passing or missed entirely. Forging these connections could lead to practical counterhegemonic alliances not only across the Atlantic Ocean, but around the planet. One powerful example is the collaborative, open-access, and

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<sup>13</sup> Examples of recent studies that use postcolonial, ecocritical methodologies to analyze cultural production from the Atlantic Basin include the essays in Anderson and Bora’s edited volume on *Ecological Crisis and Cultural Representation in Latin America*; Laura Barbas Rhoden’s “Activismo medioambiental multimodal en el Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica: medios digitales, patrimonio biocultural y decolonialidad”; Byron Caminero Santángelo and Garth Andrew Myers’s *Environment at the Margins*; Caminero Santangelo’s *Different Shades of Green* and “Witnessing the Nature of Violence: Resource Extraction and Political Ecologies in the Contemporary African Novel”; Jennifer L. French’s “Voices in the Wilderness”; George Handley’s “The Postcolonial Ecology of the New World Baroque: Alejo Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos*”; Gisela Heffes’s *Políticas de la destrucción/poéticas de la preservación*; Jorge Marcone’s “Filming the Emergence of Popular Environmentalism in Latin America: Postcolonialism and Buen Vivir”; Lizabeth Paravisini Gebert’s “Caribbean Utopias and Dystopias: The Emergence of the Environmental Writer and Artist”; Steven F. White’s “Like a River: An Introduction to Contemporary Latin American Eco-Literature”; and Lesley Wylie’s *Colonial Tropes/Postcolonial Tricks*. There are a host of others that take complementary postcolonial, if not explicitly ecocritical approaches to literature, deconstructing the symbolic regimes that have upheld the colonial orders governing human and nonhuman bodies. One key example would be Gabriela Nouzeilles’ edited volume on *Naturaleza en disputa: retóricas del cuerpo y del paisaje en América Latina*. Similarly, Ileana Rodríguez takes a transatlantic postcolonial approach to literary cartographies in *Transatlantic Topographies: Islands, Highlands, Jungles*; however, she focuses almost exclusively on the problem of representation, rarely addressing explicitly the materiality of the environments in question.

modifiable Environmental Justice Atlas. This Atlas documents and catalogues social conflict around environmental issues with the goal of connecting affected communities and forging transnational networks and alliances to effectively respond to corporative or governmental socio-environmental aggressions. Thus, different communities experiencing similar ecological conflicts can share educational, legal, organizational, and other informational resources as well as collaborate in different ways.

This special issue of *Ecozon@* seeks to engage the power of comparative, collaborative critique across continents in problematizing the geopolitics of globalized capitalism. We seek to draw visibility to what Jennifer Wenzel, dialoguing with Gayatri Spivak and Tim Ingold, has called "subaltern planetary perspectives". These challenge the neoliberal concept of the globe as a virtual space designed to dismantle all borders to the smooth flow of capital while sequestering human and nonhuman bodies into different kinds of enclosures. As Wenzel queries,

Can we hear the phrase "global capitalism" in ideological as well as spatial terms: not only as a capitalism that spans the entire earth (or aspires to) but also one that depends on a certain idea of the earth as a globe? In an anti-capitalist, decolonizing, deconstructive reversal of such thinking, "planetary" would aim to reveal and undermine the hegemony of the global: refusing to cede to capitalism the impulse toward totality, but instead thinking totality otherwise, to rethink what it means for the earth to have a shape like its own, and to be a home for all. (21)

At the same time, this work of "thinking totality otherwise" is particularly delicate; it runs the risk of reinforcing what it attempts to dismantle through reincorporation into the Western tradition of humanist universalism. As DeLoughrey, Didur, and Carrigan point out in the introduction to *Global Ecologies*, there is a real danger in "the 'over-worlding' of postcolonial texts and contexts whereby social and ecological anxieties are projected onto the indigenous or Global South" (4). Indeed, this was one of the methodological issues that Franco Moretti confronted in his seminal reformulation of "World Literature," in which he advocated a change in critical focus away from nationalistic philologies—the search for ur-texts and national idioms—towards "distant reading," a technique designed to make visible the systematicity of the viral spread of capitalist ideologies, forms, and practices. The abstraction of distant reading, however, necessarily generates a sense that it reproduces the very totalizing/totalitarian ideology that it seeks to expose. Moretti addresses this issue via Roberto Schwartz's notion of "misplacement": if the novel, as the iconic form of bourgeois self-representation, both embodied and registered the spread of capitalism, the aesthetic "cracks" that appeared between the totalizing form itself, the local plotlines (social representation), and authorial agency (the position of the author with respect to both the form and plot) expose the traumatic social transformations that were occurring with the implementation of successive forms of capitalism.<sup>14</sup> The specificity of these "cracks" thereby undermines the sense of

<sup>14</sup> Moretti builds from Schwartz's Lukacsian assertion that "forms are the abstract of specific social relations" (qtd. in Moretti 65).

capitalism as a global "human" condition conveyed by the novel as a homogeneous "universal" form.

Subsequent scholars such as Sharae Deckard and Michael J. Niblett have engaged this formulation from an ecocritical point of view vis-a-vis Jason W. Moore's critique of capitalism as a world-making machine that fundamentally and simultaneously transforms societies and environments. Drawing on Michael Löwy's formulation of irrealism, Niblett advocates reading for these "cracks"—now irruptions of the unreal that contrast with and contradict the novel's roots in realism (that is, the "practical" world as perceived by the capitalist subject)—as evidences of socioecological revolutions, shifts in world-making regimes. In this formulation, irrealism appears as the indirect representation of the traumas provoked by these socioecological revolutions (Niblett 21). Precisely because of its relationship to the rise of the capitalist world ecology, therefore, the novel is a privileged form for mapping the spread of capitalism as well as its traumatic socioecological effects. Of course, one could say the same of film, which until the advent of digital media was produced almost exclusively by wealthy individuals and corporations due to its high production and distribution costs. On the other hand, less monetized forms of cultural production—poetry, performance art, *testimonio*, raw video—tend to play more clearly defined roles in portraying those "subaltern planetary perspectives" that contest directly the system of global representation and its virtual "pragmatic realities."

Like Șerban Văetiși, we advocate a transatlantic perspective deriving from below, from the shared strategies of resistance of those who have been exploited in colonial and transnational neocolonial projects.<sup>15</sup> We are looking for something akin to Spivak and Wenzel's planetary perspective as a counterhegemonic alternative to the global, but attuned to the specific, translocal voices, patterns of movement, and socioecological transformations in the South Atlantic Basin. As a methodology for cultural criticism, this transatlantic approach works to find a middle ground—the translocal—between the distant reading which Moretti advocates in making literature (and film) visible as part of the capitalist world-ecology and the nationalistic close reading that draws out what is singular to the national subject. In reality, this is a false opposition, since nationalistic close reading more often than not lends itself to Ericka Beckman's modernizing "capital fictions"—that is, the capitalistic development fantasies that disrupt social and ecological relationships at the local level, generating the conditions for the commodification of people, cultural production, and environments within national and transnational economic circuits.<sup>16</sup> This occurs because the liberal state has typically viewed capitalism as an instrument for the construction of national unity; in this foundational fiction, the idealized national citizen is envisioned as an autonomous, entrepreneurial subject.

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<sup>15</sup> In "Global Development and Local Communities: Toward a Post-Developmental Paradigm of Transatlantic Studies," Văetiși advocates a critical geopolitics involving translocal alliances.

<sup>16</sup> See the introduction to Beckman's *Capital Fictions*.



In this sense, nationalistic close reading often reproduces the fictions that underpin the capitalist world-ecology, while a transversal, comparative reading reveals not only the fictionality of nationalistic narratives, but also that what is purportedly national singularity is more often than not a variation on global capital forms that have emerged from particular historical regimes of commodification.<sup>17</sup> The articles included in this special issue analyze the cultural production of the South Atlantic, looking to draw out what is specifically transatlantic within what Moretti calls the capitalist "system of variations"; at the same time, they scrutinize those variations for the "cracks" in the fictions of capitalism (Moretti 64).

This comparative approach does not allow one to read these aesthetic cracks in capitalistic forms as stylistic failings that indicate incomplete modernization, but rather as fissures within the capitalist world ecology itself. It is through those cracks that what has been suppressed, the reverse of the capitalist world-ecology, reemerges as something that can no longer be purely local, if such a thing ever existed autonomously, but that nevertheless reinstates the counterhegemonic force of the local. In this sense, the translocal emerges as a system of common differences across geographical areas; these commonalities do not arise from an internal logic of sameness (the variational logic of neoliberal multiculturalism within the invariability of capital accumulation and cultural consumerism), but rather as shared resistances against the homogeneity of commodification. It is the commodity itself—as a variational form—that generates the commonalities between radically different bodies in the process of commodification, but the materiality of those bodies necessarily exceeds full appropriation, thereby preserving difference within the structure of commonality. Shared patterns of difference and resistance thus emerge in all points along the commodity circuit.

For this reason, local socioecological practices and imaginaries cannot help but emerge onto a stage that is planetary. In the digital era in particular all local practices are potentially translocal. On the one hand, the moment these practices are filmed and uploaded to Facebook or Youtube, they are commodities that bring in advertising revenue from a potentially global viewership; in this sense, there has been a near total commodification of representation. On the other hand, however, under globalization any local form of representation cannot be read as other than what Wenzel terms "scenes of world-imagining from below, a topos wherein marginalized literary characters or documentary subjects situate their own precarious local condition within a broader, transnational context" (20). The synchronicity of the local cracks within global representation and the coordination between them politicizes the translocal, creating the conditions for the emergence

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<sup>17</sup> This becomes quite clear when we think of the roles of sugar and cattle in Latin American nationalisms, for example. During the postcolonial period, a large proportion of Latin American and Caribbean nations constructed nationalistic identities and associated performative cultural practices (dance, film, food, literature, music) around variations on the figure of the *vaquero* or the sugarcane plantation worker of African descent.



of socio-ecological cosmopolitics, to borrow Isabelle Stengers's term for describing the political force of agential consortia that depend on alliances between diverse human and non-human actants. In contrast with what Wenzel describes as the "Apollonian view from high above the earth and the highminded cosmopolitanism often associated with that perspective" embraced by neoliberal capitalistic planning processes, cosmopolitics are "dirty," that is, they are grounded, impure, unhygienic (Wenzel 20). In this way, the "cracks" in hegemonic forms of representation converge with counterhegemonic self-representation, not only to disrupt the ideologies that underpin the modern, capitalist world ecology and the unsustainable socioecological forms that it produces, but also to suggest and implement alternatives.

Rebecca Jarman's essay on "Bolivarian Landslides? Ecological Disasters, Political Upheavals, and (Trans)National Futures in Contemporary Venezuelan Culture" examines the ways in which Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez's regime used literal cracks within the socio-ecological landscape—the 1999 Vargas landslides—to implement and sustain his political program, portraying the disaster as a propitious revolutionary event. However, the regime's totalitarian imposition of a homogenous national identity and the reliance on commodity exports within the neoliberal global economy stymied the possibilities for the creation of a "post-capitalist" and "post-catastrophic" order capable of creating a sustainable subject, a thesis that Jarman develops through analyzing representations of childhood in Juan Carlos Méndez Guédez's novel *Una tarde con campanas* and Marité Ugás's film *El chico que miente*. Ironically, she argues, it is the displacement of people affected by the disaster to Madrid that permits them to imagine a sustainable future in which humans live within, not beyond nature. Inverting this approach to the translocal, John Trevathan's "Submergence: On Transatlantic Ecocriticism, Islands and Archipelagos" deploys the trope of the archipelago to connect the colonial and dictatorial aquatic histories that affected Caribbean islands as well as deserted (or submerged) Spanish rural towns. Trevathan argues that Caribbean and Iberian regions—like archipelagos—form "insulated" geographies shaped and connected by their geohistorical entanglements of water and capitalist expansional trends. The ecological necrosis triggered by both imperial desires inscribed in Caribbean geographies and Franco's hydroelectric biopolitics that condemned rural towns to insulation and terminal decay can be explored through the liquid poetics of memory found in texts by José Lezama Lima and Francesc Serés, respectively. Taking a more direct approach to the critique of capitalist forms of environmental injustice and encouraging the emergence of posthumanist modes of empathy and ethics of care to resist it, Maryanne L. Leone's essay on "Trans-species Collaborations in Response to Social, Economic, and Environmental Violence in Rosa Montero's *Lágrimas en la lluvia* and *El peso del corazón*" studies two recent futuristic novels by Spanish author Rosa Montero from a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective. She draws on the notion

of slow violence to draw attention to the unequal distribution of the socioecological risks manufactured by capitalist development.

Focusing more broadly on colonial legacies, in “Transatlantic Sertões: The Backlands of Ruy Duarte de Carvalho and Mia Couto,” Victoria Saramago Troianowski examines the circulation and decolonial repurposing of a colonial geographical term in Brazil and Lusophone Africa. For the Portuguese colonizers, “sertão” was used to describe barbarous, inland territories that had not yet been fully territorialized. Saramago discusses how Brazilian authors Euclides da Cunha and Guimarães Rosa reappropriated the term for the postcolonial project of constructing hybrid national identities. In their writing, the sertão becomes a space of creative possibility. Following Guimarães, African authors Duarte and Couto engage the term in a decolonial way. Since it had disappeared from common usage in Mozambique and Angola, it lost its colonial connotations and alluded only to creative possibilities for subjective engagement with the savannah environment. In a similar vein, Anne-Laure Bonvalot’s essay on “La guerra de los mundos en algunas ficciones del Antropoceno: Agonística ambiental y poéticas de la habitabilidad” looks for a decolonial aesthetic for the Anthropocene, analyzing three 21<sup>st</sup>-century novels published in Angola, Brazil, and Spain. These socio-ecological narratives from the Southern Atlantic region deconstruct fictions of capitalism while proposing decolonial ways to relate to human and nonhuman others.

Carlos Fonseca Suárez’s essay on “Viral Events: Epidemiology, Ecology, and the Outbreak of Modern Sovereignty” proposes an innovative, ecocritical reading of the Haitian revolution and the rise of modern concepts of republican sovereignty through the figure of the epidemic. Fonseca Suárez argues that the simultaneous, viral spread of mosquito-born yellow fever and the practice of mesmerism or “animal magnetism” led to a reconceptualization of sovereignty as residing within the multitude, as an assemblage of bodies interconnected precisely through the rhizomatic spread of material affects and practices. Working from a similar principle, Palmar Álvarez-Blanco mobilizes decolonial theories and practices that contest hegemonic neocolonial and capitalist modes of organizing knowledge and understanding learning. Álvarez-Blanco’s “‘Matrices de aprendizaje’ emancipadoras. OVNI (Observatorio de Video no Identificado) y el videoactivismo” proposes that a decolonial, decentralized, transnational, collaborative, and inclusive videoactivism could be a powerful convivial tool for epistemological decolonization and practical resistance.

## Conclusion

Our hope is that this special issue contributes to a more diverse understanding of Atlantic socio-ecological discourses and movements beyond the dominant North Atlantic monopoly on meaning-making and its totalizing

descriptions of modernity. We believe that re-imagining the Atlantic from decolonial ecocritical perspectives and from the locus of enunciation of South Atlantic geographies, bodies, and epistemologies beyond euromimesis can be intellectually stimulating and politically relevant. Our intention is not to replace the dominant North Atlantic descriptions of modernity for other totalizing narratives, but rather to open the floor to nuanced and complex ecocritical explorations of the South Atlantic in order to contribute to the ongoing postcolonial global ecocritical debate. We concur with Benita Sampedro Vizcaya that the Atlantic should “allow itself to be theorized persuasively, from its different loci, but should probably not—and perhaps cannot—be defined, or confined, in any totalizing way” (919).

The contributions to this special issue read South Atlantic cultural manifestations as privileging aesthetics of interdependency, “systemic narratives,”<sup>18</sup> and stories of relatedness, to challenge the dominant imaginary that promotes teleological readings, neoliberal fantasies, hyperbolic individualism, and ideologies of disconnection. A diverse ecology of knowledges (decolonial, posthumanist, postcapitalist, feminist) is mobilized in these essays to contest the boring, unjust, and destructive monoculture of capitalist modernity and its hubristic (colonial and neocolonial) ideology of death. Several of the essays included here not only provide a corrective to North Atlantic technocratic environmental hegemony and its proverbial blindness with respect to ongoing catastrophic material and semiotic realities—namely, global power asymmetries, colonial structural legacies, persistent neocolonial inertias, and the disturbing inequality at the root of the ecological crisis—but also propose alternative ways of reading, learning, listening, relating to others (humans and nonhumans), and being in the world. The conditions of possibility for living well depend on the collective and collaborative cultivation of more and more of these alternative seeds as well as the massive dissemination of their decolonial *naturecultural* diversities. Otherwise, the “cruel optimism” (Berlant) ingrained in the capitalist world-ecology will continue promising limitless material growth and synthetic happiness while delivering manufactured disaster, ecological collapse, unnecessary suffering, constant dissatisfaction, massive extinctions, environmental refugees, unacceptable exploitation, social corrosion, disturbing inequalities, and the media celebration of the inflated egos of madmen with no capacity for empathy.

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<sup>18</sup> See Prádanos’ “Writing an Engaged Novel”.

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

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## **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.<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> That the 1999 Vargas landslides

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<sup>1</sup> 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*.

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup> 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.

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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).

<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup> 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

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<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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

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<sup>6</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup>, Chávez announced 342 known fatalities, which four days later had become 20,000 in another government statement.

<sup>7</sup> 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).<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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

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<sup>8</sup> 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?*.

<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

### 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

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

<sup>11</sup> 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).

<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.

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<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup> 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*.<sup>15</sup> 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

<sup>14</sup> See the first chapter of Berlant's *The Queen of America*.

<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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

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<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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

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<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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

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<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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## 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).<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> “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.).<sup>2</sup> 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.)<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>3</sup> “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

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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)<sup>4</sup>

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

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<sup>4</sup> "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).<sup>5</sup>

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)<sup>6</sup>

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,

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<sup>5</sup> “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).

<sup>6</sup> “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).<sup>7</sup> 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).<sup>8</sup> 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).<sup>9</sup>

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

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

<sup>8</sup> “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).

<sup>9</sup> 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).<sup>10</sup> 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)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “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).

<sup>11</sup> “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).<sup>12</sup> 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 “archipelagos”, 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

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<sup>12</sup> “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).<sup>13</sup> Through poetic creation, *sobrenaturaleza* or *contranaturaleza* might replace nature with an alternative composition. In *La cantididad hechizada*, *sobrenaturaleza* 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).<sup>14</sup> 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

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

<sup>14</sup> “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).<sup>15</sup> 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).<sup>16</sup> 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

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

<sup>16</sup> "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).<sup>17</sup> 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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<sup>17</sup> “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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## **Trans-species Collaborations in Response to Social, Economic, and Environmental Violence in Rosa Montero's *Lágrimas en la lluvia* and *El peso del corazón*<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses Iberian ecocritical approaches and cultural responses to ecological degradation through an examination of Rosa Montero's futuristic novels *Lágrimas en la lluvia* (2011) and its sequel *El peso del corazón* (2015). In these works, contaminated natural resources, cloning, and teleportation for interplanetary travel contribute to new social hierarchies, existential crises, and heightened xenophobia in Europe, now part of the United States of the Earth. This study places particular emphasis on the novels' criticisms of a North-South divide, in which the use and distribution of natural resources reflects the inequitable burden of environmental contamination and economic exploitation on the world's southern zones. Montero's novels posit that interspecies alliances across different geographical regions respond to these inequities. In this analysis, Rob Nixon's ecocritical work on slow environmental violence, Spanish economist Amaia Pérez Orozco's writings on feminist economics and collaborative care, and the theory and activism of various ecofeminists underscore Montero's critique of a global economic system that exploits the environment and the marginalized. These theorists and activists argue that social justice, sustainability, and a non-materialist conception of well-being must replace the dominant androcentric approaches to economics and to social relations, which foster growing inequity and environmental contamination.

*Keywords:* ecocriticism, ecofeminism, feminist economics, slow violence, Rosa Montero, Spanish narrative.

### **Resumen**

Este trabajo hace hincapié en acercamientos ecocríticos y respuestas culturales a la degradación ecológica a través de las novelas futuristas de Rosa Montero *Lágrimas en la lluvia* (2011) y la secuela *El peso del corazón* (2015). En estas obras, los recursos naturales contaminados, la clonación, y el teletransporte interplanetario contribuyen a nuevas jerarquías sociales, crisis existenciales y un aumento en la xenofobia en Europa, que ya es parte de los Estados Unidos de la Tierra. Este estudio pone énfasis en la crítica que llevan a cabo estas novelas de una división norte-sur en que el uso y la distribución de los recursos naturales reflejan la carga desigual de la contaminación medioambiental y la explotación económica de las zonas periféricas del mundo. Las novelas de Montero proponen que las alianzas entre especies a través de diversas regiones geográficas responden a dichas desigualdades. En este análisis, la obra ecocrítica de Rob Nixon sobre la violencia medioambiental, los estudios de la economista española Amaia Pérez Orozco sobre económica feminista y cuidado colaborativo, y la teoría y el activismo ecofeministas subrayan la crítica de Montero a un sistema económico global que explota el medio ambiente y a los marginados. Estos teóricos y activistas proponen que la justicia social, la sostenibilidad de la vida y una concepción no materialista del bienestar deben reemplazar los acercamientos androcéntricos dominantes en la economía y las relaciones sociales que animan una creciente desigualdad social y contaminación medioambiental.

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*Palabras clave:* ecocrítica, ecofeminismo, económica feminista, violencia lenta, Rosa Montero, narrativa española.

In concert with this issue dedicated to transatlantic ecocriticism, my study explores the literature of Spanish writer Rosa Montero along with several ecocritical scholars from Spain as well as some from North America to contribute to the growing interest in Iberian literary and cultural studies in the environmental humanities.<sup>2</sup> As Carmen Flys Junquera notes, ecocritical analyses not only study representations of the natural environment but also the complexity of human and non-human interactions, ethical obligations, and alternative, sustainable responses (309–10). While critics already have affirmed Rosa Montero's engagement with socioenvironmental issues, the close readings in this essay show that *Lágrimas en la lluvia* (2011) and *El peso del corazón* (2015) urge the present day reader to consider not only the compounding ecological degradation of today's dominant growth economics, but also an ecocritical ethical response that affirms the interconnectedness of all beings.<sup>3</sup>

Montero's narratives move us into the future, to the year 2109, when contamination, scarce natural resources, cloning, and interplanetary travel contribute to the creation of new social hierarchies, heightened xenophobia, a starker north-south contrast, and a deeper segregation of the poor. Montero situates Spain as part of the privileged northern hemisphere, but also emphasizes marginalized groups within this southern European space. Although these novels present a myriad of themes worth discussing, this study will focus on two aspects. It will examine criticisms of north-south and south-south divides in which the use and distribution of natural resources reflect the inequitable burden of environmental contamination and economic exploitation on the world's southern zones, as well as on minority groups, women, and children. The essay also will focus on transnational and interspecies responses to ecological, social, political,

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<sup>2</sup> Luis I. Prádanos provides an overview of the development of ecocriticism and degrowth studies in Spain in "Decrecimiento" (77–79). See also Carmen Flys Junquera for a review of ecocriticism's development and the advent of ecocritical studies in non-Anglo literature. *La imaginación hipotecada: Aportaciones al debate sobre la precariedad del presente* (Álvarez-Blanco and Gómez López-Quiñones, eds.) connects environmental issues to societal insecurities and democratic participation in Spain (Lenore). In *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*, scholars explore the relationship between environmentalism and animal rights, tourism, and the Franco dictatorship, among other issues (Beilin and Viestenz, eds.).

<sup>3</sup> Rosa Montero (b. 1951, Madrid) has written for the newspaper *El País* since 1976 and has published extensively in the fictional and non-fictional realms. Her narratives address women's resistance to and reshaping of societal expectations, migration, globalization, climate change, and memory ("Rosa Montero"; "Rosa Montero, Página Oficial"). She is an animal rights' activist and has voiced opposition to bullfighting (see Beilin, "Introduction," Chapters 5–6).

and economic crises.<sup>4</sup> The analysis of the spatial and social distribution of environmental degradation will draw on Rob Nixon's theory of slow environmental violence, Amaia Pérez Orozco's arguments on refocusing economic measures on the sustainability of life, and ecofeminism's emphasis on the interdependence of all species and the mutual oppressions of women and the environment. With the female protagonist, detective, and android Bruna Husky and a host of marginalized characters, Montero's *Lágrimas en la lluvia* and *El peso del corazón* suggest that a collaborative model of social, economic, and ecological justice must oppose a paradigm of well-being based on continual economic expansion that in the end will fail to support all life forms.<sup>5</sup>

Before discussing ecocriticism in Montero's works, it is helpful to have a broader view of the story that the author constructs in *Lágrimas en la lluvia* and its sequel *El peso del corazón*, which takes place six months later. In this imagined future, the nations and transnational alliances of today have merged to form the United States of the Earth (*Estados Unidos de la Tierra*, or E.U.T.), a political alliance constituted in the year 2098 in defensive response to the discovery of three extraterrestrial civilizations. In addition to these "new" species, humans have created replicas for particular functions, without consideration for their emotional and intellectual needs. Known as *replicantes*, *reps*, *androides* and *tecnohumanos*, humans believed to control this species until combat and mining replicas rebelled in 2060.<sup>6</sup> Although the sixteen-month *guerra rep* ended in peace accords that granted replicas full civil rights, they continue to face discrimination and supremacist opposition. *Lágrimas* centers on a plot in which adulterated implanted memories cause the replicas to kill androids and humans alike to save children they actually do not have and then to commit suicide. An activist replica group hires Bruna Husky to investigate this conspiracy to augment humans' fear of their species. In *El peso del corazón*, Bruna agrees to work on a case to gain medical care for a ten-year-old girl from the Earth's most contaminated area, the Zone Zero, who suffers from radiation-induced damage despite a fifty-year ban on nuclear energy.

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<sup>4</sup> Katarzyna Beilin, together with Sainath Suryanarayanan, also notes that speciesism is a central concern in *Lágrimas en la lluvia*, and locates this novel within a broader discussion of the support in Spain for genetically modified foods and a bioeconomy. Prádanos includes *Lágrimas en la lluvia* in his study of ecocriticism and the critique of global capitalism in three Spanish science fictional works from 2011. While my analysis intersects with Prádanos' on several points, my study asserts that Montero proposes a cooperative socioeconomic model as an antidote to the neoliberal economic expansion and ecological homogeneity that Prádanos also notes ("Decrecimiento"). Lastly, in the final editing, I learned that Flys Junquera and I simultaneously have been presenting on ecofeminism and these fictional works by Montero. She has two articles in process.

<sup>5</sup> Environmentalism first appears in Montero's narrative work in her 2008 *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo*, where an older marginalized female scientist comments on societal indifference to climate change and the use of scientific developments to destroy life. In this novel, as in the two studied here, gendered marginalization, colonialism, racism, poverty, and environmental concerns intertwine. For an ecocritical perspective on this novel, the reader might consult Prádanos, "Towards a Euro-Mediterranean" and "La degradación."

<sup>6</sup> Beilin, with Suryanarayanan, asserts that Montero expresses support of science's power to bioengineer responses to climate change, while also critiquing a lack of ethical consideration for the bioproducts of human's scientific endeavors (253).

Husky discovers the global centralization of radiation storage and the illegal trade of radiation between the E.U.T. and the floating territory Labari, which was founded during the Robotic Wars for humans and runs on nuclear energy. In both novels, Bruna Husky works to sustain lives, despite her claim of indifference to others.

In line with current feminist ecocritical thought, Montero's novels examine synergies between the exploitation of the environment and oppressions of women, the poor, and minority groups, and emphasize the interdependence of all life.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, these narratives assert the worth of human and non-human entities in and of themselves, not as mere resources for growth, but highlighting the importance of bio and cultural diversity to the health of the planet, and local and transnational responses to environmental distress and concomitant economic exploitation. While earlier ecofeminist scholars in North America proposed an essentialist association of women with nature, ecofeminists since the 1990s largely have rejected the notion that women have a biologically closer relationship to nature or a greater responsibility to address environmental damage than men.<sup>8</sup> The relational ethics of care that ecofeminists such as Karen Warren and Val Plumwood suggest contests androcentric environmentalism and a hierarchical moral organization of human over non-human life. Plumwood urges "dialogical and communicative relationships of sensitivity, negotiation and mutual adaptation" (169-70). In Warren's words, "ecofeminism makes a central place for the values of care, love, friendship, trust, and appropriate reciprocity" (33). This affective perspective brings into focus that ecological damage negatively impacts all life forms, yet the consequences are not evenly distributed (Puleo 53-64, 74-81). An ethics of care must be more than appreciation; the relationship must have "practical implications for the welfare of the one who is cared for" (King 92). These characteristics are present in the interspecies relations in Montero's novels, which emphasize mutual care and adaptations across species, gender, age, and geographical zones in response to environmental degradation.

For Spanish feminist economist Amaia Pérez Orozco and others, reciprocity forms the basis of an alternative paradigm to the dominant androcentric, market-based economy, in which human beings depend on the market to fulfill needs and material wants, with nature at the service of ever-increasing production and consumption. Instead "social provision" shifts the emphasis to the issue of how to equitably distribute resources to provide for needs, and thus sustain life, in a realm

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<sup>7</sup> Ecofeminists also recognize that classism, racism, and colonialism and neocolonialism shape these exploitations (Gaard and Murphy 2-5).

<sup>8</sup> French feminist Françoise D'Eaubonne, who introduced the concept of ecofeminism in 1974, contended that patriarchy encouraged consumerism and the production of unnecessary goods, while women's control over reproduction would lessen the impact on the environment (Puleo 32-33, 36-37). For an overview of the trajectory of ecofeminism, see Alicia Puleo's chapter "Los ecofeminismos en su diversidad" (29-85). Greta Gaard, however, cautions against histories that adhere to the feminist waves, which Puleo does in part, arguing that this metaphor omits the work of ecofeminists of color and of the developing world (646).

of co-dependence among humans and in relation to the natural world.<sup>9</sup> This economic alternative focused on care provision values unremunerated contributions, often ignored by a traditional market economy, and thus, Pérez Orozco asserts, better accounts for gender and ethnic inequalities (“Estrategias feministas” 104–6). Montero’s novels portray economic inequity as an enduring characteristic of life on Earth, made more acute by the visible and less visible ecological costs of the current global market-based economy.

### **Projecting the Future of Slow Environmental Violence and the Corporatization of Resources**

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon argues that while we more readily address sensational forms of environmental destruction, we must pay attention to “slow violence,” which often has an immediate impact on the world’s poorest inhabitants (2). In essence, Nixon suggests a re-evaluation of the very notion of violence in order to raise attention to the environmental degradation that unfolds slowly and thus may go unnoticed. His study looks at writer-activists, many from the global South, who use representational strategies to “offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen,” facilitate an “apprehension” of environmental threats and damage, and humanize and highlight who is impacted and how (15). Montero’s writing has a similar agenda.

Montero’s novels exemplify a cultural response to the negative ecological impact not only on the Iberian Peninsula, but also on the southern hemisphere of the economic, environmental, and political policies of Spain, of Northern Europe, and of global alliances. Set in the not so distant future of the early twenty-second century, with references that clearly situate the stories in Madrid, Montero’s Bruna Husky-narratives imaginatively illustrate effects on the future environment of contemporary consumptive behaviors and thus urge her readers to consider their own role in this damage and in the uneven access to sustainable habitats. *Lágrimas en la lluvia* and *El peso del corazón* posit that by 2109, environmental depredation has further limited natural resources and reduced the inhabitability of the Earth, with severe consequences for the poor and marginal species. Interlaced texts from the Central Archive of the United States of the Earth (the future web, now controlled by the global government) inform us that events of the past, our present, have caused the environmental deterioration. Spanish economist Joan Martínez-Alier argues that economic models focused exclusively on GDP fail to account for how the loss of direct access to natural resources due to corporate cooption and high levels of consumption in the north economically impact the rural poor (62–63). In this vein, Montero’s novels allude to the continuation and even increase in the suspect alliances between conservationists and capitalists in

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<sup>9</sup> “[E]l ‘aprovisionamiento social’” (“Estrategias feministas” 106).



an advancing commoditization of water, air, plants and animals, partnerships that often exclude local people (Anguelovski and Martínez-Alier 168–69). In Montero's narrated future, the means of access to clean water has changed to a card inserted into a reader, but as today one still pays for this necessity. Nonetheless, water's exacerbated scarcity, exemplified in vapor showers to reduce usage, has increased the cost and decreased access. Moreover, air pollution has created a permanent haze around the sun and, like today, impacts all areas of the Earth; yet, the future global government has created distinct geographical areas, the Green zones and the Zone Zero, distinguished by their respective level of contamination and separating those who can pay for clean(er) air from those who cannot. While professionals who provide services in these hyper-contaminated zones receive double their salary and may stay for no more than a year to minimize negative repercussions for their health, the Earth's marginalized citizens are forced to migrate to "one of those supercontaminated, marginal sectors" in "the desperate and poisonous atmosphere of those wretched holes" (*Tears* 57).<sup>10</sup> The southern region excludes the poor from life-sustaining natural resources in the north.

This hemispheric division is described in *Lágrimas*; yet, it is in *El peso* that Montero makes the north-south ecological and economic inequities most vivid, and suggests transcontinental commonalities and cooperation. If we view Spain as part of the south, then the novel also imagines a differentiation in environmental damage and economic wealth between southern Europe and the southern hemisphere, with Spain being part of the advantaged zone. The opening scene of the sequel takes place in the Zone Zero bordering on the Green zones. At the border control, where Bruna waits in line to leave after investigating a case, a formidable wall, "impenetrable, indestructible, and as hard as a diamond" separates the south from the north and blocks a narrow mountain pass with insurmountable rock formations on each side (*Weight* 2).<sup>11</sup> The news regularly reports that people rush the wall and, while Bruna is there, she witnesses its electric field repel hundreds of men, women, and children as a few make it to the less polluted side. Bruna's comparison to medieval sieges certainly suggests a lack of progress in creating equity in society. Set in the future, this scene reminds the contemporary reader of today's borders that negate rather than create social, environmental, and economic justices. In *Slow Violence*, Nixon notes the global increase in gated communities that separate the ultra poor from the ultra wealthy and that "create the delusion that we can survive long term in a world whose resources are increasingly unshared" (20). Bruna Husky hears automated warnings, in "artificial voices, artificial courtesy and above all the stupid little tone of enthusiasm," that only authorized people may pass to the green side, and she critically observes the deep inequities that undergird this assignation of place in

<sup>10</sup> "[U]no de estos sectores hipercontaminados y marginales" in "la desesperada y venenosa atmósfera del maldito agujero" (*Lágrimas* 71).

<sup>11</sup> "[I]rrrompible y tan duro como un diamante" (*El peso* 12).

“columns of toxic smoke...merging with the gray, contaminated sky that threatened to collapse on top of her head” (*Weight 2*).<sup>12</sup> The wall, built with transparent material to make it less noticeable, but now yellowed and stained as if by urine, stands in symbolic testament to the moral tarnish that this north-south division implies and makes visible a social and spatial exclusion that many wish to ignore.

While in the Zone Zero, Bruna acutely notes the corruption that forms part of a market-driven society in which even the most basic necessity—clean air—is a product for purchase. The detective surmises that a man also waiting to leave the contaminated area must be wealthy, powerful, and involved in some kind of corrupt business transaction for he is wearing the latest model of air purification masks, “elegant, and almost invisible—ultralight and ultraexpensive technology,” and otherwise would not visit this zone (*Weight 3*).<sup>13</sup> Further, while the Supreme Court had prohibited that private companies own and charge for air at the end of *Lágrimas*, giving the reader hope of improved equity in the distribution of natural resources, in *El peso* six months later, the Green zones have imposed a residency tax that effectively excludes the poorest from inhabiting the cleaner north. In Madrid’s former (today’s) city center, temporary housing built after the Robotic Wars now houses the city’s poorest, who live one step from expulsion to the Zone Zero in the hemispheric south. Montero’s narrated future makes this slow ecological damage more perceptible and goes further, positing that increased corporatization of these basic natural resources will lead to greater social segmentation.

The narration makes clear that global corporate interests, with their exploitative practices, have augmented the gravity of environmental deterioration.<sup>14</sup> Both novels reference Texaco-Repsol, an implied merger of the current U.S.-based Texaco Chevron and Madrid-based Repsol. The global company has created a *parque-pulmón* within Madrid’s Retiro Park in which artificial trees clean the air more efficiently than natural ones. In the only urban area in which ironically large publicity billboards are not allowed, signs request silence in order to maintain “an ecological, pure space” in “a type of secular sanctuary: sacred, biologically sustainable zones” (*Weight 23*).<sup>15</sup> Husky voices the hypocrisy of a global entity that augments air pollution and climate change, yet creates fabricated trees that clean the air: “By the great Morlay, the nerve of Texaco-Repsol: having overexploited the planet, the company now pretended to be the high priest of

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<sup>12</sup> “[L]as voces sintéticas, la cortesía sintética y, sobre todo, su estúpido tonillo de entusiasmo”; “Columnas de humo tóxico...se fundían con un cielo congestionado color plomo que amenazaba con derrumbarse sobre su cabeza” (*El peso* 12).

<sup>13</sup> “[E]legante y casi invisible [...] ultraligera y carísima” (*El peso* 13).

<sup>14</sup> Prádanos cites some similar examples in *Lágrimas* of the relationship between the scarcity of resources, their commodification by global firms, and the exploitation of the poor (“Decrecimiento” 82).

<sup>15</sup> “un espacio ecológico y puro”; “zonas sagradas de la sostenibilidad biológica” (*El peso* 36–37).

ecology" (*Weight* 23).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, this corporation's profit-only motives literally mark the bodies of the poor. Companies such as Texaco-Repsol advertise their products via "billboard people," humans who wear uniforms in the corporations' colors and screens that continually announce products and cannot be silenced (*Tears* 27).<sup>17</sup> These individuals work for miserly pay fifteen hours a day and, because most establishments will not allow them to enter, circulate in the streets "like lost souls" (*Tears* 27), socially and economically ostracized.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, this work at Texaco-Repsol is coveted because people receive breathable air as part of their compensation and thus can stay in the planet's less contaminated northern zone. As Bruna Husky observes upon seeing a human ad, technohumans are discriminated against but the greater discrimination is "that of the powerful against the wretched" (*Tears* 48).<sup>19</sup> Nixon observes three characteristics of neoliberalism: the greater divide between rich and poor; the greater burden on the poor of ecological damage; and, the greater potential for companies to avoid responsibility for ecological damage in a transnational context (46). As illustrated, Montero's *Lágrimas en la lluvia* and *El peso del corazón* expose the negative impact of neoliberalism on the environment and on access to resources in a manner disproportionately detrimental to the geographic south and to the poor in all areas of the world including Spain.

### Slow Violence on Women and Children North and South

Indian activist and scholar Vandana Shiva turned attention within ecofeminism to the negative impact of neoliberal globalization on rural populations in former colonized nations of the global South and on women and children.<sup>20</sup> Shiva is speaking of India and Asia, so the connection to literature from Spain is more tenuous; yet, her focus on the exploitative relationship between northern and southern regions and its impact on women and children illuminate Montero's representation of this dynamic. Shiva characterizes the accumulation of capital and a commerce-driven economy as another form of colonization, a "maldevelopment" (5) that "sets in motion a process of exploitation, inequality, injustice, and violence" (6) serving industrialized areas and the broader capitalist system (1-9). According to Shiva, women in rural cultures are especially effected because they are not only the poorest, but also the main providers (42).

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<sup>16</sup> "Por el gran Morlay, qué desfachatez tenían los de la Texaco-Repsol: después de haber esquilado el planeta, ahora aparentaban ser los sumos sacerdotes de la ecología" (*El peso* 37).

<sup>17</sup> "[S]eres anuncio" (*Lágrimas* 40).

<sup>18</sup> "[C]omo almas en pena" (*Lágrimas* 40).

<sup>19</sup> "[L]a de los poderosos contra los pringados" (61).

<sup>20</sup> Shiva's ecological perspective derives from Indian cosmology, in which the feminine is the originator of life, but the feminine and the masculine, as well as the human and non-human, together create the dynamic energy and inseparable unity that is nature (78-82). Puleo observes that Shiva brought a much-needed postcolonial perspective to ecofeminism, yet idealizes the situation of pre-colonialized women (70).

The contamination of the character Gabi in *El peso del corazón* best exemplifies Shiva's connection between environmental injustice, spatial placement, poverty, and gender, while also addressing sexual violence. When Bruna witnesses a guard at the border attempting to throw a young girl back into the Zone Zero, she takes legal responsibility for her. Bruna learns that Gabi Orlov is an orphan and was born in 2099, which makes her ten years old. She straddles the north and south, for although she lives in the southern hemisphere, she is from Dzerzhinsk, Russia. Though the narration provides no description or commentary on this city, Montero's election of Dzerzhinsk for Gabi's birthplace serves as a reminder of the toxic accumulation of chemical pollutants over time and the prioritization of industry over human and ecological welfare. This city of almost 245,000 people was a center for chemical production and manufactured chemical weapons during the Soviet period. Approximately 300,000 tons of waste from 190 different chemicals were dumped in Dzerzhinsk and the neighboring region between 1930 and 1998, with lasting effects. Dioxins and phenol are present in the water supply at thousands of times above recommended levels and increased levels of cancers and other diseases have contributed to a reported life expectancy of 42 years for men and 47 for women. In 2007, almost one-quarter of the population worked at chemical plants. The Guinness Book of World Records named Dzerzhinsk the most polluted city in the world in this same year and the city still figured on the Blacksmith Institute and Green Cross's list of top ten polluted places in 2013 ("The World's Worst 2013" 15, 33).

Through the character Gabi, "corporeal memory" contests the transnational government's desired amnesia of local and global chemical and nuclear contamination.<sup>21</sup> An infected bite that Gabi perpetrates on Bruna's arm to protest her tutelage leads them to the hospital, where the doctors check Gabi for diseases common in the polluted Zone Zero. The hospital instead discovers that the young girl has been exposed continuously to high levels of radiation, which will lead to leukemia and her death in five to ten years. The bacterial infection that Gabi passes on to Bruna pales in comparison to the toxic burden that government-supported nuclear industrial programs have imposed on Gabi. In narrating her contamination, Montero critiques the effectiveness of nuclear accords and highlights the long-term threat to life that nuclear energy, weaponry, and technology pose. More than fifty years ago, in the narrated future of this novel, the planet's nations, still not unified at that point, agreed to end the production and use of nuclear energy after disasters occurred in France and in Russia, and solar and tidal power had developed sufficiently to replace nuclear energy. Nuclear weaponry also was abandoned, though more powerful weapons were built. As required by the Minister of Industry, Sustainable Development, and Energy, the hospital reports Gabi's radioactivity; however, the erasure of the report suggests

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<sup>21</sup> Nixon discusses "corporeal memory" of toxic contamination in his analysis of Indra Sinha's *Animal People*. See chapter 1.

that a powerful entity wants to repress this evidence of sustained environmental damage and afflicted communities. In effect, Bruna learns that national governments had agreed to bury the world's nuclear waste in cylinders in a remote, uninhabitable area of western Finland, named Onkalo, and then erase all signs of the secret site in anticipation of human greed and curiosity. The growing strength of ultranationalist terrorist groups and the past robbery of atomic material during the Robotic Wars, however, hastened the transfer of nuclear waste to this location and the engineers postponed sealing off the entrance in order to test radiation levels. Onkalo is not traceable via GPS and the few references on the Central Archive cite Finnish tales of a fictional hell-like place. In a story of political corruption, the Minister of Industry, Sustainable Development, and Energy has been selling radioactivity to the independent floating territory Labari, while two intermediaries decide to negotiate on their own, and the Labari government attempts to take control of the nuclear depository. Moreover, the Minister has been selling radioactive waste to ultranationalist and religious groups in the northern and southern extremities of the planet, and the careless transfer of this waste has exposed the recipient areas to high levels of radiation, including Gabi's natal city Dzerzhinsk. A former engineer on the project notes the invisible, yet formidable ecological threat: "You can't see radiation or feel it or smell it. But it's capable of ending life on the planet" (276).<sup>22</sup> If nuclear contamination threatens all life, in Montero's novel the young and poor of north and south disproportionately face the toxic burden and violence that transnational government officials and profit-motivated men produce.

Montero's narration gives form to this invisible waste and to the actual construction of an underground facility named Onkalo on the desolate Olkiluoto Island, Finland, which, like Montero's narration, engineers plan to seal, leave unmarked, and let nature cover over time (Heffernan). Such a plan places the natural process of plant-life growth in collusion with human activity that ends life and drastically alters the natural world. In concordance with Nixon's imperative to expose slow ecological violence, Gabi's toxic body testifies to the longitudinal accumulation of radioactive waste, the undisclosed disposal plan, and the improbability of safe disposal today and in the future. Her young body also alerts the reader to the confluence of environmental toxicity and gender injustice, for her vagina is scarred from a rape that occurred either in her polluted birthplace or in the Zone Zero of the ultra-polluted south.

### **Cooperative Sustainability and Socioenvironmental Justice**

Alliances that develop in *Lágrimas en la lluvia* and *El peso del corazón* among beings of different species and geographical zones suggest that a care-

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<sup>22</sup> "Su radioactividad no se ve, no se siente, no se huele. Pero es capaz de acabar con la vida del planeta" (*El peso* 330).



centered relational paradigm provides the foundation for ecological, economic, political, and social sustainability. Plumwood's insistence on the development of communicative, reciprocal relationships of care among diverse species to counter anthropocentrism and the othering of the non-human is particularly illuminative for my reading of cooperative sustainability in Montero's texts (169–70). Plumwood recognizes the potential for communication, and thus agency, among all species, and in this way seeks to revise the hierarchal moral scale by which ethicists have devalued non-human life (189–95).

*Lágrimas en la lluvia* and *El peso del corazón* posit that fewer natural resources, newly discovered ecological diversity, and the widening gap between rich and poor fuel the attraction of leaders who promise salvation through social and ecological homogeneity. Suggesting the pernicious potential of biotech, the Cult of Labari constructs a floating territory of semi-artificial bacteria to house a so-called perfect society in which only humans may live. This stratified racist, homophobic, and misogynist society exists within a simulacrum of nature, in an environment of fake sunrises and sunsets, suggesting that the hierarchies in this land are not natural but rather human invention. A loyalist to Labari argues that a society that openly acknowledges discriminations is preferable to a democratic one that denies the existence of these injustices. However, Bruna counters that although these issues exist in the E.U.T., at least its citizens may critique injustices and fight for a more equitable world.

The narration of an occulted war in the extreme north between fundamentalist and nationalist groups who oppose the transnational government dramatizes the suffering of the marginalized while also highlighting social alliances in response to desperate circumstances. Combat androids fulfill their role without conviction and orphaned children, mutilated humans, and hungry dogs must fend for themselves in a bombarded city devoid of resources: “a desolate place that looked more like an unplace” (267).<sup>23</sup> The barren land echoes Nixon's observation that the depletion of natural resources creates stationary displacement, less visible than migration, which “leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable” (19). Amidst local and transnational political, social, and ecological distress, the narrative suggests that people provide for each other in ways that circumvent the official market. A female engineer who had worked at the nuclear storage facility in Onkalo has turned her apartment into a foster home for children, sustaining their lives outside of the formal market. A male merchant in the black market gives children more than the worth of the items they bring him, he says out of pity, yet regardless the valuation takes into account human necessities. These interactions align with Pérez Orozco's rejection of profit-only measures of economic well-being in favor of considering which needs are met and how (“Estrategias feministas” 110). Pérez Orozco also speaks of intermediate spaces that the market does not cover. Montero's ecofeminist narratives differ

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<sup>23</sup> “[U]n lugar desolador que más bien parecía un no lugar” (319).

from Shiva's emphasis on female caregivers and instead posit that the responsibility to care for the Earth and its creatures is shared across genders and species.<sup>24</sup> This activism, which responds to the depletion of resources and its unequal impact on groups with low social power, might be characterized as environmental justice; yet, because these actions are individually realized, Montero's narrations fall short of representing broader environmental or social justice movements, such as those that arose from the 15M protests of 2011 in Spain.

In "New Directions for Ecocriticism," Gaard advocates that feminist ecocriticism "articulate an interspecies focus" by examining how texts depict non-human species and their interactions with humans, whether human superiority is assumed, if non-human beings are passive agents in need of saving or agents in their own right, and if "communalism" or "dominance" are the foundation for "social and ecological relations" (651). The genetically engineered Bruna Husky straddles the human and non-human. In *El peso del corazón*, the protagonist—and we the readers—learn that androids are made in series of twelve to lessen the cost of production. This practice, kept secret from the public, prioritizes monetary calculations over the ethical implications of reducing a life to a mere product. In the vein of feminist economists and of environmental justice, Montero's novel critiques an economic model that does not consider the cost to human (or semi-human) dignity and quality of life. Bruna's desire that her body matter as much as a human one and that others consider her life valuable, represents a larger call to validate the unique contribution of each species to the ecology of existence.

The protagonist's complexity encourages the reader to engage with the technohuman's preoccupations and experiences rather than to see her as a distant other without relation to contemporary human lives. Born with the physical and psychological age of twenty-five and with a life expectancy of only ten, Bruna is acutely aware of her mortality; she repeatedly counts the years, days, and months left to live before she will die of a cancer that ends the life of all technohumans. She eschews emotional attachment because of this short life span, yet develops caring relationships with humans and non-humans alike that supersede human centrality and counter the violence of war and the unsustainable practice of interplanetary mining for which humans designed and fabricated her species.

Montero navigates carefully the proposed care-based vision of community so as not to fall into an essentialist paradigm with this female protagonist and caregiver. The physically strong former soldier reacts quickly when threatened and will kill to protect her and others' lives. In this sense, Montero complicates the association of women with non-violence present in some ecofeminist theory. Moreover, numerous references to Husky's disinterest in domesticity contest the essentialist association of women with domestic work. For Husky, cleaning her

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<sup>24</sup> Fátima Serra-Renobales argues that men figure as positive characters in solidarity with women in Montero's *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* and *Lágrimas en la lluvia* (77-78).

apartment is not as an end in itself but rather a means to prepare her mind for work outside the home (67). Her animalistic sexual desire also counters a traditional feminine image. Beilin, with Suryanarayanan, likens Husky to Donna Haraway's cyborg, whose freedom from the biological and cultural task of mothering and from cultural norms enables her to value all life equally and save life on Earth (250-52). Hard to categorize, Bruna Husky is not domestic yet she repeatedly cares for others.

Bruna Husky disdains close relationships with others and the nurturing traits traditionally assigned to women, yet her thoughts and actions reveal sensitivity to social and ecological justice. In fact, the novels' protagonist embodies many of the aspects that, according to Plumwood, create an ecologically sensitive interspecies ethics, including continuity among, the complexity of, and willingness to communicate with other species. Plumwood also notes the acknowledgement of animality within the self, non-hierarchical difference, and mutual negotiation (194). Continual adjustment to others, and of others to her, characterizes Husky's relationships. Husky recognizes similarities among herself, humans, and non-humans, and she also affirms differences and thus the sovereignty of each being. Her own liminal identity, as human and not human, and her status as protagonist decenter the human in these stories. Moreover, the narration upends the heterosexual norm, stating that, like most humans and technohumans, Husky is not exclusively hetero- or homosexual (*Lágrimas* 122).

Bruna's actions and perspective manifest Pérez Orozco's suggestion to make visible the conflicts between capitalism and sustaining lives and to change the paradigm so that care work receives economic and social recognition as producing value ("Diagnóstico" 140-44). Bruna takes Gabi to the Green zones, as already discussed, and agrees to investigate a case for the aforementioned Minister only because he will give Gabi medical insurance that covers radiation exposure treatment. In addition, Bruna's relationship with Gabi improves the girl's psychological health despite Bruna's admonition to not expect much from her. Very similar to Bruna, Gabi shies away from affective interactions; yet, with gestures that reflect her practice of tying her cherished possessions and in order to show a positive valuation of her care, she makes Bruna a ring of knotted string and knots Bruna's t-shirt.

Bruna, who negates social responsibility for others, finds a permanent home for this ten-year-old with her friend Yiannis, a human who had lost an infant son decades ago and, at the end of the narration, adopts Gabi. Yiannis also takes care of Bruna, frequently checking in on this detective whose work endangers her life. The importance of this reciprocal care for Bruna and Yiannis is evident at the end of *Lágrimas*. Bruna asks Yiannis to partner with her in solving cases and thus gives an economic and social place to this older man who had worked for the Central Archive and whom the government had fired for investigating the plot against technohumans. Upon helping her friend, Bruna focuses on the several years of life

that remain for her rather than her usual existential angst and claims of solitude. Moreover, Yiannis represents a rejection of the neoliberal status quo and a closer affinity with nature, because unlike most humans in this imagined future, Yiannis ages naturally rather than to resort to plastic surgery.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Yiannis uses prize funds that Husky received for informing the public of the nuclear waste site to found One More Step, a political movement dedicated to social and environmental justice. In short, Husky's indignation of the environmental and gendered violence inflicted on Gabi results in north to south relationships (or south to south if we prioritize Spain's southern position in Europe) that improve Gabi's, Yiannis's, and Bruna's lives, as well as the lives of those who will benefit from Yiannis's socio-political activism.

Husky, Yiannis, and Gabi's relationships with each other model the "social provision" Pérez Orozco speaks of and which, as noted earlier, is also exemplified in the care that the female engineer and black market merchant provide in the war-torn northern region. Pérez Orozco emphasizes that, historically, women have participated in the economy but the negation of their presence has supported the false premise of an androcentric masculine-driven economic system. Significantly, Montero's novels take a step further Pérez Orozco's "women's present absence" and her notion that interdependent care provision constitutes citizenship by making visible not only women's presence in the economy, but also by extending this care giving presence to men, semi-humans, and other species.<sup>26</sup>

While the aforementioned examples suggest positive valuations of a reciprocal care crucial to a sustainable society and ecology, in the character of the police inspector Paul Lizard and in Husky's relationship with him, Montero warns that an ethics of care might reinforce traditional male-female roles despite de-emphasizing a growth-focused market society. As the two compete to solve cases, Lizard and Husky distrust, yet also desire each other physically and emotionally. Descriptions of Lizard's large physical size and Bruna's sexual attraction to him intimate her vulnerability to his masculinity. In both novels, Paul is concerned for Bruna's safety and saves her life; yet, Bruna's reticence to accept his assistance and to expose herself emotionally clearly indicate her wariness of dependence on this strong male figure for her care.<sup>27</sup>

*Lágrimas en la lluvia* and *El peso del corazón* present a paradigm of interdependent care that extends to the non-human realm to suggest that the rights and contributions of all beings must be considered as we address social and environmental injustices. Bruna shows a particular sensitivity to a genetic replica of the last polar bear, which lives in a World Exposition pavilion in Madrid. She

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<sup>25</sup> Plastic surgery in the narrated future creates a physiologically homogeneous society (Prádanos, "Decrecimiento" 84).

<sup>26</sup> "[P]resencia ausencia femenina" ("Estrategias feministas" 110-111). See "Amenaza tormenta," 29-31, for a discussion of citizenship centered on sustaining lives.

<sup>27</sup> Serra-Renobales instead asserts that Lizard's protection of Husky exemplifies solidarity and collaboration. Moreover, she observes that their names, both of animals, suggest a common ground that conjoins Husky's force and Lizard's life-giving character (80).

sees Melba when others cannot find her in her artificial Artic environment and she feels her own mortality in this fabricated animal that will suffer the same cancer-driven end as her, yet with an even shorter life span. The promise of “[a]n infinite chain of Melbas down through the ages” (*Tears* 162), all replicas, amplifies Bruna’s angst that her life is not as valued as the life of a human, and that she, like the bear, is not unique, but rather replaceable.<sup>28</sup> From an ecofeminist perspective, the narration suggests a shared oppression between two beings that once had been separate—human and animal, but are connected, both androids. In this sense, *Lágrimas en la lluvia* proposes that one avenue to addressing the current ecological crisis is acknowledgement of the interconnectedness and interdependence of diverse species.

Collaborations among species from different planets geographically extend the care alliances in these novels and highlight the negotiation of relationships with non-hegemonic modes of communication. Husky forms care giving reciprocal relationships with extraterrestrial beings that challenge her sense of superiority over non-human species and lead to mutual emotional and physical sustenance. The extraterrestrial Omaás and Balabís are marginalized, minority residents on Earth, whom humans place in the same taxonomy as themselves, but for whom they invent a new category, “Other Beings” (*Tears* 44). Informally, these beings are called “*bichos*, or creeps,” demarcating a lesser status than humans and technohumans (*Tears* 44).<sup>29</sup> Bruna awakens one morning with a drug- and alcohol-induced hangover, horrified to discover an Omaá in her bed. She initially ignores Maio, who then, seemingly homeless, sits at the door to her building. After some time, Bruna invites Maio to stay with her and together they develop a communicative and mutually beneficial relationship. She learns that because of their intimacy, the Omaá can read her thoughts and she comes to understand that it expresses emotions with changes in body color. Returning to Gaard’s exhortation to critically examine depicted hierarchies in interspecies relations, the non-human Omaá exhibits agency in this relationship of reciprocal care. Bruna does not exclusively help this creature; later in the narration, Maio saves Bruna’s life. Similarly, in both novels, an extraterrestrial pet that Bruna adopts when his owner, an android, is killed also saves Bruna from an attacker. As with Gabi and Maio, Bruna claims that she would be better off without responsibility for the *bubi Bartolo*, from the Omaá civilization, yet she grows fond of it and gives it a home. Moreover, Bruna defends its character when others speak ill of the species. We see Bartolo’s reciprocal affection for Bruna when he excitedly greets her whenever she comes home. Montero’s narratives highlight that the critical sustenance that Bruna and Bartolo, and Bruna and Maio, provide each other forms part of a connected ecological spectrum. Her interactions with these extraterrestrial beings and with humans are negotiations towards mutual understanding.

<sup>28</sup> “[U]na infinita cadena de Melbas en el tiempo” (*Lágrimas* 189).

<sup>29</sup> “[L]os Otros”; “*bichos*” (*Lágrimas* 56).



Montero's narratives suggest that to care for another begets more care in a cooperative spiral that positively values the life of all species. Husky finds a permanent home for the Omaá that results in a partnership with a human whose mutilated body evidences the injustices of a society that places profit and unsustainable resource exploitation above the welfare of beings. To make loan payments for a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Steiner violin, Mirari teleported to another planet to work in the government's mining expeditions, a form of travel that often deforms the body and in her case dissolved the bones in an arm. Mirari's story might be read as a cautionary tale about a consumer society in which desires destroy well-being. Now a violinist with a subpar prosthetic arm, her tale also highlights the stratification of healthcare and the low status of the arts in the neoliberal global economy. Environmental and social violence weighs most heavily on individuals and species without economic power. Yet, by coming together, these beings achieve better circumstances for each other. Mirari gives Maio a home and a place in her orchestra as a flautist, and the two become intimate friends, while Maio's well-being also improves Bruna's spirit and outlook. Moreover, a communalist ethic delivers medical care that the neoliberal system fails to provide. Bruna loses an arm in a fight at the entrance to Onkalo—another bodily mutilation due to the production of energy—but because of her medical insurance, is given a top-end prosthetic. On the last page of *El peso*, Bruna offers to give Mirari her prosthetic arm when she dies of the expected cancer and feels a sense of purpose that supersedes the anguish of her mortality and produces the lightness of a happy heart. The narrated inter- and intraspecies alliances of multiple geographic zones in Montero's novels posit a citizenship of agency and interdependence that centralizes the sustainability of life. The alliances in these works, however, suggest that marginalized beings are more open to overcoming prejudices and caring for one another than those in positions of power.

In the process of gaining her trust, Husky creates a story for Gabi of a giant and a dwarf who are friends and who live in a world in which the past and gender differentiation do not exist, until the dwarf's jealousy shatters this utopian construct. Yet, even after the idealistic conditions disappear, the giant and the dwarf continue as friends and help each other survive. *Lágrimas en la lluvia* and *El peso del corazón* suggest that reciprocity and communalism among and across species might create a more sustainable future, but to continue to experience the intense beauty that Bruna sees in the northern dawn as she lays injured in the nuclear dump of Onkalo depends on a radical shift in how humans and other beings treat each other and the natural world.

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## Transatlantic Sertões: The Backlands of Ruy Duarte de Carvalho and Mia Couto

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### Abstract

This article develops a transatlantic approach to the colonial and postcolonial uses of the term "sertão" (backlands) in Angola, Brazil, and Mozambique through analyzing the works of Mia Couto and Ruy Duarte de Carvalho, especially in their readings of João Guimarães Rosa. By focusing on their fictional and essayistic work, I analyze how these authors explore social and environmental dimensions of different sertões in order to negotiate the multiplicity of meanings the term has acquired on both continents.

*Keywords:* sertão, lusophone studies, ecocriticism, postcolonial studies.

### Resumen

Este artículo toma un acercamiento transatlántico a los usos coloniales y poscoloniales del término "sertão" (lugar desierto) en Angola, Brasil y Mozambique por medio del análisis de las obras de Mia Couto y Ruy Duarte de Carvalho, particularmente en cuanto a sus lecturas de João Guimarães Rosa. Al abordar sus ensayos y ficción, analizo cómo exploran las dimensiones sociales y ambientales de distintos sertões para negociar la multiplicidad de significados que el término ha adquirido en ambos continentes.

*Palabras clave:* sertão, estudios lusófonos, ecocrítica, estudios poscoloniales.

Among the extensive vocabulary created, adapted, and appropriated by the Portuguese to describe the geographies of the overseas colonies it kept from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, "sertão" is certainly one of the most persistent and challenging terms. In English, it is usually translated as backlands, hinterlands, or wilderness, although these terms can clearly be insufficient in certain contexts. Initially used to name inland areas not yet territorialized by the Portuguese, it came to encompass a wide range of meanings in the Lusophone world. In Brazil, while it is often associated with the arid interior of the country's Northeast, it has also been associated traditionally with rural, forested, and other non-urbanized areas across the country. The integration of these marginal areas at the national level was the goal of numerous developmental projects set by successive governments, albeit with distinctive variations.<sup>1</sup> In Angola and Mozambique, in contrast, the term remained confined to a colonial discourse of territorial control,

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<sup>1</sup> For studies on some of these projects, see Vidal e Souza; Lima; and Dutra e Silva, Miranda de Sá and Romero Sá.

and it has disappeared from the post-independence vocabulary in the two countries.

The sertão's polysemy has found a fruitful space in Brazilian literature, where the multiplicity of landscapes to which the term has been assigned have provided the settings of major works such as Euclides da Cunha's *Os sertões* (*The Backlands*, 1902) and João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande sertão: veredas* (*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, 1956). Among their readers are some of the most prominent writers in Mozambique and Angola, who have been developing an increasingly robust literary corpus since these countries' independence in 1975. Angolan Ruy Duarte de Carvalho and Mozambican Mia Couto have both published essayistic pieces and fiction that discuss the sertões of Brazilian geography and literature. Meaningfully, their essays take into consideration not only the multifaceted nature of the term, but also the ecological similarities between the African southern savannahs and the South American savannah known as *cerrado*, with which the term sertão is often associated. At the same time, the term sertão has limited yet meaningful appearances in their fictional works. The challenge, in this case, is to navigate amongst the diverse and sometimes opposing connotations the term may take across continents, biomes, and historical moments. In Carvalho's and Couto's works, I argue, it often leads to the development of narrative devices that put into relief the dialogical nature of the many voices present in these countries before and after 1975.

This article aims to describe ways through which Carvalho and Couto negotiate the differences between the colonial and outdated connotation of sertão in Africa, and its literary uses stemming from their readings of Brazilian literature. More specifically, I investigate how their essayistic works on Guimarães Rosa deal with the uses of the term sertão in the colonial discourse about Lusophone Africa, on the one hand, and how this issue is approached in their fiction on the other.<sup>2</sup>

The primarily geographic sense of sertão carries with it an amalgam of ideologically charged views of social and environmental factors. Besides implying a certain epistemological void, it has been frequently used discursively as the opposite of "civilization."<sup>3</sup> Rural areas are perceived as sertões in contrast to cities, following the colonial practice of designating areas of scarce Portuguese presence sertões in contrast with areas where the Portuguese have stabilized their control. As such, the sertões provide a powerful category that exposes the connections between human and environmental colonizations.<sup>4</sup> By examining contemporary literary responses to projects of social and environmental colonialism, this article

<sup>2</sup> See Anita Moraes's "Guimarães Rosa lido por africanos" for a study on Couto's and Carvalho's readings of Guimarães Rosa.

<sup>3</sup> In his research on the presence of the sertão in Portuguese colonial cartography, for example, Rex Nielson notes that from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, "and perhaps even up to the present, the sertão has connoted not only geographical location but also wildness, barbarity, and non-European, non-Christian culture" (8-9).

<sup>4</sup> This environmental colonization, as Richard Grove notes, did not necessarily take the form of pure destruction but resulted in a varied range of "interventionist forms of land management" (7).

proposes a transatlantic perspective on ecocritical and postcolonial debates that encompass the South Atlantic and Eastern Africa.<sup>5</sup> As a key category to understand patterns of Portuguese colonial expansion, the sertão may also provide a useful conceptual tool for ecocritical approaches to postcolonial contexts. A brief, non-exhaustive account of the term's origin and development in the two continents will be followed by a discussion of tropes adopted by Couto and Carvalho.

### Early Modern Sertões

One of the possible etymologies of the term sertão was proposed by Gustavo Barroso, based on Bernardo Maria Carnecatim's *Dictionary of the Bunda Language of Angola* (1804), according to whom it would be derived from "mulcetão," which comes from "michitu" or "muchitu," and refers to places away from the coast (53–54). It is significant that among its possible origins there is one coming from a former colony, given the sertão's ties to overseas colonialism.

Portugal's colonial expansion was primarily based on maritime travels, which resulted in extensive Portuguese presence in coastal areas across continents, but little inland penetration. In *Roots of Brazil* (1936), for example, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda describes the Portuguese colonization in Brazil with an allusion to Fray Vicente do Salvador when he notes that, in the sixteenth century, "the colonists, even those in Brazil, crawled along the coast like crabs" (104).<sup>6</sup> Used in opposition to the coast, the sertões encompassed the inland territories about which the Portuguese had little or no knowledge, and where they had rarely or never ventured. As foreign space that was simultaneously the object of surveillance of a colonial "panopticon writ large," as Lauren Benton describes imperial spatial rationalization through mapping, the sertões inspired fear but also curiosity and greed for the many potential sources of wealth hidden there (see Benton 11).

While Gomeas Eanes de Zurara already mentions the "parte do sertão" ("the sertão area") in his 1450 chronicle of the invasion of Ceuta in 1415, Pero Vaz de Caminha, in his travel account of the first Portuguese arrival to America in 1500, speculates about the potential wealth to be found in the sertão beyond the wall of trees of the coastal Atlantic forest.<sup>7</sup> References to the sertão's undefined geography

<sup>5</sup> For recent works that bring ecocriticism and postcolonial studies together, see Huggan and Tiffin, and DeLoughrey and Handley.

<sup>6</sup> "[A]ndavam os colonos portugueses arranhando as praias como caranguejos" (*Raízes do Brasil* 132).

<sup>7</sup> See Eanes de Zurara 186. Caminha's references to the sertão in the letter are marked by mentions of trees covering what the Portuguese would imagine to be a vast land. For example: "Pelo sertão nos pareceu do mar muito grande, porque a estender olhos não podíamos ver senão terra com arvoredos, que nos parecia mui longa" ("From the sea the backlands seemed huge because as far as the eye could see there was only land and woods, so it seemed a very extensive land"; 12) Unless otherwise noted, all further passages in Portuguese were translated into English by Juan Diego Mariátegui.

often led to vague phrasing such as “sumir pelo sertão” (“to disappear into the sertão”) or “sertão dentro” (“deep into the sertão”). These terms often introduce the description of something to be found in inland areas or the initial steps of an exploratory journey, with little or no cartographical specificity. In many instances, they imply the complete disappearance of travelers from areas of colonial influence.<sup>8</sup>

## Brazilian Sertões

After Brazilian independence in 1822, the term sertão remained in use throughout the country, and it kept some of the main connotations already present in Portuguese colonialism: the Brazilian sertões were the vast territories of terra ignota, to use the cartographic expression immortalized by Euclides da Cunha in *Os sertões* (80).<sup>9</sup> It figured in the Imperial and especially Republican imagination as empty areas—albeit often inhabited by indigenous and rural populations—whose exploitation and national integration at the social, political, economic, and military levels was instrumental for national development. The sertão remained then, to use Antonio Moraes’ term, a “geographical other,” the complementary pair in the dichotomy between a civilized coast and a barbaric interior, and the frontier to be constantly expanded (87).

Scientific missions, sanitary campaigns, military bases, and the building of roads, train tracks and telegraphic lines are among the numerous projects and actions undertaken or supported by successive governments with the purpose of “taming” and developing the sertões. Perhaps none has raised as much international attention as the inauguration of Brasília in 1960. The transfer to the “capital in the sertão” from the coastal city of Rio de Janeiro was aimed primarily at promoting the development of the country’s sertões (Lima, “Brasília” 17).

Long before the 1960s, however, the term sertão became increasingly associated with the interior of the Northeastern states. Marked by severe droughts, intense racial mixing, messianic movements, banditry, and an oligarchical patriarchy, the Northeastern sertão came to represent a simultaneous source of concern and authenticity throughout the twentieth century. A landmark in this collective perception was undoubtedly Euclides da Cunha’s *Os sertões*, the famous account of the Canudos War, a conflict driven by the army of the newly declared Brazilian republic against the growing town of Canudos and its messianic leader, Antonio Conselheiro. As Nísia Trindade Lima comments, “the

<sup>8</sup> In a previous study, “Sertão Dentro: The Backlands in Early Modern Portuguese Writings,” I analyze the use of these and related expressions. My conclusion is that travelers to America tended to express less certainty about what can be found in the sertão than travelers to Africa, although both groups use it to convey indeterminacy.

<sup>9</sup> As Luiz Costa Lima explains, it is significant that de Cunha chooses the term “ignota” or incognita instead of “desconhecida” or unknown: “It would be unknown only if it had not yet been questioned and measured by already existing instruments. It is incognita because it need to give form to its own instruments” (123; my translation).



sertão/litoral dualism presents two facets. In one of them, the negative pole is represented by the sertão—identified with a resistance to modern civilization. In the other, the sign is inverted: the litoral is presented as synonymous with inauthenticity, and therefore as antithetical to the nation. In the work of many authors, among whom Euclides da Cunha's position is exemplary, ambivalence is the principal characteristic of the representation they construct of the country and its contrasts" (Lima 60).

In *Os sertões*, such ambivalence is valid both for the archetypal figure of the sertão—the sertanejo—and for its environment. Da Cunha's characterization of the sertanejo as a "Hercules-Quasimodo" (Cunha, *Backlands* 207) can also be applied to the environment that, in its harsh dryness and resilient vegetation, plays an active role in the fight against the republican troops, both by hiding the sertanejos and by resisting the entrance of the republicans: "The fight is unequal. When a military force must lower itself to an inferior type of combat, it has to deal not only with man but also with the earth. And when the backlands broil in the heat of the summer, it is not hard to predict who will be the victor" (Cunha, *Backlands* 203).<sup>10</sup> According to Adriana Campos Johnson, the identification of "the desert, not the jagunço, as the central antagonist" would effectively displace "the problem of constituting new republican subjects into the problem of constituting a new territory," that is, of "turning land into geography" (135-136). A consequence of this process would be the relative geographic stabilization of the sertão in the Northeastern states, thus forging the term's lasting association with dryness, poverty, and rurality.

The ongoing instability of this project was evidenced by the publication in 1956 of João Guimarães Rosa's only novel, *Grande sertão: veredas* (*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*). Set primarily in the Southeastern sertões of the state of Minas Gerais, this first-person account of farmer and former bandit Riobaldo has a complex treatment of the term sertão, defined by the author himself as the space par excellence of the "metaphysical aspect of language," that is, the space in which "language and life are one and the same thing" (Guimarães Rosa, "Diálogo" 68). Numerous passages of *Grande sertão: veredas* connect this view of literary language to the sertão, such as: "Lugar sertão se divulga: é onde os pastos carecem de fechos, onde um pode torar dez, quinze léguas sem topar com casa de morador, e onde o criminoso vive seu cristo-jesus, arredado do arrocho de autoridade" ("The sertão-place expands/disseminates itself: it is where the grasslands have no borders, where one can ride ten, fifteen leagues without coming across a single house, and where the criminal lives his Christ-Jesus, far from the noose of authority", 5). This widely quoted passage already gives an idea of what is at stake in Guimarães Rosa's sertão: the rural referential space of cattle raising and low demographic density, where political and military powers are limited if not

<sup>10</sup> "A luta é desigual. A força militar decai a um plano interior. Batem-na o homem e a terra. E quando o sertão estua nos bochornos dos estios longos não é difícil prever a quem cabe a vitória" (Cunha, *Os sertões* 361).

inexistent, but also a space of vastness and inscrutability. This is where, to use Antonio Candido's words in one of the first essays devoted to the novel, "o deserto é sobretudo projeção da alma" ("the wilds are, more than anything, a projection of the soul", 114). It is, in short, a space where social, political, metaphysical, religious, and existential sertões meet, in its inexhaustible potential to address a wide range of readings without being limitable to one approach.

*Grande sertão: veredas* is only one example in a vast array of uses the term has received in Brazilian culture. These uses range from a relative proximity to the sea, such as the interior portion of the coastal state of Rio de Janeiro in José de Alencar's *O guarani* (*The Guarani*, 1857), or the interior neighborhoods of the city of Rio de Janeiro in Armando Magalhães Corrêa's *O sertão carioca* (*The Sertão of Rio*, 1936); to the cycle of novels on the droughts of the country's Northeastern states, which gained a decisive momentum in the 1930s with the publication of Rachel de Queiroz's *O quinze* (*The Year Fifteen*, 1930), and Graciliano Ramos' *Vidas Secas* (*Barren Lives*, 1938), and which remained influential in Brazilian literature and film throughout the twentieth century. Together, they attest to the ongoing presence of the sertão in independent Brazil and the role it has had both in defining developmental policies and in configuring cultural imaginaries. A significantly different scenario is to be found in the term's fate in Lusophone Africa.

### Angolan and Mozambican Sertões

The direction taken by the term sertão in Lusophone Africa is clearly different. Recurrently used by the Portuguese to classify territories distant from the coast or from the sites where their presence was established, it continued to be rather a relational term with no geographic and cultural roots in the areas that today are Angola and Mozambique. As Mia Couto notes in one of his comments about Guimarães Rosa, "The Portuguese took the word sertão to Africa to name the savannah landscape. It did not work. The word did not put down roots. Only in the old colonial writings one can find the term 'sertão.' Almost no one today, in Mozambique and Angola, recognizes its meaning" ("Rosa em Moçambique" 66).<sup>11</sup>

Until a few decades before the two countries' independence in 1975, however, the sertões were used to name inland areas of scarce or inexistent Portuguese presence. In *Sertanejos de Angola* (*Sertanejos from Angola*, 1943), for example, a then young Castro Soromenho writes about the "brave sertanejos" or nineteenth-century Portuguese men who explored inland areas of Angola.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Os portugueses levaram a palavra para África e tentaram nomear assim a paisagem da savana. Não resultou. A palavra não ganhou raiz. Apenas nos escritos coloniais antigos se pode encontrar o termo 'sertão'. Quase ninguém hoje, em Moçambique e Angola, reconhece o seu significado" ("Rosa em Moçambique" 66). In a recent conversation with me, Angolan writer Ondjaki confirmed that the term is not used in contemporary Angola.

<sup>12</sup> Castro Soromenho's views of colonialism would change in the following years, leading to his falling-out with Salazar and consequent exile from Portugal in 1960. In spite of his later criticism of

Published during a context of increased reliance on the African colonies set forth by the Estado Novo under the administration of prime minister Antonio Salazar, the book's first words already evoke Angola's sertões from a typically colonialist perspective: "Over the barbarity of the African sertões, just a few dozen adventurers have raised the flag of their nation as a symbol of occupation...They refer to themselves, proudly, as Sertanejos" (5).<sup>13</sup> The sertão is then immediately associated with barbarism and with the need for foreign, "civilized" occupation. While in Brazil the sertanejos are usually portrayed as the local inhabitants of the arid interior of the country's Northeast, Castro Soromenho's sertanejos are instead the Portuguese explorers seeking to expand the borders of the Portuguese Empire. To a certain extent, they were the historical equivalents of the *bandeirantes* (frontiersmen) in territorializing interior areas of colonial Brazil.

The stereotyped view of the African sertões as places of racial and environmental barbarism presented in *Sertanejos de Angola* was but part of a larger tradition of mystery and uncontrollability associated with the term from the early modern period to the twentieth century. A good example is the 1882 collection *Viagens, explorações e conquistas dos portugueses*, organized and commented on by Portuguese writer and historian Luciano Cordeiro, in which the late nineteenth-century voice of the commentator adds a more dramatic tone to the more pragmatic tone of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century chroniclers. Whereas the latter use sertões in an economic fashion mainly to describe areas away from the coast yet to be invaded, Cordeiro does not hesitate in supplementing such accounts with observations in which racism and fear towards the African backlands go hand in hand. He refers, for example, to the seventeenth-century explorers that,

with all the resources of nearly three centuries of civilization and science, dedicated themselves to one of the most grueling and glorious deeds that a white man can accomplish; when one reflects on the fact that these men could no longer believe in grandiose illusions [of wealth] about the very long road ahead and the terrible savagery to be traversed, and that they themselves [experienced] the treachery of the heathen, the hostility of the climate. (8)<sup>14</sup>

These tropes of backwardness and imminent danger would be evoked by Angolan and Mozambican postcolonial writers such as Couto and Carvalho with critical distance and, frequently, an ironic twist.

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the Portuguese colonial regime, *Sertanejos de Angola* was published as the 98th volume of the *Pelo Império* [Throughout the Empire], a collection published between 1935 and 1961 by the General Colonial Agency. These ideological changes, however, would still be insufficient for him to escape the perspective, in Russel Hamilton's words, of an "enlightened colonialist" (40).

<sup>13</sup> "Sobre a barbárie dos sertões africanos, umas escassas dezenas de aventureiros ergueram a bandeira do seu país como símbolo de ocupação. [...] Eles chamam-se a si mesmos, com orgulho—Sertanejos" (*Sertanejos de Angola* 5).

<sup>14</sup> "[C]om todos os recursos de quasi tres seculos de civilização e de sciencia, [dedicaram-se] a um dos feitos mais asperos e gloriosos que póde realizar o branco; quando se reflecte em que aquelles homens não podiam já crear-se grandes illusões ácerca do extensissimo caminho a percorrer e da terrivel selvageria a atravessar, e que elles proprios [sentiam] a perfidia do gentio, a hostilidade do clima" (Cordeiro 8).

At the same time, Couto and Carvalho take advantage of the startling environmental similarities that the sertões of the three countries often share. After all, the savannah covering most of Mozambique and Angola is equivalent to the biome of the Brazilian *cerrado*, including the areas that serve as the setting for most of Guimarães Rosa's novel. All are formed by "tropical and subtropical grasslands, with scattered bushes and trees" and a relative dryness (Shorrocks 1). According to Bryan Shorrocks, "savannahs on different continents often 'look similar,' but the individual species are quite different" (10). In spite of the different forms of biodiversity in southern Africa and South America, the similar impression caused by these forms was noticed and explored by Couto and Carvalho. The African savannah also resembles somewhat the drier areas of the *caatinga* and the sertão in the Northeastern Brazilian states, which was so crucial for the geographical stabilization of the term in the twentieth century. It is not by chance that Carvalho, in *Desmedida*, brings together the two archetypal Brazilian biomes into a single literary geography whose axis is the São Francisco river, which links one to the other in a South-North direction. This landscape reminds Carvalho of the area where a significant portion of his fictional and anthropological work is set: the Moçâmedes desert in southern Angola, which is dry despite its relative proximity to the sea.

Although the term sertão does not populate the everyday vocabulary used in postcolonial Mozambique and Angola, there is a very specific usage in postcolonial Lusophone African literature, or at least on the bookshelves of its authors, which is the reference to the literary landscape of the Brazilian sertão. The sertão of Couto and Carvalho combines aspects of the Orientalist view of the term developed by the Portuguese in both continents with careful attention to the specificity of the areas formerly called sertões in Mozambique and Angola, but also with an acute perception of the numerous points of contact between the Latin American and the African sertões. The following sections of this essay describe discursive strategies through which these two authors engage with these varied uses in the context of the negotiation of national identities as the two countries recovered from long civil wars following their independence.

### Mia Couto

Mia Couto engages the concept of sertão in two essays about Guimarães Rosa: "O sertão brasileiro na savana moçambicana" ("The Brazilian Sertão in the Mozambican Savannah", 2005), and "Rosa em Moçambique" ("Rosa in Mozambique", 2007), both presented as public lectures in Brazilian institutions before their publication.<sup>15</sup> These two essays could actually be read as variations of a same text, given their similar contents and even the repetition of whole passages.

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<sup>15</sup> The first one was presented in 2004 at the Brazilian Academy of Letters, in Rio de Janeiro, and the second one was presented in 2007 at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, in Belo Horizonte.

Both discuss the decisive influence that Rosa's work had over the Mozambican author's literary trajectory. Following some of the many intuitions or keys to approaching his own work that Couto identified in Guimarães Rosa, we find that the creative power of Rosa's language and his deviation from a rationalist logic produce a poetic transgression of reality, a foundation of myth as nation and not of nation as a myth that takes place outside an idea of nation based on uniformity and modernity ("Rosa em Moçambique" 66).<sup>16</sup> This is of special importance for a recently independent country that, like the Mozambique of the era in which Couto read Rosa, was still caught between colonial and national realities.

This space takes shape via Guimarães Rosa through a symbolic recontextualization of the sertão's referential spaces in Brazil. Rosa's sertão is converted by Couto into an instrument of political transformation: "The sertão and the veredas of which he speaks are not of a geographical nature. The sertão is a world built in language" (Couto, "Rosa" 66).<sup>17</sup> In the sertão, the narrator becomes a "mediator of worlds"—in this case, of the many worlds found in Brazil (Couto, "Rosa" 68). Curiously, Couto's arguments seek simultaneously an affirmation and a rejection of the geographical referentiality of the Brazilian sertões. With these two coexisting movements, it is as if the Mozambican author wrote, as would Rosa, "na linha de costura" (along the seam) between different realities (Couto, "Rosa" 67). Rosa's sertão for Mia Couto, on the one hand, remains the broad space encompassing the country's plurality of voices in the crucial moment of Brasília's building. On the other hand, it is the linguistic space that transcends geo-historical constraints.

By transposing this mediating power to the space of Mozambique, Couto connects the savannah to the sertão through this symbolic and referential ambivalence: "O sertão é, pois, um mundo em invenção. Tudo isto se pode dizer da savana, o espaço onde se constrói não apenas a paisagem de África, mas onde África se constitui" ("O sertão brasileiro" 109) ("The sertão is therefore a world in the process of being invented. All this can be said about the savannah, the space where the African landscape is not only constructed but also defined" ["Brazilian Sertão" 53]). The savannah refers then to the referential space of the African landscape as much as to "a world built on language" found in Couto's own fictional work. Taking into account the ecological proximity between the African and the South American savannahs in each region, Couto seems to draw upon the central place of the sertões in the Brazilian social and cultural imaginary in order to assign an analogous role to the savannahs of Mozambique and other African countries.

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<sup>16</sup> In Couto's words, "o sertão de Rosa é erguido em mito para contrariar uma certa ideia uniformizante e modernizante de um Brasil em ascensão" ("Rosa's sertão is built as a myth in order to challenge a certain modernizing and uniformizing idea of a developing Brazil" 67, my translation).

<sup>17</sup> "O sertão e as veredas de que ele fala não são da ordem da geografia. O sertão é um mundo construído na linguagem" (66).



A decade later, however, the presence—or rather absence—of the term in Couto’s fiction would shift in the first volume of the *As areias do imperador* (*Sands of the Emperor*) trilogy. This novel, entitled *Mulheres de cinza* (*Women of Ash*), brings the reader back to 1895 when the State of Gaza, “the second largest Empire in Africa led by an African” would face its last moments before the fall of the emperor Ngungunyane (Couto, *Mulheres* 3). The narration alternates between the first person narrator Imani, a Choipe teenager from a family notoriously supportive of the Portuguese, and the letters written by Germano de Melo, an outcast turned sergeant whose mission was to expand the Portuguese control in the area.<sup>18</sup> In this historical novel, marked by an intense dialogism that repeatedly foregrounds the perspective of the Chopes through Imani and challenges environmental racism through Germano, the colonial usage of the term sertão in Africa finds its place in the fictional work of Couto.

*Mulheres de cinza*’s sertões belong exclusively to Germano’s letters, written to a military officer of a higher rank, and they often follow the colonialist trope of vast, empty space: “nesse vasto sertão de Inhabane” (“in this vast sertão of Inhabane”, 20), “na lonjura deste sertão” (“in the remoteness of this sertão”, 205), or in longer passages such as:

All this asphyxia could be compensated by the infinite geography of Africa. But these ample distances produce an inverse effect: everything here is brought closer together. The line of the horizon is at our fingertips. And I imagine the immense route of our letters traversing the African sertão. (151)<sup>19</sup>

The dizzying immensity that reinforces the Romantic tone of this passage is the same that makes possible the distance of the African sertão from the horizons of the colony’s coastal capital, Lourenço Marques (today’s Maputo). In this context, the very courier service available inside the sertão appears as an almost uncanny sign of modernity.

Concomitant with such a sense of remoteness is the racist anguish stemming from Germano’s lack of knowledge and control over the area:

We arrived yesterday at Chicomo after a journey of two weeks on foot, through a sertão that fascinates and frightens me. In every thicket I imagine an ambush. In the dark of every night I see an ambush. Attacked by monstrous insects or by untamable Negros, what is the difference for he who is about to die? (35)<sup>20</sup>

In this series of comparisons, in which the forest is compared to a trap and black men are made equivalent to “monstrous animals,” the foundational fiction that *Mulheres de cinza* might represent does not hide the situation of deep racial and

<sup>18</sup> Regarding the role of letters in Couto’s fiction, see Rothwell 55.

<sup>19</sup> “Toda esta asfixia poderia ser compensada pela infinita geografia de África. Mas esta ampla lonjura produz um efeito inverso: tudo aqui se torna mais próximo. A linha do horizonte fica ao alcance dos nossos dedos. E imagino o imenso percurso destas nossas cartas atravessando o sertão africano” (151).

<sup>20</sup> “Chegámos ontem a Chicomo depois de uma viagem de duas semanas a pé, por um sertão que me fascina e me amedronta. Em tudo o que seja floresta imagino uma emboscada. No escuro de cada noite adivinho uma cilada. Atacado por monstruosos bichos ou por indomáveis negros, qual a diferença para quem vai morrer?” (35).

environmental tensions that underlie the modern history of Mozambique.<sup>21</sup> If Simon Estok defined the ecophobia found in Western societies as “an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism,” this passage brings to light the common ground of ecophobia and racism by conflating them into a same form of fear (Estok 6).

At the same time, Germano’s stay in the town of Nkokolani, in the sertão of Inhambane, leads him to reconsider some of his earlier positions, which allows his love for Imani, as well as passages such as: “Descubro, enfim, meu caro Conselheiro, nestes tristes sertões uma humanidade que em mim mesmo desconhecia. Esta gente, aparentemente tão distante, tem-me dado lições que não aprenderia em nenhum outro lugar” (“I discover, in the end, my dear Conselheiro, in these sad sertões a humanity I did not know in myself. These people, supposedly so distant, have taught me lessons I would not have learned anywhere else”, 120). This discovery of a deeper humanity in what Germano calls the sad sertões, then, puts side by side the sertões and Germano’s subjectivity, in a closer albeit different way from *Grande sertão: veredas*. It also marks the transformation lived by a character increasingly aware of the similarities between the Portuguese’s and Nguhunyane’s fights for territorial control and their “narrativas imperiais (...) que não diferiam umas das outras” (“imperial narratives [...] that did not differ one from another” 118). Germano’s dismay about the Portuguese colonial enterprise, blind to the complex social and psychological dynamics at stake within the backlands of Mozambique, finds expression in one of his final letters which he revokes what he had previously said: “não adoeci em África, como todos os demais. Eu adoeci de Portugal. A minha doença não é senão o declínio e a podridão da minha terra” (“I did not fall sick in Africa, like everyone else. I became sickened of Portugal. My illness is nothing but the decline and rottenness of my country”, 206). Germano inverts the colonial hierarchy in this passage: the Portuguese metropolis becomes the rotting place that may contaminate the African sertões, where a different, perhaps deeper level of humanity exists.

Germano thus embodies the possibility of a colonial discourse on the sertão that could contribute to a postcolonial approach to the term. While his sertão does not erase the social, racial, and linguistic hierarchies that were still to a certain extent present after Mozambique’s independence, it does promote a questioning and nuancing of such hierarchies that would potentially lead to a decolonial view of the savannah. Consequently, the sertão, as the colonial avatar for the landscape of the savannah referred to by Couto in the previous articles, stands as the place where a more prominent balance of powers due to the scarce colonial presence may allow a real, independent Mozambique to emerge. The ambivalence of the sertão as a trope of colonial discourse and as a “mediator of worlds” is thus intensely dramatized in this fictional reflection on how to build a nation.

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<sup>21</sup> I borrow the term from Doris Sommers.

## Ruy Duarte de Carvalho

In Ruy Duarte de Carvalho's *Desmedida* (2006), a mixture of travel diary, essay and historical account, the Angolan author narrates his travels to Brazil. Besides São Paulo, he journeys to the São Francisco river and to the areas where Guimarães Rosa's works are set, then back to Luanda. His objectives concerning geographical displacement are already stated in the opening paragraph:

there is a place, I was saying, there is a point on Brazil's map, there is a corner where the states of Goiás, Minas Gerais and Bahia meet, and the Federal District is also very close. There I would like to go... it is there that most of *Grande sertão: veredas'* action is set... [...] and to the lower São Francisco, I would go too, if I could... because it borders Euclides da Cunha's sertões... (15)<sup>22</sup>

The point where many states meet provides a geographical metaphor for the intensely intersectional character of the sertão for Carvalho, in a similar fashion to Couto's definition of the sertão as a space that mediates worlds. The area encompasses not only the diverse histories and narratives belonging to each of these geographical areas, but transatlantic geopolitical imaginaries, linguistic practices, and socio-environmental frameworks. This vastness of themes, characters, and common histories recall the vastness of Guimarães Rosa's sertão.

The sertões surrounding the São Francisco River occupy several chapters of the book and provide the author with a starting point to introduce other topics. Figures that visited the two continents, such as British writer and explorer Richard Burton and French poet Blaise Cendrars, make an appearance, as does the history of the colonial expansion in Africa and America such as the seventeenth-century Dutch invasion. The very title *Desmedida*, or what cannot be measured, alludes to the ways that the sertões visited by the narrator resisted mapping, regulation, and control, as much as it may allude to the history of contact between the two nations.

In this sustained comparison of the histories of Angola and Brazil, Carvalho proposes a common intercontinental history shared by the two countries: "Todo o mundo, e eu também, parece estar hoje de acordo que tanto Angola como o Brasil, no que diz respeito a passados discerníveis, não dá de facto para entender um sem entender o outro" ("Everybody, including myself, seems to agree today that, in what concerns trackable pasts, it is impossible to understand Angola and Brasil independently from each other", 222).<sup>23</sup> This does not, however, imply a strict similarity between them: both remain separate in their colonial and postcolonial

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<sup>22</sup> "...tem um lugar, dizia eu, tem um ponto no mapa do Brasil, tem um vértice que é onde os estados de Goiás, de Minas Gerais e da Bahia se encontram, e o Distrito Federal é mesmo ao lado. Aí, sim, gostaria de ir... é lá que se passa muita da acção do Grande Sertão; Veredas... [...] e ao baixo São Francisco, podendo, ia também... porque encosta nos Sertões euclidianos..." (15).

<sup>23</sup> As Chaves notes, "sua incursão [ao Brasil] seria um modo de ver Angola de outro prisma, corroborando a legitimidade da aproximação já encetada por tantas outras vias" ("His travels to Brazil would be a way of seeing Angola from another angle, reinforcing the approximation already launched by so many other paths" 289, my translation).

histories. In his words, “Tivemos independências diferentes, tivemos histórias também diferentes tanto antes das nossas independências como depois delas, mas fazemos também todos parte, embora sem dúvida cada um à sua maneira, da mesma substância que burbulha no caldeirão dos nossos futuros comuns ou diferenciados” (“Our independences were different, our histories both before and after independence were different, but we also all belong, doubtlessly in our own unique ways, to that same substance that bubbles in the cauldron of our futures, whether they be common or differentiated”, 201). With all the differences recognized, what is at stake here are rather the numerous points of contact that may shed light onto new historiographic and environmental perspectives. Among the latter are the similarities he notices between the Brazilian sertões visited by Carvalho and some landscapes of Angola:

And in the landscapes that Guimarães Rosa described to me, I recognized those already familiar to me. Be it because the nature is the same as in many of Angola’s landscapes—and in some of Angola’s landscapes I would recognize those I was reading about—be it because the people he described, people from woods and caves, from farms and bush, these too were the people with whom I dealt in Angola in my work and my life. (86) <sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, this comparison does not gain the symbolic meaning Couto establishes between the roles of the sertão and the savannah in nation building. Instead, they strengthen the ties between the literary imaginaries active in the two countries, of which *Desmedida* is a significant example.<sup>25</sup>

In other works by Carvalho, occasional mentions of the African colonial sertões make use of quotation marks or of a discursive refraction that eschews his own voice even when there are no clear marks of a shift in enunciation. An example is *Vou lá visitar pastores* (1999), a blend of anthropological, historical, autobiographical, and literary account of the Kuvale shepherds in the region of Moçâmedes, to which most of Carvalho’s attention is devoted. The author starts an explanation of why indigenous people did not want to work for Portuguese settlers when he describes the “indígenas Mondombe, rebeldes a qualquer trabalho, à sujeição, à escravidão, permanentemente refractários ao seu emprego [...]” (“the indigenous Mondombe rebel against any work, subjection, slavery, permanently resistant to their employment”, 46). This is all written in free indirect speech, as explained by the author: “Estou a utilizar os termos em que são referidos na bibliografia disponível” (“I am using the terms referred to in the available sources”, 46) The irony, already present in the indirect speech per se through the neutrality with which the possibility of enslavement is posed, receives an explanation that

<sup>24</sup> “E nas paisagens que Guimarães Rosa me descrevia, eu estava a reconhecer aquelas que tinha por familiares. Já porque de natureza a mesma que muitas das paisagens de Angola—e em algumas paisagens de Angola eu reconhecia aquelas, enquanto lia—já porque a gente que ele tratava, gente de matos e de grotas, de roças e capinzais, era também em Angola aquela com quem durante muitos anos andei a lidar pela via do ofício e do viver” (86).

<sup>25</sup> In this sense, the sertões of *Desmedida* could compose something like a South Atlantic cartogram, to use Laura Padilha’s metaphor to understand “spatio-fictional images” in contemporary Angolan literature (140).

prevents any doubt as to the author's position. Besides explaining the previous free indirect speech, this last passage configures what comes next: "Até um naturalista suíço, de nome Lang, que o governo faz vir àqueles sertões depois da fundação do presídio de Mossâmedes, em 1840, para informar do potencial dos recursos da região, se revela pessimista perante a indolência das gentes daquelas terras" ("Even a Swiss naturalist, named Lang, that the government sent to those sertões following the founding of the Mossâmedes fortress in 1840 to inform on the region's potential resources, shows himself to be pessimistic before the indolence of the inhabitants of this land", 46–47). Even though the "terms used in the bibliography available" refer primarily to indigenous "indolence," the very use of sertões here becomes part of a general colonial discourse, despite not being explicitly recognized as such by Carvalho.

Other devices employed by Carvalho to refer to sertões and other tropes of colonial discourse include simple indirect speech or clear direct speech. The former can be found also in *Vou lá visitar pastores*: "Ao chefe do Concelho de Campangombe chegou a ser enviado, pelo governador anterior a Ferreira de Almeida, um ofício que o instruía no sentido de não se opor à passagem de uma dessas 'guerras,' que havia de vir do sertão de Benguela para guerrear os 'cubaes'" ("The governor before Ferreira de Almeida sent the chief of the district of Campangombe a missive that instructed him to not oppose to one of those 'wars' that would inevitably come from the sertão of Benguela to war against the 'Cubaes'", 50). Although the whole content of what the former governor says would belong to an indirect speech, only the words "guerra" and "Cubaes" appear between quotation marks. This leaves the sertão of Benguela in an unstable position regarding its inclusion in the character's vocabulary, since it is not explicitly attached to the governor's speech through the quotation marks, but remains close enough to his discourse to be associated with it. In a less ambiguous fashion, Carvalho also uses it in an uncomplicated direct speech when, in the novel *Os papéis do inglês* (*The Englishman's Papers*), the character named Grego is described by Galvão, without quotation marks, as "grosseiro, conflituoso, destrambelhado e rude" ("crude, conflictive, crazed, and uncouth") before the narrator explicitly quotes Galvão: "e isso adaptava-se ao que ele próprio [Galvão] [...] dizia sobre o juízo que nessa altura recaía sobre cagadores de elefantes perdidos pelos matos: era 'um dos muitos cafres brancos que a vida sertaneja de África cria'" ("And that was in keeping with what he himself [Gavão] said about the punishment that at that point fell on the attendants of the elephants lost in the bush: he was 'one of those white barbarians that life on the African sertão creates'", 64). In this case, although the term "sertanejo life" refers to a person uncannily close to the Brazilian sertanejos described by da Cunha in the roughness of their character, it still belongs to the figure of the Portuguese explorer as Castro Soromenho describes it. Most importantly, it appears within direct discourse whose authority cannot be questioned, thereby constituting another example of the discursive variations Carvalho has explored throughout his works.



## Approximations

Focusing both on the civil wars in the decades following the countries' independences, such as Couto's *Terra sonâmbula* (*Sleepwalking Land*, 1992), or dealing with a broader temporal span in the Moçâmedes region of Carvalho's *Os papéis do inglês*, Couto and Carvalho have been carrying out a delicate negotiation between discursive tropes of colonialism, an analytic approach to literature's founding role in nationalistic discourses, and the influence of Brazilian writers, especially Guimarães Rosa, upon the first generations of postcolonial writers, who nevertheless usually took a critical distance from the Brazilian author.

Crossing all these factors, the figure of the sertão remains a challenging one. The imaginative geography, to use Edward Said's term, of the African sertões is fundamentally tied to a Portuguese colonial discourse in which racism goes hand in hand with an environmental view marked by an ecophobic fear of the unknown and the obsession for territorial control.<sup>26</sup> It is exclusively in discourse referring to Portuguese colonization that the term sertão appears; otherwise, it is absent from today's Angola and Mozambique. On the other hand, the Brazilian sertão is also geographically tied to one of the poorest and most marginalized regions of the country, the Northeastern sertões, ambivalently perceived also as one of the most authentic parts of Brazilian culture. This assumed authenticity, together with the wide presence of the term in Brazil's literary tradition, shapes a view of the sertão as a space of social mediation where an individual, as much as a nation, can find themselves. This is how, to a certain extent, both Couto and Carvalho understand the place of the sertão in Brazilian culture.

Dealing with contradictory connotations, Carvalho and Couto take advantage of their own positionality to put into perspective the colonial discourses on the African sertões and the potentially productive result of an approximation between the Angolan, the Brazilian, and the Mozambican sertões. This approximation can belong to a referential order when events and peoples crossing from one coast to another provide the elements for the writing of a common transatlantic history, in which the presence of the sertão is to be taken as the index of a similar attitude towards the colonial other that, nevertheless, is permanently subject to a strategic semantic reformulation. For this purpose, Carvalho may evoke their role in a literary tradition such as the Brazilian one, or talk about the sertão in an Angolan context through a refracted voice that does not need quotation marks to come across as the discourse of a colonialist locus of enunciation. Moreover, the physical similarities between the sertão of Guimarães Rosa and the savannah for Couto provide a space for symbolic mediation among the diverse and divergent groups facing the task of imagining a community. The

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<sup>26</sup> I refer here, in Said's words, to the ways one finds of "dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away" (55).

sertão of Inhambane belonging to the pen of the Portuguese sergeant is the same space where the different actors that negotiate both forms of communality and power are the close ancestors of an independent Mozambique.

Instead of denying or ignoring the sertões of colonial discourse on Africa, then, these authors perform this discourse by attributing it, directly or not, to the mouth or pen of their characters. This dialogic device allows them to play and to expose what Homi Bhabha calls the ambivalence of colonial mimicry within the colonial contexts in which the narrations are set.<sup>27</sup> In doing so, they make evident the historicity of the sertão as a social and environmental category that establishes a specific imaginary, frequently stereotypical, over a certain territory. It is in this sense that, as Byron Caminero-Santangelo defends this textual strategy, an African ecocriticism may take shape: not through a de-historicized view of a nature devoid of human presence, but rather through a close debate with postcolonialism and a focus on regional and local modalities of environmentalism. In his words, “postcolonial ecocritics attempt to historicize nature (while putting nature back into history) in order to disrupt the naturalization of geographical identities and conditions that have been shaped by imperialism” (10).

To conclude this article, I want to propose that Mia Couto’s and Ruy Duarte de Carvalho’s works can be read as an intervention, more than in Brazilian literature itself, in the Brazilian collective perception of its own sertões.<sup>28</sup> The relatively smooth transition the term has enjoyed after Brazilian independence, as shown by the lasting presence it has had in the country’s intellectual history and internal geopolitics may easily ignore the array of usages it has received beyond Brazil’s geographical borders and modern history. When Carvalho and Couto put into critical perspective these sertões with different levels of familiarity for Brazilian readers, then, they also affect the perception of the term in Brazil. As a result, and almost in an ironic fashion, they contribute to sustaining the term as environmentally diverse and as geographically unstable as it has indeed always been.

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<sup>27</sup> Colonial mimicry refers to the double articulation of colonial projects that constitutes, in Bhabha’s words, “a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence” (123).

<sup>28</sup> In fact, *Mulheres de cinza* is the first non-Brazilian novel in contention as a finalist for the prestigious São Paulo Literary Prize in 2016, which is awarded only to works first published in Brazil. The fact that the novel was chosen shows how close Couto is to Brazilian publishers and readers. At the same time, as Nara Rubia Ribeiro explains, it is curious that the author himself chose to pluralize the Brazilian edition’s title to *Mulheres de cinzas*, because, according to him, in Brazilian Portuguese the original title could be understood as “women wearing ash grey,” which would not be the case in Mozambique and Portugal.

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## La guerra de los mundos en algunas ficciones del Antropoceno: Agonística ambiental y poéticas de la habitabilidad

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### Resumen

En este estudio, pretendemos analizar el potencial narrativo y las implicaciones estéticas de la noción de Antropoceno en algunas ficciones ecológicas afrohispanicas contemporáneas. Se tratará en particular de examinar la eficacia de dicha categoría aplicada a la literatura ambiental de los Sures, en la medida en que constituye para ella no sólo una clara preferencia temática, sino que implica también unas inflexiones estéticas y formales que merecen ser analizadas de manera sistemática. Para llevar a cabo el análisis, nos apoyaremos en un corpus de tres novelas emblemáticas de dicha estética: *El padre de Blancanieves*, de la novelista española Belén Gopegui (2007), *Os Malaquias*, de la brasileña Andréa del Fuego (2011) y *Os Transparentes*, del escritor angoleño Ondjaki (2012). Desde una perspectiva comparatista y contrastiva, intentaremos definir los contornos de lo que podría ser una ecocrítica afrohispanica, esbozando el marco epistémico-estético común a estas escrituras.

*Palabras clave:* Antropoceno, ecocrítica, literatura ambiental, ficción ecológica, estudios decoloniales, posdesarrollo, ecologismo popular, agonística ambiental

### Abstract

In this piece of work, we will consider the narrative power and the aesthetical implications of the notion of Anthropocene in some contemporary ecological fictions from the African, Hispanic and Portuguese-speaking countries. The pertinence of the category applied to the environmental literature of the Souths will be examined more particularly, in so far as it constitutes not only a clear thematical preference, but also because it implies some significant aesthetical and formal inflexions which should be analyzed in a systematic way. In order to see the analysis through, we will rely on three novels which are deemed representative of such an aesthetic: *El padre de Blancanieves*, written by the Spanish novelist Belén Gopegui (2007), *Os Malaquias*, by the Brazilian novelist Andréa del Fuego (2011) and *Os Transparentes*, by the Angolan novelist Ondjaki (2012). In a comparatist and contrastive perspective, we will try and bring out the epistemico-aesthetical basis which these writings have in common.

*Keywords:* Anthropocene, ecocriticism, environmental literature, ecological fiction, decolonial studies, post-development, popular ecology, environmental agonistics.

Este trabajo pretende considerar el potencial narrativo y las implicaciones estéticas de la noción de Antropoceno. Se tratará de examinar en particular la

pertinencia de dicha categoría aplicada a la literatura ambiental de los Sures,<sup>1</sup> en la medida en que no sólo constituye una clara preferencia temática, sino también porque supone inflexiones estéticas y formales significativas que hasta la fecha no se han analizado de manera sistemática. En un opus reciente, los historiadores de la ciencia Christophe Bonneuil y Jean-Baptiste Fressoz ponen de relieve la condición narrativa del Antropoceno: la hipótesis de la entrada en una nueva era geológica de la cual el ser humano sería el centro y el agente más potente aparece como una categoría fundamentalmente polémica, portadora de relatos e interpretaciones contradictorios y muchas veces enfrentados. Por un lado, el acceso del ser humano a un nuevo régimen de existencia biológica, su promoción al rango de categoría geológica o de agente transformador, son objeto de lecturas tecno-optimistas, acríticas y modernizadoras, que reconducen desde una posición hegemónica el discurso científico de la modernidad occidental fundamentada en un régimen ontológico específico—una cosmovisión dualista, basada en una estricta separación entre lo humano y la naturaleza, que el antropólogo Philippe Descola califica de “ontología naturalista”. Tal metarrelato viene formulándose desde una posición de atalaya: según Bonneuil y Fressoz, el discurso de la toma de conciencia ecológica puede leerse como una fábula teleológica forjada y difundida por las instancias expertas, cuya impronta en el imaginario occidental conduce a silenciar la multiplicidad de las luchas socioecológicas que se están multiplicando en todo el planeta.

Pero la hipótesis del Antropoceno también puede leerse como el momento de una crisis de la modernidad occidental y de la concepción irénica de la naturaleza que le es consustancial: las huellas indelebles que el ser humano dejó en la Tierra son a la vez el resultado y la prueba incontestable de las prácticas de depredación que se han ejercido y siguen ejerciéndose a escala planetaria. La ambivalencia fundamental del concepto también la recalca Bruno Latour en su último libro (Latour, *Face à Gaïa*): el autor argumenta que el término “Antropoceno” designa al mismo tiempo la toma de conciencia de algo irreversible—la constatación de daños irremediables que son fruto de un acontecimiento que pertenece al pasado—y la creencia esperanzadora en la posibilidad de invertir la tendencia. La noción tendría que ver simultáneamente con el reconocimiento de una impotencia y un “don de *agency*” (Latour, “The

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<sup>1</sup> Se puede decir que el Antropoceno implica una nueva distribución geopolítica que supone reconsiderar la oposición Norte/Sur (así como otras dicotomías comparables: Occidente/Resto del mundo; centro/periferia, etc.). Tomar en cuenta criterios como la emisión de gases de efecto invernadero, la contaminación, la producción de residuos, etc., implica que numerosos países, como los emblemáticos BASICs (Brasil-Sudáfrica-India-China), ocupen una posición ambigua que indica la insuficiencia, incluso la caducidad, de la dicotomía Norte/Sur para pensar el Antropoceno. Sin embargo, decidimos mantener aquí la categoría “Sures”, entendiendo la ecocrítica meridional como un discurso que emerge a la vez dentro y fuera del marco epistémico occidental y busca articular epistemes tricontinentales, formulando una crítica de las categorías de la dominación por el universalismo abstracto y distanciándose de las que tienden a producir una hipóstasis de lo particular. Se trata de desarrollar métodos de configuración de los saberes que superen sin ignorarlo el reparto en áreas culturales.

Notion”). Esta ambigüedad intrínseca hace potencialmente del Antropoceno una fuente de relatos emancipadores—o por lo menos el momento privilegiado de su despliegue. Con Bonneuil, Fressoz y Latour, nos inclinamos a leer el Antropoceno como el relato más potente que haya existido desde la modernidad: la fábula que contiene está marcada por una muy eficaz “teleología del devenir ecológico” (Bonneuil y Fressoz 67), que emblematiza el discurso casi formulario del “¿cómo hemos llegado hasta aquí?”.

A nivel más estrictamente literario, nuestra hipótesis es que la frecuente plasmación y tematización del Antropoceno—entendiéndose éste como un relato de la huella ecológica humana—en las ficciones ambientales meridionales hace de él una categoría narratológica central y potente que induce un tipo de formalización específica cuyos rasgos intentarán definirse a continuación. Simétricamente, podemos preguntarnos si la aplicación de la categoría “Antropoceno” a este tipo de corpus no supone inflexiones en el modo mismo de aprensión de la noción. Examinando la literatura ecológica de los Sures, nos parece que se desprende una acepción peculiar del Antropoceno, un pensamiento de la huella estrechamente vinculado con lo que Boaventura de Sousa Santos y Maria Paula Meneses califican de “epistemologías de los Sures”, fundamentadas en un esfuerzo de descentramiento perpetuo y en la búsqueda de un posicionamiento y una hermenéutica pluritópica que suponen “no sólo el vaciado y la movilidad del centro de la representación sino también la movilidad del centro del acto de representar” (Mignolo).

No seguimos aquí la definición de Adam Trexler<sup>2</sup> que identifica estrictamente la literatura del Antropoceno con las ficciones del cambio climático (*CliFi*): adoptaremos en cambio una definición más abarcadora, en la medida en que conlleva una reflexión de cariz socioecopolítico acerca de las nociones conexas de “capitaloceno” o de “occidentaloceno” en crisis (Bonneuil). Para el historiador, ambas categorías expresan la relación de consustancialidad que existe entre el Antropoceno como nueva edad geohistórica y nueva dinámica de transformación del planeta, y el capitalismo en cuanto régimen específico de acumulación depredadora procedente de los países del Norte. Para la ecocrítica de los Sures, pensar el actuar geológico del ser humano implica entablar un diálogo epistemológico con los estudios y las teorías poscoloniales y decoloniales: la dicotomía naturaleza/cultura que la hipótesis del Antropoceno viene a socavar es también la que vertebra el proyecto colonial, basado en una división entre mundo “salvaje” y mundo “civilizado.”

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<sup>2</sup> “The concept of the Anthropocene helps explain the widespread phenomenon of climate change fiction. Early climate change novels tended to focus on theoretical malleability of global climate, in terms of terraforming, nuclear winter, or geological processes. [...] To date, nearly all Anthropocene fiction addresses the historical tension between the existence of catastrophic global warming and the failed obligation to act. Under these conditions, fiction offered a medium to explain, predict, implore, and lament” (Trexler 9).

Para llevar a cabo el análisis, nos apoyaremos en tres novelas que a nuestro parecer constituyen una muestra ejemplar de lo que podría ser una estética ambiental meridional: *El padre de Blancanieves* de la novelista española Belén Gopegui (2007), *Os Malaquias* de la brasileña Andréa del Fuego (2011) y *Os Transparentes* del escritor angoleño Ondjaki (2012). Desde una perspectiva comparatista y contrastiva, intentaremos comprender en qué medida se puede hablar de una ecocrítica afrolusohispánica, destacando el marco epistémico-estético común que vertebra esas escrituras. Abordaremos primero los relatos antagónicos que esas ficciones dialogizan mediante la construcción de unas ecologías eminentemente agonísticas desde la resistencia, para centrarnos luego en la peculiar poética de la habitabilidad del mundo en tiempos del Antropoceno que dichos textos configuran.

## **El Antropoceno como categoría narratológica: relatos enfrentados y cosmovisiones en lucha**

### *Una agonística ambiental*

Según la dicotomía elaborada por Bruno Latour, que retoma los grandes paradigmas enfrentados en el campo de la ecología, existirían dos tipos de relatos del Antropoceno que, si bien no son incompatibles, aparecen como fuertemente antagónicos: a la fábula del Antropoceno como relato de salvación tecnocientífica arraigado en una toma de conciencia formulada y ratificada por las instancias legitimadoras y expertas del Norte, responde otra acepción sumamente agonística del concepto. El primer principio narrativo se encuentra plasmado en numerosas distopías ambientales, que escenifican ora una ecología del colapso, ora una ecología de la resiliencia tecno-optimista: esas obras no formulan realmente una crítica del progreso, sino que implícitamente configuran otra forma de metarrelato. Como escriben Bonneuil y Fressoz:

Aunque pretende anunciar su fin, esta fábula acaba por reproducir la visión del mundo de los modernos que incrimina. Procede del mismo régimen de historicidad que había imperado durante todo el siglo XIX y parte del siglo XX, en el que el pasado sólo se evalúa en negativo, con el rasero de una lección impartida por el futuro, y en una representación del tiempo en cuanto aceleración unidireccional. Escenifica un “frente de modernización”, que deja atrás un pasado ciego para ir hacia un porvenir en el que nuestros saberes se habrían globalizado y estabilizado, obligándonos por fin a tomarlos en cuenta en el juego político [...] La teleología del devenir ecológico de nuestras sociedades sustituye la del progreso. Estamos ante una fábula modernizadora que anuncia el fin de la modernización. (67; mi traducción)

Los relatos de la modernización, de la protección de la naturaleza –definida como una entidad radicalmente exterior al sujeto que construye un discurso acerca de ella– o del crecimiento verde vienen reemplazando paradójicamente la fábula del

progreso, un desplazamiento aún más problemático a la hora de considerar la necesidad de empezar a formular los lineamientos de una ecocrítica decolonial. Según el camerunés Étienne-Marie Lassi, uno de los mayores representantes de la ecocrítica africana, semejante visión de la ecología es profundamente occidental, exógena e incluso colonial. Adhiriéndose implícitamente al paradigma del ecologismo popular creado por el economista catalán Joan Martínez Alier, el investigador denuncia el carácter hegemónico de la acepción modernizadora de una ecología que

[...] insinúa que los pobres de las llamadas regiones subdesarrolladas o tercermundistas, sumidas en los problemas de la supervivencia cotidiana y de las injusticias socioeconómicas, serían incapaces de promover la protección del medioambiente, a no ser que fuera para acusar a Occidente de sobreexplotar los recursos naturales y de contaminar el medioambiente. Este prejuicio esconde otro, a saber que las sociedades precoloniales carecían totalmente de conciencia ecológica. (Lassi 2; mi traducción)

Ahora bien, existen otros tipos de relatos que buscan el descentramiento frente a la episteme mayoritaria propuesta por Occidente. Esas fábulas, que las ficciones de nuestro corpus pretenden visibilizar escenificándolas, se proponen deshacer, minar o contestar la evidencia de la ontología naturalista y dualista en la que se fundamenta el primer relato:

[...] De hecho, el analista de las sociedades modernas, inmerso como los sujetos a los que estudia en una cosmología naturalista supuestamente coextensiva a toda la humanidad, no puede prevalerse de un punto de vista descentrado [...] que al desfamiliarizarlo le invitaría a cuestionar con más vigor los fundamentos de su propia posición en el mundo. (Descola 60; mi traducción)

Poniendo en escena experiencias comunitarias de resistencia al desarrollismo feroz, esos textos construyen otra acepción, más conflictiva y crítica, del Antropoceno: éste pasa progresivamente a designar el momento de una crisis sin precedentes de las certidumbres modernas—acerca de la naturaleza, pero también de los proyectos existenciales, del universalismo utópico y de las políticas territoriales que conllevan, como el proyecto colonial. La escena que la novela del Antropoceno viene dibujando sin cesar es la del desmoronamiento conjunto del “occidentaloceno” y del “capitaloceno.” En *Os Malaquias*, por ejemplo, al motivo de la orfandad de los tres protagonistas Nico, Júlia y Antônio, responde la instalación de una central hidroeléctrica y el desplazamiento forzado de la comunidad a un sitio más elevado. Más allá de una mera tematización del cambio climático, se trata de sugerir el origen antropogénico de las desigualdades y violencias ecológicas que afectan a las comunidades desposeídas:

Casas fechadas, foram chegando crianças, mulheres, homens, os cachorros atrás. Encontravam-se no caminho e especulavam. Nunca antes um aviso para todo mundo e com urgência.

Com a capela cheia, um homem de fala clara deu o recado. Para o desenvolvimento da região uma hidrelétrica será criada. Para tal, era preciso represar água. O



- melhor lugar envolvia boa parte das fazendas e isso incluía o vale da Serra Morena. A empresa compraria as posses e facilitaria a construção de suas novas casas na cidade. O futuro tinha chegado.
- A água vai vir de onde?
  - Quanto de água cabe no vale?
  - Vai cobrir nossa casa?
  - Da minha não saio nem morto. (Fuego 75-76)

Convocar la noción de Antropoceno como un posible prisma hermenéutico para la novela de los Sures equivale a hacer hincapié en los incontables relatos de la desposesión y de la movilización de las víctimas, de los sin-parte de la modernidad y del progreso. También implica abrir un cuestionamiento filosófico acerca de las posibilidades de habitar la tierra, y acerca de las cosmologías que inspiran y vertebran las comunidades afectadas.

### *Gaïa, la guerra de los mundos y el posnaturalismo: una escritura de la desposesión*

El Antropoceno, al producir millones de refugiados climáticos, hace peligrar muchas de las promesas que contenía la modernidad: la idea de una vida mejor para la mayoría queda seriamente amenazada, así como el horizonte de una paz o de una posible comunión en torno a la naturaleza, que ya no se puede entender como potencial instancia de reconciliación, sino que aparece más bien como un *casus belli*, a la vez lugar y objeto de conflictos violentos. En las novelas del corpus, el Antropoceno designa la posibilidad de la barbarie o la necesidad de la guerra. En la novela *Os Malaquias*, la noticia de la futura inundación de un pueblo de la *Serra Morena* (Brasil) a raíz de la instalación de una central hidroeléctrica desencadena una serie de acontecimientos mortíferos:

Dois dias para sair, com mais três a água chegava para fazer do vale um lago, a reserva da luz elétrica. Mais da metade do vale havia-se mudado. [...] Uma família se paralisou diante da inundação, não saíram da casa, em silêncio se deixaram afogar. Temência ao natural, aceitaram o destino de progresso, feito deles o cordeiro do sacrifício. Uma paralisia triunfante, injeção de morfina, sem dor, calados. (Fuego 81-83)

El Antropoceno hace emerger lo que Latour califica de “nuevo régimen climático” caracterizado por la proliferación de luchas ecoterritoriales (Svampa), una situación de conflictos múltiples y permanentes en torno a Gaïa,<sup>3</sup> que la primera lectura, en su versión posapocalíptica (colapsología) o en su vertiente tecno-optimista, implicaba silenciar. Esa agonística ambiental y posnatural viene escenificada de manera ejemplar en *Os Transparentes* de Ondjaki. Después de

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<sup>3</sup> Usamos con Bruno Latour el término de Gaïa para referirnos a la Tierra como entidad posirénica y posreconciliadora, y por ende posmoderna y posnatural. Al mismo tiempo la elección terminológica se concibe como un homenaje a las cosmovisiones precoloniales que la epistemología naturalista tendió a invisibilizar.

haber decretado la nacionalización de un eclipse total, el Partido en el poder decide sencillamente anular dicho fenómeno natural:

[...] Angola anuncia ao país e ao mundo o cancelamento, repito, o cancelamento total do eclipse anunciado para os dias próximos. serão envidados esforços para minimizar os danos económicos que esta decisão possa causar, mas a partir deste momento o Partido declara inteiramente cancelado o tão esperado eclipse total!  
– era o que faltava  
– ora porra, se eu soubesse não tinha vindo  
lamentavan os estrangeiros  
era frustrante assistir, assim, à alteração do curso das coisas, e das expectativas coletivas, não por força da natureza mas sim por vontade humana, ainda que esse curso seja intencionalmente apresentado como o fruto de uma decisão sábia e ponderada por um coletivo de pessoas, no presente caso, um coletivo político.  
(Ondjaki 362-363)

Esta escena, de apariencia cómica y sobrenatural, indica la caducidad de la noción de naturaleza en tanto entidad autónoma y separada del mundo social y de la esfera política. Encontramos la misma idea en la novela de Belén Gopegui, mediante las palabras de Mauricio, uno de los militantes del grupo de activistas ecologistas que emprenden la construcción, en una azotea madrileña, de un dispositivo de cultivo de spirulina capaz de producir oxígeno a pequeña escala y de reducir la contaminación:

Y lo más importante: plantear que las decisiones fundamentales sobre lo que es bueno investigar y elaborar y transformar nos han sido arrebatadas. Sería nuestra forma de contar que la lucha política puede hacerse ahí, en la producción, o en la transformación o como quieras. Creo además que la lucha política se une con la ecológica, porque toda producción entraña siempre una destrucción, y también la decisión de lo que se destruirá nos la han negado. (Gopegui 128)

Desposesión ecológica y desposesión política se presentan como indisociables, y las experiencias de ecología comunitaria y popular aparecen poetizadas como una respuesta constante a las lógicas de espolio en marcha. Pensar el Antropoceno supone cuestionar el régimen histórico de acumulación, de extracción y de extorsión capitalista: es más, las novelas lo designan tácitamente como el origen del descarrilar geológico de la Tierra fuera del Holoceno, vinculando íntimamente la producción de las desigualdades socioeconómicas con la producción de las degradaciones ambientales.

Así, la naturaleza ya no reúne, sino que divide. En la novela del Antropoceno, asistimos a una guerra de los mundos y de las cosmovisiones peculiar, en la medida en que opone los modernos, los modernizadores, a los terrícolas, a los habitantes de Gaïa, a los que el escritor angoleño Ondjaki llama “los Transparentes”, las víctimas olvidadas e invisibilizadas del desarrollismo. Dicha guerra de los mundos se empareja con la lucha de clases, pero la supera ya que conlleva la necesidad de descentrar la mirada con respecto al modelo marxista clásico: la agonística ambiental que se despliega en estas ficciones implica por

ejemplo repensar la frontera entre lo humano y lo no-humano. Varios agentes de transformación o elementos de la posnaturaleza, como los biocidas, las máquinas, los dispositivos de extracción o los OGM, pertenecen, como los que les crean o están involucrados en el proceso de su fabricación y puesta en marcha, al bando de los modernos o modernizadores. En *Os Transparentes* y *Os Malaquias*, el frenesí desarrollista y extractivista—un término del portugués que los antropocénólogos retoman y emplean cada vez más—en el que está implicada una comunidad híbrida de humanos y máquinas, desestabiliza a los moradores, los terrícolas –un colectivo que incluye no solamente a los seres humanos que asumen sin dualismo su pertenencia a la Tierra desde el modelo de una planetaridad situada (Spivak 71), sino también a los ecosistemas amenazados, a los elementos naturales de frágil equilibrio y a las zonas críticas. El propio título *Os Transparentes* no sólo es una metáfora que designa a las comunidades y pueblos cuya lucha suele invisibilizarse, sino que remite a la ausencia de fronteras entre el ser humano y lo que le rodea: la trayectoria del personaje de Odonato, que se vuelve cada vez más transparente y acaba por salir volando por el cielo de Luanda, simboliza la caducidad del corte ontológico reduccionista moderno en provecho de una ontología relacional. En el siguiente fragmento, podemos leer a través de la nostalgia de Odonato la progresiva invasión de la comunidad por los dispositivos de la modernidad que vinieron a perturbar la propia temporalidad de los sujetos que se perciben como profundamente terrestres, situados y arraigados:

Luanda era então, se comparada com a atualidade, um quase deserto urbano onde faltava a comida e a roupa, os medicamentos, sem água ou luz, muitas vezes faltava cerveja ou vinho, as refeições chegavam a limitar-se ao famoso peixe-frito com arroz de quase-tomate, faltavam enlatados mais não alguma fruta vinda do sul e do interior, faltava whisky mas não o peixe-seco, não havia linhas telefónicas estáveis mas as conversas eram abençoadas pelos tardios ventos da madrugada, os sapatos estavam gastos mas as pernas felizes num contentamento de incansáveis noites de kizomba, havia o recolher obrigatório e por isso as festas se enchiam de uma gente que a garantia em sorrisos e animação até depois das cinco da manhã, não havia cd's nem éme pê três mas os gira-discos suavam e os amplificadores eram tratados com ventoinha para não comprometerem o convívio musical, não se sabia de tantas doenças sexuais nem dos mais recentes hábitos de cobrir o membro com apertados pedaços de plástico mas as praias e os muros e as moribundas viaturas oscilantes sabiam dos corpos refeitos no ato celebrante do amor, nasciam então tantas crianças, morriam outras tantas, nasciam outras mais, as festas pobres serviam mais para rever familiares e vizinhos do que para comer ou cometer exhibicionismos de novo riquismo, o mar era mais generoso em peixe até as pessoas eram mais brandas. (Ondjaki 180)

Esta descripción de Odonato apunta al desarrollismo como agente de una desposesión paradójica, típicamente moderna, que opera por saturación, como indica en la propia sintaxis la lógica acumulativa y copulativa que une en una misma visión holística y sistémica todas las dimensiones de la existencia, tanto geológica como social. En los tres textos que nos ocupan, la alternancia de

dispositivos posnaturales y sobrenaturales pone en tela de juicio la acepción moderna de la naturaleza como instancia de pacificación.

El Antropoceno en tanto categoría narratológica implica reconsiderar la frontera ya caduca entre naturaleza y cultura, en la medida en que supone un nuevo reparto de agencia entre humanos y no-humanos: se le puede considerar como un posible punto de inflexión a partir del cual la Tierra se ha transformado en una enorme y global zona crítica. Lejos de plasmarse en distopías de cariz catastrofista o posapocalíptico, la reflexión sobre el Antropoceno en la economía narrativa de las novelas de los Sures supone un fenómeno de reterritorialización, de relocalización y de rematerialización: se trata de un nuevo régimen de existencia que perturba las categorías establecidas y hace, por ejemplo, de la novela social (incluso de la novela urbana) el lugar preferente de una reflexión privilegiada acerca de lo que todavía podría llamarse, tomando en cuenta todas las restricciones y precauciones que hemos venido formulando hasta ahora, “la naturaleza.”

Porque escenifican un pensamiento ecológico que es a la vez posnatural y profundamente político, las ficciones del corpus dibujan una agonística ambiental que ratifica la desaparición de la naturaleza moderna y reconciliadora en provecho de una poética del conflicto y de la desposesión que afecta a los habitantes de Gaïa, cuyas cosmovisiones, experiencias y prácticas se visibilizan con profusión. Pero el reconocimiento narrativo de la inhabitabilidad de Gaïa no da lugar, como muy a menudo es el caso en las ficciones noroccidentales, a una preferencia distópica y colapsológica, sino a una remotivación de la narración colectiva que emprende, como veremos ahora, caminos formales bien peculiares.

### **“Relación” y habitabilidad: el punto de vista de Gaïa**

Las novelas del corpus tematizan el lazo que une a los terrícolas con su entorno, no en una perspectiva de enfrentamiento, de binarismo o de corte ontológico, sino desde la óptica de una “relación,” una noción que entendemos tanto en su aspecto narratológico y poético, en el sentido de un “relatar vinculando” (Glissant 187; mi traducción), como en su acepción antropológica (Descola 74). En vez de una mera teleología del devenir ecológico, asistimos a la emergencia de un dispositivo enunciativo particular: en todos los textos citados, rastreamos la presencia de un punto de vista integrado, articulado sobre un principio de no separación o de imposible exterioridad de lo humano frente a la Tierra. Un punto de vista que podríamos calificar con Jean-Christophe Bailly de heterótrofo (Bailly 57), el del ser vivo que asiste al mundo al cual pertenece desde una apertura fundamental, una disponibilidad primordial y una postura conectada. Tal instancia de relación tiene que ver estructuralmente con el Antropoceno, puesto que constituye una especie de refutación formal del dualismo humanidad/naturaleza en el que se fundamentan la ontología y la epistemología

occidentales desde el Renacimiento. Semejante punto de vista, descentrado y antiesencialista, es integrador e inclusivo: la instancia de relación baja a ras de tierra o de agua, se opera un desplazamiento desde el punto de vista de Sirius—lo que Enrique Castro Gómez denomina el “hybris del punto cero”—hacia el de Gaïa, el de las comunidades híbridas, humanas y no-humanas, de seres desposeídos que luchan para seguir habitando la Tierra. En *Os Malaquias*, los restos del pueblo inundado y sus habitantes se funden en un mismo colectivo: “No alto da Serra Morena, Nico, Maria e Antônio. No telhado da casa, Eneido. Mais ninguém” (Fuego 81). En *Os Transparentes*, la confrontación entre el ser humano y su entorno se narra desde una perspectiva posnatural, relacionada y sistémica: el modesto espacio vital del personaje del Cartero se ha vuelto totalmente inhabitable y la casita de la chabola donde vivía ha desaparecido debajo de una montaña de basura:

parou o seu corpo cansado para mirar com assombro a enorme montanha de lixo que o separava da sua casa, há anos que o trajeto era este, os seus pés conduziam-no automaticamente a casa, no escuro ou sob a luz de tantos luares, o Carteiro entrava no seu musseque, cruzava várias casas, curvava por becos de chão irregular e molhado por águas imundas, e antes de chegar a casa atravessava a enorme montanha de lixo que dividia, na realidade, dos musseques, um riozinho de água escura desenhava no chão curvas que imitavam, com muito boa vontade, um enorme mapa de Angola, o Carteiro confirmava as curvas sinuosas do perigoso riacho, dava um passo mais largo e atravessava-o, descobrindo nas lateiras da lixeira sempre uma passagem de lixo compacto que o conduzia, cento e tal metros depois, à porta da sua pobre casa, mas o Carteiro parou o seu corpo cansado e usou os olhos para confirmar que essa passagem havia desaparecido, tudo era ocupado pelas extensões altas da montanha de detritos acumulados durante anos, deu a volta, olhou, não conseguia passar, tentou subir, escorregou sem se magoar, apanhou o seu saco de cartas e tentou por outro lado, mas a impossibilidade do acesso configurava-se cada vez mais perentória, sorriu, julgando estar a interpretar de modo errado o caminho para a sua própria casa, olhou as árvores que serviam de orientação e viu estar no lugar certo da passagem para a sua casa [...] era mais uma ofensa que a cidade e o lixo proferiam contra a sua pessoa, impedindo-o de usar o mesmo caminho, a mesma via térrea, suja e estranha, mas um trilho que era também um pouco seu [...]. (Ondjaki 397-398)

Debido a que significa el encuentro del tiempo humano con el tiempo terrestre, la hipótesis del Antropoceno deshace la gran dicotomía entre la naturaleza y la sociedad al confirmar la entrada de la humanidad en esa nueva era, los científicos aportarían una especie de prueba geológica a la crítica descoliana del naturalismo. Si seguimos las categorías ontológicas del antropólogo francés, que formula cuatro maneras de definir la relación entre el ser humano y el otro, el punto de vista integrado no procedería de una ontología naturalista y dualista, sino más bien de una cosmovisión profundamente animista, totemista o analógica. La vertiente social y la ecológica se encuentran mezcladas en el punto de vista de Gaïa, un punto de vista colectivo y multisituado que es también el *punto de vida* de comunidades protagonistas de una violenta lucha ecosocial. En *El padre de Blancanieves*, la



palabra coral y alternada de los diferentes miembros de un grupo de activistas ecologistas genera otra instancia de relación, la del “narrador colectivo” cuyos contornos ontológicos se exploran mediante fragmentos textuales denominados “comunicados”:

Ustedes, sujetos individuales, suelen referirse a mí como asamblea, aunque a veces también me llamen congreso, foro, grupo de grupos, movimiento. Y no suelen tener oportunidades para conversar conmigo. Los sujetos colectivos no hablamos sino que más bien emitimos circulares, documentos, resoluciones. Un comunicado es de las cosas menos solemnes que podemos emitir. Pero yo me he tomado la libertad de añadirle esta presentación porque los sujetos colectivos nos pensamos a nosotros mismos en singular y tenemos nuestras cosas. Preferencias, ya saben, manías, estribillos que se nos pegan a veces, peculiaridades. Yo, por ejemplo, además de en singular tiendo a pensarme a mí mismo en masculino. Creo que es porque desde pequeños nos enseñan que a lo que más nos parecemos no es a los animales ni a los vegetales sino: a) al plancton, b) a los extraterrestres. (Gopegui 13)

A semejanza de lo que ocurre en la novela de Belén Gopegui, en *Os Malaquias* y *Os Transparentes* también se atomiza la relación del devenir ecológico de ambas comunidades en una multitud de voces que están fuertemente ancladas en los lugares que habitan y metaforizan. La privatización del agua y la extracción del petróleo en la primera novela y la construcción de una presa en la segunda obligan a los moradores a repensar totalmente su modo de vida, y la relación de las desigualdades ecológicas emana siempre de la lucha de un colectivo compacto y resistente.

En la ficción del Antropoceno, la narración alternada, al hacer intervenir y al conectar entre ellas subjetividades ancladas en temporalidades ora geológicas, ora sociales, anula o desnaturaliza formalmente el corte moderno entre la temporalidad de la historia humana y la temporalidad de la historia de la Tierra y de la vida. La historia común del planeta y de las sociedades abre un cauce para un régimen de relación metabólica del mundo, sugiriendo la existencia de relaciones de coconstrucción, de codependencia y de compenetración entre lo social y lo ecológico. Dichas conexiones se plasman en la adopción del punto de vista integrado donde convergen y se funden dos regímenes temporales tradicionalmente separados. En *Os Transparentes*, encontramos este principio de condensación de las temporalidades social y geológica: el espacio estratificado del edificio en el que viven los protagonistas simboliza la historia de la ciudad de Luanda a través de una comunidad metonímica, a la par que da a leer una radiografía del suelo y del subsuelo de la capital angoleña. El edificio, agujereado por todas partes, amenazado de derrumbamiento, se organiza en estratos. Alberga en los bajos una providencial y profusa reserva de agua que será también un refugio cuando la ciudad arda en llamas, y en la azotea un cine poscolonial. La estratificación geológica es también social ya que va vinculada con la puesta en relación de diferentes capas de la sociedad *caluanda*. Como en el caso del narrador colectivo de Belén Gopegui o del valle polifónico de Andréa del Fuego, el punto de vista del edificio-*oikos*, verdadero protagonista de la novela, no es el de los

humanos ni el de la naturaleza, es más bien el punto de vista sistémico y posdisyuntivo de Gaïa.

Asistimos a un fenómeno de rematerialización del discurso ecológico de la novela en el marco de una estética que intenta emanciparse de la dicotomía entre antropocentrismo y ecocentrismo, sin eludir lo social ni producir un discurso estrictamente proteccionista hacia el medio ambiente que reconduciría sin historizarlos los fundamentos de la antropología moderna. Semejante propuesta estética, que encontramos en las narraciones de Ondjaki, Belén Gopegui o Andréa del Fuego, contribuye también a desestabilizar la frontera que históricamente separa los estudios poscoloniales y los estudios ecocríticos, enquistados ambos en una tradición de enemistad epistemológica basada en una supuesta incompatibilidad en términos de marco referencial (Huggan y Tiffin). En los tres textos encontramos formulada una nueva definición de la inmanencia, lejos del idealismo paseísta que la mirada colonial pudo atribuir a los pensamientos meridionales sobre el medioambiente.

La propia forma de la ficción del Antropoceno se mimetiza con los desastres geocológicos que en ella se vienen contando. El texto es una suma de fragmentos narrados desde un punto de vista simultáneamente global y situado, planetario y anclado; su trama está agujereada y es discontinua, como el suelo de Luanda desfigurado por los dispositivos de perforación para la extracción del petróleo y el dédalo de tuberías que se instalan a raíz de la ratificación de un proyecto de privatización del agua. En *El padre de Blancanieves*, la destrucción final de los fotobiorreactores corresponde con el desmembramiento del sujeto colectivo, un desmembramiento que no se cuenta desde ningún tipo de desencanto catastrofista, ya que es sólo provisional:

Duramos, y si bien hay rencillas, peleas, abandono y dejadez, no se define al árbol por el movimiento de sus ramas sino por el tronco, la copa y las raíces. Aun cuando el viento no agitara sus ramas seguiría siendo árbol; en cambio, no lo sería sin raíces. No son las rencillas las que nos definen, ni las peleas ni la dejadez. Soplan, sin duda, y nos agitan, pero no nos definen: no son consustanciales a nuestra naturaleza. (Gopegui 327)

El corpus pone de manifiesto un movimiento de descentramiento general y sistemático: si seguimos nuestra hipótesis inicial, en la ficción afrolusohispánica del Antropoceno, pasaríamos de una teleología del devenir ecológico del planeta—que es también una escatología individualista—a un cuestionamiento acerca de las condiciones materiales y modalidades ontológicas de su habitabilidad. El edificio de Luanda, la azotea de Madrid o la *Serra Morena* brasileña, son heterotopías del Antropoceno, zonas críticas frágiles y amenazadas, que plantean sin catastrofismo ni pesimismo la pregunta del “cómo vivir en un mundo en ruinas.”

## Conclusiones. Narrativas transatlánticas del Antropoceno: hacia una ecocrítica decolonial

El concepto de Antropoceno sugiere la idea de una nueva colaboración entre manifestaciones de la historia humana y de la historia geológica. Al hacer caducar la partición humanidad/naturaleza y al redistribuir sus propiedades, la ficción del Antropoceno plantea, a través de la guerra de los mundos que escenifica y despliega, preguntas de orden político, filosófico y (meta)narrativo: se trata de saber con qué relato del Antropoceno queremos identificarnos.

A nivel formal, si bien existen ocurrencias distópicas en la literatura ecológica de la zona que aquí se considera, la distopía socioambiental y la escatología pesimista que le suele ser consustancial están más bien relacionadas con una cosmología noroccidental y un universalismo abstracto cuya característica es la “hybris del punto cero” (Castro-Gómez), es decir la naturalización de un régimen de verdad u-tópico. Frente a ese metarrelato autoexplicativo y monotópico, que va vinculado con una acepción modernizadora del Antropoceno, asistimos a la emergencia de un realismo ecosocial que, bajo la forma de una relación agujereada, colectiva a la par que polifónica y multisituada, pretende reintroducir territorializándolo el lugar enunciativo, el *locus*, como condición de una econarrativa crítica. La hipótesis de la existencia de formas narrativas propias de la escritura ambiental meridional, entre las cuales destaca el descentramiento enunciativo, sugiere a nivel interpretativo la necesidad de un acercamiento entre los estudios ecocríticos y las teorías decoloniales, al construir esa literatura un pensamiento metabólico de las desigualdades ecológicas y las socioeconómicas desde una semiótica de la situación y de la posicionalidad. En las novelas citadas, el Antropoceno toma los rasgos del occidentaloceno y del capitaloceno, asemejados a regímenes de existencia consumistas y depredadores al borde de la implosión, y se enfoca desde un punto de vista que restituye las movilizaciones y los conflictos de los seres desposeídos. Dicha poética permite reconciliar la perspectiva antropocéntrica que adoptan preferentemente los estudios decoloniales y el deseo de ecocentrismo que frecuentemente se formula en el seno de la ecocrítica. Inferimos entonces que la ecocrítica afrohispanoamericana estibaría, a semejanza de la literatura ambiental cuyos rasgos hemos intentado esbozar, en una hermenéutica integrada o integradora, posicionada, que procede a la vez de una poética y de una política de Gaïa y abre un cuestionamiento acerca de las modalidades de la habitabilidad del planeta a través de la búsqueda y elaboración de una relación descentrada, ya sea epistemológica o estética.

La fase de reterritorialización en la que ha entrado la ecocrítica desde los años 2000 supone un proceso de reformulación teórica, epistemológica y estética sumamente significativo. Emerge un paradigma hermenéutico alternativo dentro de la escritura ambiental basado en una nueva geopolítica del pensamiento, un prisma interpretativo cuyos postulados metodológicos y axiológicos y cuyo marco

epistémico son profundamente decoloniales. Tras el momento fundacional norteamericano, la ecocrítica viajó a espacios y territorios físicos y epistémicos distintos y su paulatina territorialización implicó un fenómeno de emancipación o de distanciamiento respecto de una serie de evidencias epistemológicas, en particular de la ontología naturalista y la visión del medioambiente que ésta implica. Tanto a nivel epistémico como a nivel literario, investigadores y escritores apelan a una pluralización de los acercamientos y las escrituras de la ecología, una perspectiva cuyo horizonte epistemológico y político es la posibilidad de un conocimiento multitópico del mundo, que articule discursivamente el modelo creado por Donna Haraway de los conocimientos situados.<sup>4</sup> Las narrativas transatlánticas del Antropoceno, en tanto tentativas de formalización de un pensamiento de la huella ecológica humana, nos parecen ejemplares en este sentido: al dialogizar sin cesar una guerra de los mundos, desnaturalizan, defamiliarizan e historizan cada una de las epistemes y cosmovisiones en conflicto, dando un paso adelante en el largo y necesario camino hacia la decolonialización del ser y del saber.

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<sup>4</sup> Véase al respecto, entre otros, los trabajos de Enrique Castro-Gómez, Arturo Escobar, Émilie Hache, Étienne-Marie Lassi, Maria Paula Meneses, Walter Mignolo, Luis I. Prádanos, Boaventura de Sousa Santos o Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.

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## Viral Events: Epidemiology, Ecology, and the Outbreak of Modern Sovereignty

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### Abstract

Like most revolutionary processes, the history of the Haitian revolution has typically been narrated from the perspective of revolutionary heroes. Whether as the feat of Toussant L'Ouverture, Francois Macandal or Jean-Jacques Dessalaines, historians have often tried to encapsulate the revolution within the narrow margins of human causality. In this article, I attempt to sketch the contours of another possible history: an ecological history in which the feats of the revolutionary heroes give way to the radical power of nature. By focusing on the role that two epidemic phenomena—*yellow fever* and *mesmerism*—had within the revolution, I attempt to show how the emergence of an “epidemiological discourse” proved to be fundamental for imagining the outbreak of modern sovereignty as it occurred in Saint-Domingue. Drawing on the ecological history of the Greater Caribbean and the routes of exchange that determined the historical development of its radical environment, the article attempts to imagine what an ecocritical history of the revolutionary process could look like. It lays out a political cartography unlike that which one usually encounters in history books, following a mosquito in its route from Africa to America and retracing the way in which a European pseudo-science—mesmerism—arrived from France to America. The epidemiological discourse surrounding both yellow fever and mesmerism reveals the emergence of a new sociological language capable of figuring the crisis of imperial modes of sovereignty as well as the emergence of new modes of radical subjectivity. Departing from the works Deleuze and Guattari, but also in dialogue with recent debates in ecocriticism, the significance of the Haitian Revolution is reconsidered in its relationship to the emergence of sociology as a language capable of explaining the emergence of the modern political subject par excellence: the modern multitude.

*Keywords:* mesmerism, yellow fever, biopolitics, sovereignty, Haitian Revolution, Greater Caribbean.

### Resumen

Como la mayoría de los procesos revolucionarios, la historia de la revolución haitiana usualmente ha sido narrada desde la perspectiva histórica de los héroes revolucionarios. Ya sea como la épica de Toussant L'Ouverture, Francois Macandal o Jean-Jacques Dessalaines, los historiadores han intentado encapsular la revolución dentro de los márgenes de la causalidad humana. En este artículo, intento esbozar los contornos de otra posible historia: una historia ecológica en la que las hazañas de los héroes revolucionarios ceden el escenario al poder radical de la naturaleza. Mediante una articulación del rol que dos fenómenos epidémicos—la fiebre amarilla y el mesmerismo—tuvieron dentro de la revolución, intento demostrar cómo la aparición de un “discurso epidemiológico” demostró ser fundamental en el proceso de crisis de soberanía imperial que ocurrió en Saint-Domingue. Investigando tanto la historia ecológica del Gran Caribe como las rutas de intercambio que determinaron la radicalización de su atmósfera política, el artículo intenta imaginar una historia ecocrítica del proceso revolucionario. A través de una cartografía de las rutas transatlánticas de circulación de un mosquito, así como del desembarco en América de una pseudociencia—el mesmerismo—el artículo esboza una historiografía política distinta. Se escudriña el discurso epidemiológico que giraba en torno tanto a la fiebre amarilla como al



mesmerismo en relación con el surgimiento de un nuevo discurso sociológico capaz de representar la crisis de los modelos imperiales de soberanía y el surgimiento de nuevas subjetividades radicales. Partiendo de los trabajos de Deleuze y Guattari, pero también en conversación con los recientes debates sobre la ecocrítica, el significado de la Revolución Haitiana es reconsiderado en relación con el surgimiento de la sociología como el idioma del sujeto moderno por excelencia: la multitud.

*Palabras clave:* mesmerismo, fiebre amarilla, biopolítica, soberanía, la revolución haitiana, el Gran Caribe.

Amidst the retreat from Saint-Domingue and the defeat of Napoleon's forces in 1802, the chief doctor of the expeditionary army, Nicolas-Pierre Gilbert, published a history of the ecological and epidemiological reasons behind the defeat of the French forces. The book, entitled *Histoire médicale de l'armée française à Saint-Domingue; ou Mémoire sur la fièvre jaune*, dates from 1803 and shows Paris as its place of publication. Gilbert had been one of the few lucky members to return home out of the more than twenty thousand expeditionary soldiers Napoleon enlisted in 1802 under the command of his brother in law, General Charles Victoire Emmanuel Leclerc, as part of his plan to regain control over the island of Saint-Domingue. Guided by Toussant L'Ouverture, slave revolts had wrested the island from French control at the turn of the century. L'Ouverture, allegedly the grandson of a West African king, had the previous year—amidst the celebrations of the seventeenth anniversary of the abolition of slavery—declared himself governor for life under the powers given to him by the 1801 Constitution. He then proceeded to pronounce himself loyal to France. Napoleon, however, had other plans. Saint-Domingue played a central role in his dreams for an imperial cartography in the New World: regaining control over the western part of the island was crucial to his plan of extending the French empire throughout the Americas. Interestingly, as Gilbert recounts in his book, suggestively entitled *Memoirs of the Yellow Fever*, the failed expedition was to be marked by the ravages of disease rather than by that of the sword: the battle for sovereignty at the threshold of the New World was decided, not by the martial powers of the slave army but rather by the pitiless presence of a plague. As Gilbert recounts, Leclerc's troops arrived at Cap-Français on the *14 pluviôse an 10* (the revolutionary calendar date for the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February, 1802) and quickly took control over the island. However, with control came sickness. Silent, invisible, the plague chose the bodies it would strike with political eloquence: Leclerc's troops soon fell under the power of a sickness of unknown origin, but of recognizable symptoms. By March, with the arrival of the rains, the situation would worsen, decimating the expeditionary forces and turning a triumphal horizon into a catastrophic defeat. Gilbert's *Mémoire sur la fièvre jaune* reads as an attempt to illustrate, for the metropolitan public, the invisible powers of the tropical yellow fever. In his account, the fever "takes hold" of the soldiers'

bodies, producing in them a physiological crisis that could not be appeased by enlightened medicine:

La prostration des forces, qui, dans les premières instans de la maladie, s'était couverte du voile d'une irritation tres-vive, se démasque et marche a grands pas [...] Les dejections sont souvent noires; le visage, qui avait été d'un rouge foncé, se colore d'un jaune plus ou moins saturé : cette suffusion ictérique se répand sur la surface du corps: le malade exhale au loin une odeur cadavéreuse ; il meurt le premier, le troisieme, cinquieme, septieme jour. (66)

Over the following months, LeClerc saw how his troops disappeared into thin air as if by the power of a black magic, which, however, left the slave forces untouched. The slaves proved to be immune to the epidemic forces of the disease. As McNeill has explored, the geopolitics of this differential immunity—the fact that slaves proved to be immune to an epidemic fatal to the imperial forces—are merely the first of the many political implications such a seminal event had within the history of the Haitian Revolution and, as such, with the rise of the modern Nation-State. In fact, what becomes apparent from Gilbert's description of the symptoms of plague-ridden soldiers is precisely the metaphorical extent to which the yellow fever condensed the biopolitical implications of the Haitian revolution. As Roberto Esposito has argued in *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, what remains to be thought out here are the political consequences of the "immunitary character that the metaphor of the body politic lends to the modern political lexicon as whole" (114). In this sense, Gilbert's descriptions of the soldiers' sick bodies as possessed by electric forces that lead them to unintentional convulsions, to trance-like states, his descriptions of the famous black vomit that overcame soldiers in their last days, as well as his multiple discussions regarding immunity and contagion, allow us to sketch the key concepts for thinking the stakes of the Haitian Revolution. Questions concerning the nature of modern sovereignty, as well as questions concerning the nature of modern radical subjectivities, are all clearly sketched out by the metaphorical as well as terribly physical power of a plague that was able to put an end to a war that had extended for over a decade. The epidemiological, as well as immunological paradigm delineates the field of the game.

At first glance, from a simplistic point of view, one could then say, echoing Nicolas-Pierre Gilbert, that the plague and not the slave army, won the war. The historical account of the Haitian Revolution would therefore be reframed if it were not for the fact that, from the safe grounds of metropolitan France, one hears the voice of a scientist, or perhaps a charlatan, who also claimed responsibility for the triumphs of the New Republic. In Henri F. Ellenberger's *The Discovery of the Unconscious* we read: "In Saint Domingue, magnetism degenerated into a psychic epidemic amongst the Negro slaves, increasing their agitation, and the French domination ended in a bloodbath. Later Mesmer boasted that the new Republic, now called Haiti, owed its independence to him" (73). Ellenberger's account

extends the problem precisely where Gilbert's account ends: according to him, the triumph of the new Republic was partly due to the way in which something called mesmerism spread amongst the slaves, radicalizing them *as if* by the force of an epidemic. The triumphs of the revolution are thus further displaced from the individual political subjectivities of the revolutionary heroes—L'Ouverture, Dessalaines, Mackandall—toward an epidemic logic that now gains the density of a proper name: Franz Anton Mesmer. Later I shall delve into the history of the introduction of Mesmer's magnetic science into the revolutionary grounds of Saint Domingue. For now, however, I will be content with underlying a mere sketch of the "medical treatment" in an attempt to highlight the similarities that existed between Mesmer's magnetic cure and the trance-like maladies produced upon the body by the yellow fever. In a letter sent in 1784, Jeanne-Eulalie Millet, a colonist from the southern region of Petit Trou, recounts the effects of Mesmer's treatment in the catastrophic language of trance and possession:

A magnetizer has been in the colony for a while now, and, following Mesmer's enlightened ideas, he causes in us effects that one feels without understanding them. We faint, we suffocate, we enter into truly dangerous frenzies that cause onlookers to worry. At the second trial of the tub a young lady, after having torn off nearly all her clothes, amorously attacked a young man on the scene [...] Magnetism produces a conflagration that consumes us, an excess of life that leads us to delirium. (qtd. in Gorelick 73)

Mme. Millet's description of Mesmer's "enlightened" cure is illuminatingly paradoxical: it hints at a method of curing which induces on the body of the patient a crisis so strong that it forces the subject to break loose of its societal boundaries. When she speaks of magnetism as a cure producing an "excess of life," we are reminded of Nicolas-Pierre Gilbert's descriptions of Leclerc's plague ridden soldiers. In both cases, under the language of trance, possession and exertion, we are given the image of the sovereign body in crisis, the image of a sick and convulsive subjectivity at battle with the enlightened theories that had produced it.

In fact, as I will later explore in the article, the history of mesmerism and its introduction into the slave economy of Saint-Domingue is a fascinating one indeed, full of political mutations. Originally thought of—by the plantation owners—as a possible way of curing slaves and therefore maximizing their labor, mesmerism quickly mutated, as François Regourd has observed, into a figure for slave resistance. In two rulings from 1786 by the Conseil supérieur du Cap-Français, the authorities highlight the existence of nightly meetings in the northern district of *La Mermelade*, where they claimed slaves gathered, inducing convulsions and producing, as Regourd quotes, "false prodigies due to this would-be magnetism [...] usurped by Negroes and disguised by them under the name of *Bila*" (121). As Regourd notes, the name *Bila* referred to the *vodou* practices already shared by some of the slave population. The ruling continues to highlight the "numerous people" that attended nocturnal events as well as the crossbreeding of mesmerism

and occult African practices that characterized them. In the hands of the slaves, mesmerism mutates into a revolutionary science. As I argue in this article, the slaves saw a political tool in its logic of self-possession and trance.

What follows is an attempt to think the dialectical image that sparks once we place, side by side, these two phenomena: yellow fever and mesmerism. Therein, between these two secret poles, I would argue lies the invisible, epidemic, suggestive history of the Haitian Revolution, its triumph, and its consequences.

In the wake of James E. McClellan's seminal work *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* and Robert Darnton's *Mesmerism and the Ends of the Enlightenment*, numerous studies regarding the arrival of mesmerism to Saint Domingue have been published: studies such as François Regourd's *Mesmerism in Saint Domingue*, Karol M. Weaver's *Medical Revolutionaries*, and Nathan Gorelick's *Extimate Revolt: Mesmerism, Haiti, and the Origin of Psychoanalysis* have all attempted to read, from different perspectives, the revolutionary turn that mesmerism, or animal magnetism as it was also known, took as soon it disembarked within the already tense political grounds of the New World. Their studies have surged within the new wave of interest regarding the political journeys of enlightened sciences across the Atlantic: whether from the perspective of gender, as in Weaver's case, psychoanalysis, as in Gorelick's case, or history, as in Regourd's case, these studies attempt to answer the complex question regarding the birth and mutations of "modern science" as they occurred on that two-way street which, following Paul Gilroy, one could call the "Black Atlantic." On the other hand, following the resurgence of environmental studies within the humanities, scholars have started to pay attention to the impact that transatlantic routes determined by the slave trade had upon the "political ecology" of the New World: studies like Stuart McCook's *The Neo-Columbian Exchange* or Debbie Lee's *Yellow Fever and the Slave Trade*, from Robert K. D. Peterson's *Insects, Disease, and Military History* to J.R. McNeill's *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean*, have all highlighted the repercussions that the ecological mutations introduced by the slave trade as well as by transatlantic mercantilism had upon a political environment that was already ripe for revolution. Some of these studies have further pinpointed the role that the yellow fever, or black vomit, as it was also known, had upon the geopolitical history of the Greater Caribbean, and in particular, within the history of the Haitian Revolution. In this essay, I think through what happens when one reads the history of the Haitian Revolution from both perspectives at once: namely, what happens to the biopolitical history of the Black Atlantic once it is read from the discursive as well as material ground which mesmerism shared with the yellow fever: a discourse regarding the limits and heightened states of sovereign bodies, the radicalization of subjectivities, and the triple knot between hegemony, subjection and revolution. The biopolitical consequences of such discourse for the history of the late, radical enlightenment

are here mediated by a series of medical figures at the threshold of positivist science: the epidemic of yellow fever and mesmerism both encourage us to envision social bonds in terms such as contagion, suggestion, excitement, and immunity. When viewed from this discursive lens—rather than through a purely materialist conception—the history of the Haitian revolution, I believe, appears in its true density: as the first clinical case of a wave of political fervor that would soon spread throughout the Americas, exposing the crisis of the imperial modes of sovereignty. The dialectical image joining the plague-ridden bodies of Leclerc’s forces to those of the mesmerized bodies of both slaves and colonists, gives us the vocabulary through which to sketch many of the crucial questions regarding the role of the Haitian Revolution within modern political theory: What modes of political subjectivities arise out of the structural model of contagion and suggestion proposed by the figures of the plague and mesmerism? What happens to the territorial notion of the “political body” when it is forced to account for such heterogeneous spaces of intensities as those produced by the plague or by mesmeric magnetism? What happens to the social concept of slavery and empire, in its full semantic density, once it is forced to account for the possibility that a similar logic of the “possessed body” such as mesmerism could bring the collapse of the slave empire? All of these questions point to the Haitian Revolution as a place in which the Enlightenment encounters itself at its limits, as the condition of possibility of its own collapse. Over a century later, the playwright and writer Antonin Artaud, another Frenchman in conflict with his own legacy, would pronounce in his essay “The Plague and the Theater,” some illuminating words: “He saw himself plague-ridden and saw the disease ravage his tiny state” (45). Artaud’s intuition is precisely right: the logic of contagion and suggestion produces a profound disintegration and reformulation of the state conceived as a body politic.<sup>1</sup> As Roberto Esposito, who perhaps more than anyone else has championed the biopolitical implications of virality and contagion, states about biopolitics: “[...] by placing the body at the center of politics and the potential for disease at the center of the body, it makes sickness, on the one hand, the outer margin from which life must continually distance itself, and, on the other, the internal fold which dialectically brings it back to itself” (15). However, this doesn’t mean that the threat of contagion signals the end of the state. Rather, as my brief history of the Haitian Revolution will suggest, what would emerge out of such an epidemic crisis was the modern biopolitical state as a viral body politic in constant negotiation with its latent political viruses.

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent discussion on this relationship between the social contract and contagion, read Angela Mitropoulos’ *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia*, where the author sketches—departing from a biopolitical reading of contagion—a theory regarding the modern state.



## Revolutionary Flights: The Invisible Territory of the Mosquito

“Did the mosquito do it?”  
—Walter Reed

Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier knew very well the role that a mosquito could have in the history of a revolutionary process. Rather than depicting the main fighting years of 1791 to 1804 that frame the revolution’s acknowledged chronology, his historical account of the Haitian Revolution in his 1949 novel *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*) centers around an earlier political event that highlights the radical political ecology that characterized the emancipatory process of the first slave revolt of the Americas. In his attempt to uncover the historical logic of the revolutionary process, Carpentier scrutinizes historical records and attempts to find the original source of the revolutionary fever. As the novel’s famous prologue clearly states, he finds the source in the outflow of revolutionary fervor and belief that overtook the slave crowd that witnessed the 1758 execution of the famous maroon and vodou leader François Macandal. It is at that moment, Carpentier suggests, that history bifurcated the community into two historical groups: on the one hand, the slaves who believed in Macandal’s flight and on the other, the white colonists who returned to their homes believing that he had died in the bonfire. No longer passive spectators, the slaves’ faith had transformed them into radical subjects with historical agency.<sup>2</sup> Theirs, however, was not the only transformation. The scene of Macandal’s flight is also a scene of metamorphosis that merges the logic of vodou with the origins of the yellow fever. At the novel’s turning point, Macandal, a houngan knowledgeable of poisons and occult sciences, escapes the consuming power of fire by metamorphosing himself into the most minuscule of creatures: a mosquito. As the narrator, taking the perspective of the slave witness, explains:

In his cycle of metamorphoses, Macandal had often entered in the mysterious world of the insects, making up for the lack of his human arm with the possession of several feet, four wings, or long antennae. He had been fly, centipede, month, ant, tarantula, lady-bug, and even a glow-worm with the phosphorescent green lights. When the moment came, the bonds of the Mandigue, no longer possessing a body to bind, would trace the shape of a man in the air for a second before they slipped down the post. And Macandal, transformed into a buzzing mosquito, would light on the very tricorne of the commander of the troops to laugh at the dismay of the whites. This was what their masters did not know; for that reason they had

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<sup>2</sup> The prologue of *El reino de este mundo* marks the first appearance and theorization of what is perhaps the most famous aesthetic concept within Latin American literature: *lo real maravilloso*. Interestingly, little if any attention has been paid to the politics of witnessing that are there disclosed under the rubric of the category itself. As Carpentier suggests in regards to Macandal’s flight, the real maravilloso is a category that posits the event as such as a question regarding the politics of witness, interpellation and faith: Who sees what? Who is radicalized by what? To some extent, what Carpentier discusses in relationship to Macandal has the structure of the radical event as discussed by Badiou.



squandered so much money putting on this useless show, which would prove how completely helpless they were against a man chrismed by the great Loas. (44-45)

According to this logic of metamorphosis and invisibility, at the precise moment in which Macandal is thrown into the bonfire, a slave voice is heard yelling “Macandal sauvé!” producing a commotion within a crowd who suddenly believe they have seen their leader dissolve into thin air as a mosquito. The scene, presented by Carpentier himself in the book’s prologue as the primary example for what he called the “real maravilloso,” gains a particular epistemic density when placed in relationship to recent debates concerning posthumanism, zoopolitics, and postcolonial theories of shamanistic transformation. Whether in relationship to what Michael Taussig—in his study of Putumayo shamanism—has called the “space of death,” in regards to Eduardo Kohn’s recent work on posthuman anthropology in his book *How Forests Think*, or in the context of the recent debates concerning zoopolitics, from Derrida to Agamben, what the scene stages are the political implications of a “magical” world where the distinction between culture and nature, between human and animal, is superseded by a chain-like logic of metamorphosis that links the world as cosmos, to quote Isabelle Stengers’s work on cosmopolitics, or as an assemblage, in the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari. As Deleuze himself has expressed in an interview, the logic of the assemblage is not that of linearity but rather that of contagion:

What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures. Thus assemblage’s only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a “sympathy.” It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys: these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind. (Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II* 69)

So, it should not surprise us that Carpentier, in his depiction of Macandal’s line of flight, anticipates Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptual imagery: from his becoming-animal to the line of flight sketched by his deterritorializing metamorphosis, the scene gains political density as soon as it is placed side by side with the figural concepts proposed by the authors of *A Thousand Plateaus*. The reader is perhaps reminded of their comments regarding the relationship between becoming-animal and the figure of metamorphosis in their book on Kafka: “Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor. There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the world. The thing and other things are no longer anything but intensities overrun by deterritorialized sound or words that are following their line of escape” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 22). Macandal’s metamorphosis embodies the agitation and destabilization of the status quo that would soon produce the radical states of intensity and belief that would end up shattering the territorial sovereignty of the French empire. As Carpentier correctly portrays, the germ of the revolutionary atmosphere that

would later spread over the colony with the ferocity of an epidemic was already condensed in this scene in which a man becomes a mosquito. His insight is illuminating: the history of the revolution could then very well begin and end with a mosquito.

More than half a century before Alejo Carpentier wrote a mosquito into the epic of the Haitian Revolution, another Cuban hypothesized the role of the insect within the complex political history of colonial America. In 1881, three years after the yellow fever epidemic that had devastated the Mississippi Valley, a Cuban physician by the name of Carlos J. Finlay presented a daring hypothesis regarding the propagation of the disease to the Academy of Sciences of Havana.<sup>3</sup> According to Finlay, the agent of transmission of the disease was none other than a particular species of mosquito that would later become known as the *Aedes aegypti*. With his discovery Finlay was uncovering the protagonist of a transatlantic history that had determined the political ecology of the Atlantic for more than three centuries: as McNeill has studied in his book *Mosquito Empires*, the *Aedes aegypti* was originally endemic to Africa, but must have made the transatlantic trip aboard one of the thousands of ships that, beginning in the second half of the sixteenth century and leading all the way to the heart of the eighteenth century, made their way from the coasts of West Africa to the tropical grounds of the Caribbean (33). The virus probably crossed the Atlantic in its preferred modality: as the latent stowaway waiting for the perfect environment in which to proliferate. It soon found the appropriate environment in the economic boom of the Caribbean tropics that, as Antonio Benítez Rojo explains, coincided with the introduction of the slave plantation as a new space of social interaction (33-81). The virus proliferated alongside the booming Caribbean economy within that process of ecological globalization that Stuart McCook has recently called the “neo-Columbian exchange,” as a way of differentiating it from the first “Columbian exchange” as Alfred Crosby had famously termed the ecological exchange elicited by the first imperial impact in the fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries. As McCook and McNeill both notice, the logic of “differential immunity” described by the plague, as well as the history of the virus’ relationship to this new environment, helped shape the geohistory of the region. The main event in this invisible history was the introduction, in the seventeenth century, of the sugar cane as a valuable commodity and the emergence of the sugar plantation as the main tropical modality of social life:

After 1640 sugar and geopolitics set the table very nicely for the yellow fever virus. Sugar wrought an ecological revolution upon dozens of islands and numerous patches of adjacent continental lowlands. Soon, armies of slaves hacked

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<sup>3</sup> For a more informed discussion of Finlay’s discovery as well as its place within the political ecology of Cuban history please see “Chapter Four: The Hunt for the Mosquito in Mariola” of Espinosa’s *Epidemic Invasions*.

down and burned off millions of hectares of forest in order to plant cane. Their efforts led to multiple ecological changes. Soil erosion accelerated. Wildlife vanished. More important from the human point of view, as plantation replaced forest, conditions came to favor their transmission of yellow fever. (McNeill 350)

The economic climate surrounding this inaugural moment within the history of capitalism was quickly constructing the ecological as well as political conditions for its eventual demise. As Jason W. Moore has argued in his article “Capitalism, Ecology and the Nature of Our Times,” capitalism ends up not only exploiting nature, but rather reconfiguring it: “Capital’s dynamism turns on the exhaustion of the very webs of life necessary to sustain accumulation; the history of capitalism has been one of recurrent frontier movements to overcome that exhaustion, through the appropriation of nature’s free gifts beyond capital’s reach” (110). For the next century and a half, the population of African slaves blossomed in the colony, while the differential immunity made sure, as McCook illuminatingly points out, to keep the geopolitical *status quo* untouched: expeditionary invasions during the eighteenth century were all dismantled by the epidemic force of mosquito swarms. Little did the French know that what was truly being built were not the walls of an imperial fortress, but rather an assemblage binding the slave population to the ecological environment of the plantation: an assemblage that would later prove capable of radicalizing itself under the form of a revolutionary slave army. “Revolution was in the air”: the expression—which emphasizes the way discourses regarding hygiene, magnetism and revolution coincided within the late Enlightenment—fits perfectly within the case of Saint-Domingue. The tropical environment of the island, with its rainy seasons, swamped waters and humid climate—an image of oppression and insularity—was building the grounds upon which it would later show its more radical face. In tune with the pseudo-scientific chitchat that had become fashionable throughout the island in the eighteenth century, we are tempted to say: the air had become electric.<sup>4</sup> What this implies is something crucial: namely, that the territorial grounds upon which the French empire had until then represented its geopolitical power to itself were becoming progressively differentiated by the ecological force of a flow-like political vector that had suddenly interrupted the homogeneity of the territorial *status-quo*. The sovereign imperial body, alongside its territorial representations, was entering into a crisis of unknown precedent.

With its logic of contagion, the expansive proliferation of epidemic diseases was slowly contaminating the hegemonic imperial territory. The political consequences of the not yet proposed “germ theory of disease” were being

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<sup>4</sup> As McClellan discusses in *Colonialism and Science*, mesmerism was not the only pseudo-scientific theory to arrive in Saint Domingue. The island quickly became a perfect environment for the proliferation and mutation of scientific discourses coming from Europe, prominent among them, the theory of electricity.

incubated and sketched out with the greatest of curiosities. Regarding this point, medical doctors and military leaders shared a common passion. They both wanted to decipher the propagative logic of these diseases that reproduced without apparent order. To put the epidemiological paradox in terms that underline their political implications: the paradox regarding epidemics was that they reproduced without a clear representation. Like the slaves, the epidemic logic proliferated in an invisible manner, putting into question the representative realm that had, since the Enlightenment, guided reason. The struggle was then, in all realms, a struggle for representation and visibility. For the slaves, whose population had blossomed to become a distinct majority, it was a struggle for political representation and subjectivity, while for the medical doctors the question was how to represent the invisible, unpredictable, and exponential spread of the epidemic. It was both a politics of representation and a politics of scale: it was a struggle to comprehend the political cartography of the newly emerging political ecology. As such, the links between epidemiology, territoriality, and empire would become evident in the wave of medical cartography that would keep nineteenth century medical doctors busy. A prime example of such cartographic enterprise would be that of the French physician and natural historian Jean Baptiste Le Blond, the descendant of the eponymous architect who acted as chief designer of Saint Petersburg under the Tsarist rule of Peter the Great. In works like *Observations sur la fièvre jaune*, published in Paris in 1805, Le Blond would record his observations on the disease within a broader concern regarding the ecological cartography of the region. Le Blond's endeavours were not isolated. In fact, they foreshadowed one of the crucial events in nineteenth century medicine: John Snow's founding works in the field of modern epidemiology. Convinced that the miasma theory of disease, the theory that epidemics were spread by bad air, was wrong, Snow set out in the mid-nineteenth century to discover the true source of epidemic diseases.<sup>5</sup> His insight remains an outstanding event in the history of medicine as well as in the history of sociology: confronted with the cholera epidemic that had afflicted London in 1854, he decided to map as dots each of the cases that had led to death. His conclusion was surprising: after mapping the deaths produced by the epidemic, he came to the realization that most deaths had occurred in close proximity to the water pump on Broad Street. His investigations led him to believe that it was the water at that pump which had spread the disease rather than "bad air," a theory he would later confirm when he was able to prove that the Southwark and Vauxhall Waterworks Company was taking water from sewage-polluted sections of the Thames and delivering the water to homes. Snow's discovery proved to be foundational for

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<sup>5</sup> For a broader and more informed discussion of Snow's discovery as well as of the emergence of medical cartography, see Tom Koch's fascinating book *Cartographies of Disease: Maps, Mapping and Medicine*.

modern epidemiology and its emerging germ theory of disease: the theory that diseases are caused by microorganisms that remain invisible to the naked eye without magnification. More importantly for us, what Snow's discovery, with its use of cartography and statistics, proved was that the epidemiological discourse was in fact a political paradigm that linked the microcosm of germs with the macrocosm of visible reality. With its politics of scales, modern epidemiology was inducing a crisis upon the old notions of territoriality: as Snow's map of the Soho cholera outbreak showed, the modern political map was no longer a homogenous representational-space but rather a territory infected with dots. Within the walls of the imperial map, there lay latent viruses awaiting a vulnerable body through which to actualize themselves. Nowhere was this new territorial paradigm more evident than in the case of the Greater Caribbean, where the bothersome and miniscule *Aedes aegypti* had set the trap for Napoleon's expeditionary army.

### **Bodies in Crisis: Mesmerism and Radical Subjectivity**

“If by chance animal magnetism really existed...  
I ask you, sir, what revolution should we not expect?”  
—Nicolas Bergasse

The territorial body of the empire was not the only body whose hegemony entered into a state of crisis during the second part of the eighteenth century. At the same time that the *fièvre jaune* was setting the ecological stage for the Haitian Revolution, another social epidemic was transforming the way French subjects related to their own bodies. As Robert Darnton has explored, the arrival of *mesmerism* in Paris quickly evolved into a major social event that threatened to radicalize the subjectivities of imperial citizens. In February 1778, a German physician by the name of Franz Anton Mesmer arrived in Paris proclaiming the discovery of “a superfine fluid that penetrated and surrounded all bodies” (Darnton 3). This fluid, Mesmer theorized, was part of a magnetic field of energy transfers that mediated between the realm of animate matter and that of inanimate matter. Refuting natural history's concept of a *chain of being*, Mesmer saw nature as a universal flow of energy. The Parisian public, fascinated as it was with the possibility of invisible forces such as electricity and magnetism, quickly become intrigued by the possibility of such animal magnetism, as Mesmer called the fluid. A physician himself, he found in medicine the most direct of applications: the body, he claimed, was a magnetic field and sickness was the result of an obstacle in the flow of the fluid within this field. His next step was to devise a cure according to this theory. He found such a “cure” in an alluring performance: by massaging the body's “magnetic poles,” Mesmer claimed to be able to induce a crisis upon the body which, by the way of convulsions and epileptic-like trances,



broke loose the obstacles in the magnetic field and restored the health of the patient.<sup>6</sup> Mesmer's cure, acting out a crisis that mimicked the symptoms of an epidemic, was unknowingly producing a new affective concept of the body: the body was no longer the subject of sovereign consciousness but rather a magnetic territory traversed by flow-like intensities. As Darnton explains, in inducing the subject with temporary crises the cure was in itself an alluring social performance. Within what he called his crisis rooms, the performance would take place as a spectacle of truly social dimensions:

Gossips also found inspiration in Mesmer's apparatus, especially his mattress-lined "crisis room," designed for violent convulsives and his famous tubs. These were usually filled with iron filings and mesmerized water contained in bottles arranged like the spokes of a wheel. They stored the fluid and transmitted it through movable iron rods, which the patients applied to their sick areas. Sitting around the tubs in circles, the patients communicated the fluid to one another by means of a rope looped about them all and by linking thumbs and index fingers in order to form a "mesmeric chain," something like an electric circuit. (8)

Both structurally and practically, Mesmer's cure was setting the stage for a radicalized paradigm of social experience that rearranged the relationship between the body, nature, and the social medium. The figure of the mesmeric chain gave a radical twist to natural history's "chain of being." No longer a mere hierarchical structure, the chain was suddenly traversed by the electrical power of a flow capable of producing a social crisis. Mesmer's crisis room set the stage for a new modality of historical subjectivity that embraced the excess of life and attempted to go beyond the limits imposed by sovereign consciousness.

Coincidentally, the story of the arrival of mesmerism to Haiti and its eventual radical mutation at the hands of the slave population begins with a cartographic expedition. Already from the start the territory of the empire is at stake. In June 1784, seven years before the Haitian Revolution, the Comte de Chastenot, a thirty-two year old naval officer by the name of Antonine-Hyacinth de Puysegur arrived in Saint-Domingue aboard the *Frédéric-Guillaume*. His goal: to produce a cartographic survey of the islands north of Saint-Domingue. Luckily, the ship had been able to make the transatlantic trip without any major epidemic infecting its passengers. Or so he thought. Puysegur, who had studied in Paris with Mesmer himself, probably had an explanation for this. Amidst the cartographic materials that he had brought for the completion of his naval task, he had also brought a series of *bouquets*: in those tubs filled with mesmerized water Puysegur

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<sup>6</sup> Besides the apparent relationship with the medieval humorism and its theory of disease, one can easily detect the relationship of mesmerism to modern scientific discourse regarding action-at-a-distance like electricity and magnetism. The possibility of thinking the medium of such contagion would be crucial for modern science and would in turn prove to be a powerful metaphor for the social sciences.



had, throughout the trip, administered Mesmer's magnetic cures to his sailors, making sure that their health and spirits remained untouched. As he disembarked onto the island, he took the tubs with him. Soon, at the *Maison de Providence des Hommes*, Cap-Français' poorhouse, a series of mesmeric treatments were set up. Unconsciously, he had introduced into the already radicalized atmosphere of the colony a machine capable of materializing the latent political tension already present. However, at first sight, the cure seemed to fit perfectly within the mercantile logic of slavery. Structurally, the cure mimicked the logic of possession, energy and production that characterized slave economies: the mesmerizer, like the slaveholder, took hold of the body of the mesmerized subject, forcing him to release an excess of energy. Understanding the master and slave rubric that underlined the cure, colonial slaveholders quickly jumped at the opportunity of maximizing profits. In a 1785 report by plantation owner Jean Trembley we read of the multiple benefits brought by the introduction of mesmerism, among which the author underlines the cure of slaves:

A cripple brought from the plain to Cap-Français on a litter walked freely afterward. A female slave paralyzed for fourteen years was entirely cured in a short time without her realizing that she was being treated, etc. A plantation owner on this plain made a big profit in magnetizing a consignment of cast-off slaves he bought at a low price. Restoring them to good health by means of the tub, he was able to lease them at prices paid for the best slaves. The rage for magnetism has taken of everyone here. Mesmeric tubs are everywhere. (qtd. in McClellan 178)

Trembley's report condenses the biopolitics of the mesmeric tubs as desiring-machine: in the economy of expenditure elicited by the cure we find a biopolitical figure that reproduces the discursive paradigm set up by the yellow fever. Trembley's rhetoric—his comments regarding the omnipresence of the cure as well as its capacity to take hold of everyone—already suggest the relationship between epidemics and mesmerism: both phenomena stage a new relationship between the colonial subject and his body, as well as a new relationship between this body and production. What type of economy is sketched therein? Who takes hold of whom, and for what purpose? Like the "excess of life" with which Mme. Millet described the mesmeric crises in the passage previously quoted, mesmerism forces us to see what happens to the subject when its unity is shattered by a multiplicity that knows no boundaries. I am here reminded of Deleuze and Guattari's criticism of Freud's psychoanalytical reading of the crowd in *A Thousand Plateaus*: "Freud tried to approach crowd phenomena from the point of view of the unconscious, but he did not see clearly, he did not see that the unconscious itself was fundamentally a crowd" (27). Perhaps, I would claim following their insight, what has been missing from the numerous works devoted to the arrival of mesmerism in Haiti has been a deeper understanding of the ways in which not only was mesmerism an influential element within the Haitian Revolution, but

rather a paradigmatic one. As I have tried to elucidate here, it is this paradigmatic aspect that is exposed once the discursive relationship between the biopolitical significance of mesmerism's arrival in Saint-Domingue is placed alongside the political role of yellow fever. If, following Ellenberger's image of mesmerism as a "psychic epidemic," we conceive of it in the biopolitical terms disclosed by our analysis of the yellow fever, then we realize its true historical significance: rather than being merely an influential factor within the history of the Haitian Revolution, mesmerism's radicalization of subjectivity provided a formal model for thinking through the emerging radical subjectivities that would end up shattering the imperial hegemony. It then appears unsurprising that with the paradoxical logic of Hegel's master and slave dialectic, the traitorous multiplicity of a virus mesmerism suddenly changed hands and became a "property" of the slaves, as we read in two rulings by the Conseil Supérieur du Cap-Français. To some extent it was theirs to begin with, for it was their struggle for a radical subjectivity that the cure mimicked.

These two 1786 rulings by the Conseil Supérieur du Cap-Français allow us to understand the ways in which mesmerism mutated from an imperial science into a political tool used by the slave population. In these rulings, the authorities highlight the existence of nightly meetings in the northern district of *La Mermelade*, where they claimed slaves gathered, inducing convulsions and producing, as François Regourd stated in the quote cited above, "false prodigies due to this would-be magnetism [...] usurped by Negroes and disguised by them under the name of *Bila*," referring to vodou (121). The ruling continues to highlight the "numerous people" that attended nocturnal events as well as the crossbreeding of mesmerism and occult African practices that characterized them:

[T]he miraculous operator has the subjects who ask to submit to his power brought to him into the circle. He does not limit himself to magnetizing them in the modern sense of the word. After the magician has caused the stupor or convulsions in them using both the sacred and the profane, holy water is brought to him since he pretends it is necessary to break the spell that he had previously cast on the subjects... (Regourd 322)

The counsel's description, in its conflation of mesmerism and vodou, provides us with the vocabulary through which to think the consequences of mesmerism's mutation at the hands of the slaves: miracles, subjects, power, circles, magnetism, magic, stupor, convulsion, spells... All of these figures allow us to comprehend the introduction of mesmerism into the slave circles within the logic of radicalization that characterized the struggle for subjectivity of the slaves. What comes to light from this description, as well as from Carpentier's description of Macandal's line of flight, is the fact that in their struggle for political visibility, in their struggle for political subjectivity, the slaves were in fact forcing the enlightened concept of subjectivity to explode from within. As we read in Médéric Moreau de Saint-Méry's 1797 *Description topographique*: "most of the participants asked for the ability to

control the mind of their masters” (qtd. in Gorelick 123). Unknowingly, they were casting a spell upon the imperial subject, one that broke it loose of the chains of its imperial unity, and brought it forth as a true multiplicity beyond representation. Isn't this precisely the logic of crowds, multiplicity and deterritorialization that is sketched by Macandal in Carpentier's representation of his final escape? What Carpentier's scene—in its description of the miraculous moment of liberation—suggests is that the true moment of liberation and freedom within the Haitian Revolution was not limited to that of individual subjectivities but rather occurred when the imperial logic of sovereignty was confronted with an epidemic logic capable of decentralizing the subject's self-possession. With the adoption of mesmerism, the slaves were paradoxically gaining advantage of the logic of possession that characterized their situation. As Karol Weaver notes, they were also bringing back the memory of Macandal's mythic death, and with it the colonial fear of being poisoned: “These fears are made plain by the court's willingness to apply the 1758 law, which stated, ‘Prohibited to free men of color and slaves to compose, sell and distribute or buy talismans or *macandals*’” (108). After conjuring up the memory of Macandal, the declaration of 1786 ends by explicitly forbidding mesmerism among the slaves, as well as among men and women of color. It also condemned the two main leaders of the mesmeric circles at *La Marmelade*, Jérôme and Télémaque to harsh punishments: according to Moreau de Saint-Méry, Jérôme was condemned to the galleys for life while Télémaque was subjected to the iron collar and publicly exposed (qtd. in Weaver 108). However, if we are to believe the records of the counsel, both men escaped. This flight from the territory of the law, despite its historiographic uncertainty, gives an overarching arc to the narrated history: from Macandal's flight as a metamorphosed mosquito to the uncertain flight of Jérôme and Télémaque we become witnesses to the logic of deterritorialization produced by a series of material practices that would end up shattering the traditional figure of the historical subject. We are almost tempted, poetically, to think that the mosquitoes that would bite LeClerc's forces more than a decade later would be precisely the metamorphosed spirits of the two runaways. By forcing upon us a concept of history beyond the sovereign subject, the epidemiological paradigm imposes a question: and now who/what?

### **And Now Who/ What?: The Plagued Subject of History**

“The body defeats a poison not by expelling it outside the organism, but by making it somehow part of the body.”  
—Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas*

By staging the crisis of the political figure of the sovereign body, both in its territorial as well as subjective moments, the epidemiological events that marked the history of the Haitian revolution helped sketch, at the very outset, the stakes of

modern history from a biopolitical perspective. Both the ecological history of the yellow fever in the Greater Caribbean as well as the disruptive introduction of mesmerism in Haiti became paradigmatic of the “viral-events” that, in the coming century, would threaten the stability of the Hobessian social contract, forcing the modern state to redefine the nature of its sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> The epidemic, with its complex structure of differential immunity as well as its expansive non-territorial expansion, would become the paradigm for that new political subject whose nature consisted in a constant negotiation with that within him which exceeded life. The plagued subject emerges, as Félix Guattari explains in *The Three Ecologies*, as the protagonist of an animist history that admits of no transcendental subject: “Today, it seems interesting to me to go back to what I would call an animist conception of subjectivity, if need be through neurotic phenomena, religious rituals, or aesthetic phenomena” (74). Just like the epidemic logic of contagion, animism, the idea that everything is animated and the cosmos is guided by a flow that puts everything in touch with everything, works metonymically rather than metaphorically. Animism therefore becomes, for Guattari, the structural model for a political system in which individual subjectivities dissolve into large scale assemblages. The question becomes, as Guattari continues to ask: “How can it [subjectivity] simultaneously singularize an individual, a group of individuals, and also be assembled to space, architecture and all other cosmic assemblages?” (74). This image of an animist subjectivity, of a subject always at the edge of its dissolution into cosmic assemblages, sketches the contours of a new mode of historical agency. Perhaps, one would argue, the plagued subject that supersedes the transcendental one is nothing other than that which Hardt and Negri, in their trilogy, have called the multitude. Interestingly, for Hardt and Negri, as laid out in their book *Empire*, the multitude is both the assemblage that posits the possibility of hegemonic power as well as that which homeopathically threatens to dissolve it: “This is another fundamental characteristic of the existence of the multitude today, within Empire and against Empire. New figures of struggle and new subjectivities are produced in the conjuncture of events, in the universal nomadism, in the general mixture and miscegenation of individuals and populations, and in the technological metamorphoses of the imperial biopolitical machine” (61). According to this logic, the Haitian Revolution would be one of the first irruptions of the modern multitude onto the political stage. In the slaves’ struggle for political visibility, in the nightly meetings of the slave crowds at *La Mermelade*, one finds the paradigmatic example of the sociological logic of multiplicity and contagion which

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<sup>7</sup> I borrow the concept of desire-events from Sampson’s usage of the term in *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*. Departing from Tarde’s differential microsociology and its adaptation by Deleuze and Guattari, Sampson builds a theory of the relationship between the viral proliferation of desire and a theory of the event.

comes to characterize the Spinozian multitude for Hardt and Negri. However, like the epidemic and like mesmerism, the nature of this assemblage called the multitude is a paradoxical one: unknowingly, it sketches the biopolitical double face of modern sovereignty. To state it in epidemiological terms: it sketches that which Roberto Esposito has called the immunological paradigm, the state as a viral body in constant negotiation with its latent viruses. The modern biopolitical state, one could argue following Esposito, is the immunological state whose sovereignty is always threatened from within rather than from outside. As Esposito explains in his book *Immunitas*, confronted with a life that aims to exceed itself—as Mme Millet’s quote regarding colonial mesmerism reminds us—the state must immunize itself:

Life is the event, the situation, which by definition tends to escape its own confines—it tends to break down its own limits and turn itself inside out. The mandate of law is to immunize life from its irresistible impulse to overcome itself, to make itself more than simple life, to exceed the natural horizon of biological life (or as Benjamin expresses it, “bare life,” *das blosse Leben*) so as to take on a “form of life” such as “right life” or “common life.” (31)

The Haitian Revolution would then mark a threshold in the history of modern biopolitics as the moment at which the imperialist logic of territorial hegemony is superseded by the modern state as a heterogeneous assemblage working within the homeopathic logic of contagion.

I would like to end by returning to the initial image of the chief doctor of the naval army, Nicolas-Pierre Gilbert, writing in 1803 the clinical memoirs of his expedition to Saint Domingue from the safety of his Parisian home. *Histoire médicale de l’armée française à Saint-Domingue; ou Mémoire sur la fièvre jaune* is a book written in an attempt to calm metropolitan fears regarding an elusive malady whose viral logic escaped the grasp of the French public: “Je démontrerai, par les faits, que la fièvre jaune de l’Amérique ne doit pas inspirer plus d’alarmes pour l’avenir que toute autre fièvre de mauvais nature [...] On sera forcé d’en conclure que nos Colonies ne seront pas plus désertées par nous, à raison de cette maladie” (5-6). The colonies would not be deserted by the imperial army: Gilbert’s words emphasize the connection between imperial presence and territorial sovereignty. Little did he know that at the moment of his writing Leclerc’s troops were retreating, and the General himself had fallen victim to the fatal yellow fever. Here, once again, the intuitions of Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of this World* prove crucial. In the novel, Pauline Bonaparte, sister of Napoleon and wife of Leclerc, seeing the moribund state of his plagued husband, seeks as a last resort the help of a black vodou priest, a *houngan* by the name of Solimán. Interestingly, at the last moment Leclerc is forced to resort to the same esoteric practices—creole versions of mesmerism—that, according to the novel, he had made fun of: “Now she lamented having often made fun of sacred things just to keep up with the trend. The agony of Leclerc, increasing her fear, made her delve deeper into the world of



powers that Solimán invoked in his conjures, true master of the island, last possible defender against the lashes of the far shore, only probable doctor against the inadequacy of the traditional chemists...” (Carpentier 165). Pauline’s relationship to Solimán is allegorically crucial: her survival is related to her capacity to give in to the new viral logic represented by the *houngan*. As the novel continues, we find that Pauline Bonaparte—who historically had been infected with the plague herself—carries with her back to France, together with the funeral remains of her diseased husband, the wisdom that she had acquired by her “contact” with Solimán’s contagious presence. Pauline Bonaparte’s return had brought within the confines of the metropolis the disease that so far had remained outside its territorial frontiers. As such, it remains symptomatic of the transformations endured by the imperial notion of sovereignty. From now on, the emerging global state would have to learn how to negotiate with the latent viruses that had suddenly plagued its territory. Little did Nicolas-Pierre Gilbert know that the virus he was writing about was to be found, not across the Atlantic, but outside his door.

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## “Matrices de aprendizaje” fronteras y emancipadoras. Apuntes sobre OVNI (Observatorio de Video no Identificado) y la cultura del videoactivismo

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### Resumen

Partiendo de la premisa de que no estamos solos ante una crisis económica sino ante una crisis planetaria y de civilización marcada por la desaparición de los derechos humanos y los derechos de la naturaleza, este ensayo revisa el concepto de colonialidad del saber o “colonialismo interno” (Rivera Cusicanqui) junto al de matriz del aprendizaje capitalista como estructura instituyente tanto de una psique colonizadora como de una subalterna y de las relaciones entre ambas y el mundo. En este contexto, propongo pensar el videoactivismo de OVNI [Observatorio de Video no identificado] como posible herramienta cultural emancipadora y de trabajo en un proceso de cambio político.

*Palabras clave:* Matrices de aprendizaje, (Des)colonización del saber, cultura videoactivista, OVNI (Observatorio de video no identificado).

### Abstract

Starting from the premise that we are not dealing with only an economic crisis but also a planetary crisis marked by the disappearance of human and environmental rights, this essay looks at the concepts of colonization of knowledge or “internal colonialization” (Rivera Cusicanqui) alongside with the neo-liberal capitalist model of learning as an institutive structure of the colonizing and the colonized psyche as well as the social relationship between the two of them and the world. In this context, I propose to think the video-activism of OVNI (Observatory of Non-Identified Video) as a possible cultural emancipatory tool and one that can be used in a process of political change.

**Keywords:** Models of learning, (De)colonization of knowledge, Videoactivist Culture, OVNI (Observatory of Non-Identified Video).

We are at the point of a cultural revolution in ourselves and in our institutions, that is as far reaching as the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture 11,000 years ago and from agriculture to industry a few hundred years ago. How do we re-imagine education? How do we reimagine community? How do we re-imagine family? How do we re-imagine sexual identity? How do we re-imagine everything, in the light of a change that is so far reaching and that is our responsibility to make? We can't expect them to make it. We have to do the re-imagining ourselves. We have to think beyond capitalist categories. We have to reimagine. (Lee Boggs)

“La descolonización no puede ser sólo un pensamiento o una retórica, porque las palabras suelen desentenderse de las prácticas.” (Rivera Cusicanqui 12)

El neoliberalismo, siguiendo a Bourdieu, es “una teoría económica poderosa, que gracias a su potencia simbólica duplica la fuerza de las realidades económicas que pretende expresar (...) una suerte de creencia universal, un nuevo evangelio ecuménico” (31). La potencia de esta ficción explica la precaria situación de los Estados de derecho asistenciales, el progresivo derrocamiento de las conquistas sociales y las acusaciones, por parte de sus defensores, de utopistas o de arcaicos hacia cualquiera que defienda un modelo político fundado en la defensa del derecho del ser cualquiera. De hecho, todo lo que viene ocurriendo en los últimos años en el planeta evidencia que no estamos solo ante una crisis económica sino ante una crisis planetaria, energética y de civilización marcada por la desaparición de los derechos humanos y de la naturaleza. Como escribe Alberto Acosta, economista, ex presidente de la Asamblea Constituyente de Ecuador y ex Ministro de energía y minas, “el mundo precisa cambios profundos, radicales. Urge superar esas visiones simplistas que convirtieron al economicismo como eje de la sociedad. Se precisa otra forma de organización social y nuevas prácticas políticas (...) una transformación civilizatoria” (15).

OVNI [Observatorio de Video no identificado] participa de este proceso de ruptura y superación de la ficción neoliberal al establecerse como movimiento de transformación y descolonización del imaginario individual y colectivo por medio del video-activismo. Co-fundado en los años noventa en Barcelona por el video-activista y ensayista visual Toni Serra, también llamado Abu Ali, este observatorio viene investigando y presentando otros posibles modos de realidad basados en códigos culturales alternativos y prácticas eco-civilizatorias. El trabajo de investigación, de archivo y de difusión de OVNI, desde mi punto de vista, abre paso a una posición dialécticamente emancipadora que teoriza desde la praxis con el propósito de abrir paso a un espacio donde poder observar las propias contradicciones y donde iluminar la coyuntura entre razonamientos, percepciones y prácticas. Si por un lado el trabajo de OVNI carga a favor de la esperanza—al indicar maneras de limitar el deterioro ecológico, social e individual—al mismo tiempo, ataca, a base de testimonios y datos, la mitología capitalista, su particular proceso colonizador del poder y del saber; su uniforme modelo civilizador y su unilateral contrato social. Como suele explicar su co-fundador, Toni Serra, estamos en un momento de experimentación; lo importante ahora es sembrar semillas y cultivarlas.<sup>1</sup>

Me gustaría aclarar desde el comienzo, que con esta propuesta no pretendo sobredimensionar el papel del video-activismo ni creo que sea posible resolver culturalmente lo que requiere de una urgente respuesta política. Sin embargo, desde la posición universitaria desde la que escribo, pienso con OVNI que hay que ser justos y realistas y señalar que la batalla política también lo es educativa y

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<sup>1</sup> Como ejemplo concreto, haré referencia al encuentro OVNI del año 2016 porque tuve la oportunidad de asistir como participante y ello me permite dar mejor testimonio de su labor curatorial.

cultural. Como escribe Jordi Maiso, “la crítica con vocación emancipatoria” (99) no pondrá fin al régimen capitalista de asimetrías y al sistema que las genera estructuralmente pero sí coadyuvará a la formación de una mayoría capacitada para llevar a cabo la tarea de la transformación política y social. Desde estas reflexiones, considero que la intensificación, en la esfera pública, de herramientas culturales destinadas a fomentar una ciudadanía crítica puede servir de contrapeso a aquellas otras herramientas de que se sirve el poder—los medios de comunicación de masas y la publicidad—y que refuerzan la coyuntura existente entre cultura, sociedad y poder dominante. Por eso, entiendo necesario subrayar la necesidad de posiciones eclécticas que combatan, desde todos los lugares posibles, la posición hegemónica de los valores culturales coloniales capitalistas. Para ello también es imprescindible asumir, como hace OVNI, el ejercicio de la autocrítica en la conversación con otros códigos culturales que amplíen el campo de la visión. Este texto quiere invitar a la apreciación y valoración de propuestas que, como OVNI, yacen ocultas bajo los puntos ciegos del capitalismo colonial neoliberal. Sirva este texto de breve introducción al tema pues el desarrollo completo de los puntos subrayados requiere de mayor espacio.

### **Matrices de aprendizaje alienantes y emancipadoras**

Asumir la premisa de la necesidad de un giro ecológico y civilizatorio obliga a la revisión de los conceptos de colonialidad y decolonialidad en una doble dirección; por un lado, la del poder—en nuestro momento, el capitalista neoliberal—como lógica de clasificación y reparto, de acumulación, apropiación, inclusión y exclusión; y por otro, la del saber o “colonialismo interno”<sup>2</sup> como estructura instituyente tanto de una psique colonizadora—de su manera de mirar y percibir—como de la subalterna y de la triple lógica de inclusión y exclusión—de género, raza y clase—que se establece entre ambas.<sup>3</sup> La desocupación del saber tendrá repercusiones en el ámbito del poder, y viceversa; este es el motivo por el

<sup>2</sup> Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui en la obra *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores* se refiere a esta lógica de la frontera yo-tú con el concepto del “colonialismo interno” (4).

<sup>3</sup> En *Violencias (Re)encubiertas* Cusicanqui explica con detalle el origen del concepto de colonialismo interno, su aportación y la relación de este concepto con el cambio civilizatorio. Respecto al concepto de “colonialismo interno” ella explica que para su desarrollo retoma el legado de “la crítica descolonizadora proveniente del pensamiento existencial de Franz Fanon y Alberto Memmi; la propuesta del sociólogo mexicano Pablo González Casanova elaborada a partir de la crítica de la dependencia política-económica en América Latina de los años 50 y 60; y dentro de Bolivia, el pensamiento indianista radical de Fausto Reinaga. Es una noción que fue ganando cuerpo en las discusiones al interior del Taller de Historia Oral Andina, conformado por Cusicanqui y otros jóvenes sociólogos aymaras, y en sectores más amplios de intelectuales indígenas y dirigentes campesinos vinculados con el movimiento katarista-indianista en los años 70 y 80. Es decir, que no se trataba de una idea nueva y extraña elucubrada en esferas elevadas o importada desde afuera, sino de una que expresaba un contenido significativo en el campo de la cultura política subalterna” (15). Siendo esta su herencia, explica Walter Mignolo, Cusicanqui agrega a este concepto su propio sello.

que cualquier propuesta de intervención de la crisis ecológica en curso y del estado precario<sup>4</sup> de los Estados de derecho asistenciales<sup>5</sup> tendrá que considerar su impacto en ambas esferas simultáneamente. OVNI entiende muy bien esta doble intención descolonizadora y por ello tanto en la elaboración de su anarchivo como en la organización temática de cada una de sus Jornadas anuales encontramos un ataque directo a la matriz del aprendizaje neoliberal y a su triple lógica de discriminación, apropiación y clasificación. Este concepto nos lleva directamente al trabajo que desde la psicología social viene realizando Ana P Quiroga,<sup>6</sup> retomando las lecciones de su maestro Pichón Rivièrè. Su libro titulado *Matrices de aprendizaje* recoge las lecciones de Rivièrè y el despliegue de toda una serie de preguntas centrales para comprender tanto la estructuración e institución de subjetividades colonizadoras y colonizadas, como el peso de estructuras instituyentes de un tipo concreto de relación jerárquica entre las personas y de éstas con el planeta tierra.

Por “matriz o modelo interno de aprendizaje” (35) Quiroga, siguiendo a Rivièrè, entiende un modo de relación que no solo instituye y estructura el conocimiento—“el prisma cognitivo a través del cual abordamos y conocemos la realidad” (35)—sino que también colabora en el tipo de relación que establece el sujeto consigo mismo, de éste respecto a otros sujetos y de éste con su medio en cada comunidad. La matriz del aprender “se constituye en interacción, pero a la vez condiciona modalidades de interacción” (35) y, por eso, tiene un carácter fundacional que se reedita y se reproduce en el seno de las comunidades culturales. Se trata, y transcribo del texto de Quiroga, de:

Una estructura interna, compleja y contradictoria, y se sustenta en una infraestructura biológica. Está socialmente determinada e incluye no sólo aspectos conceptuales sino también afectivos, emocionales, y esquemas de acción. Este modelo, construido en nuestra trayectoria de aprendizajes, sintetiza y contiene en cada aquí y ahora nuestras potencialidades y nuestros obstáculos. Estas matrices no constituyen una estructura cerrada, sino una Gestalt-gestaltung, una estructura en movimiento, susceptible de modificación salvo en los casos de extrema patología. (36)

<sup>4</sup> En un reciente libro titulado *La imaginación hipotecada (Aportaciones al debate sobre la precariedad del presente)* 25 investigadores reflexionan juntos sobre la crisis de civilización y planetaria, así como sobre la situación de precariedad resultado del desalojo del Estado social. La precariedad propia de la economía capitalista y de su insostenibilidad ecológica se reproduce en modelos sociales precarizados (subjetividad, ciudadanía y derechos); en la condición humana; y en una política metacultural propia de una ideología de empresa precarizadora de las humanidades.

<sup>5</sup> Si utilizo el concepto de “Estado asistencial” para distinguirlo del concepto que se viene utilizando en la literatura de las ciencias sociales “Estado benefactor” es para evita la carga patriarcal. Pensar en el Estado como organismo que provee asistencia pública evita que el cuidado de las necesidades de las personas que co-habitan juntas recaiga en la responsabilidad del ámbito familiar o en el acceso a los servicios que oferta el sector privado.

<sup>6</sup> El libro de Ana P Quiroga, *Matrices de aprendizaje* sintetiza y ordena las clases dictadas por E Pichón Rivièrè sobre el tema matrices de aprendizaje. Lo interesante del proyecto de Rivièrè es la centralidad del aprendizaje como movimiento en el que se dan transformaciones cuantitativas y cualitativas y como proceso de alternativas. El aprender como camino para una posible transformación civilizatoria.

El problema de la ocupación, por parte del poder neoliberal, del campo del saber y del aprender aparece cuando, lo que inicialmente debe responder a un proceso dialécticamente abierto, se utiliza como marco estructurador y estructurante. Pensando en el caso concreto de la matriz del aprendizaje capitalista neoliberal—y de la triple lógica de producción, explotación y relación clasista, racista y patriarcal—el vínculo sujeto-objeto-mundo aparece marcado por, y a su vez marca, relaciones asimétricas de inclusión, exclusión, apropiación, explotación y producción.<sup>7</sup> De hecho, su aprendizaje naturaliza un modo economicista e instrumental de relación en el que "los seres humanos hacen su propia historia, pero [y esto se suele ocultar] bajo circunstancias que no han sido escogidas por ellos" (PSJM y Durán 30). Su praxis evoluciona y se reproduce en particulares modos de reconocimiento y clasificación, así como en un ejercicio de la ley y del derecho individual en beneficio del emprendedor empresario:

el fundador de la sociedad civil. Un individuo al que la naturaleza le impone cálculos racionales y que es capaz de sobreponerse a su condición natural para poner en marcha el progreso y la civilización. Es la eficacia racional de su actividad la que le permite al sujeto económico cercar sus posesiones y, llegado el momento, hacer uso del trabajo de otros. La historia aparece así como un proceso necesario cuyos movimientos son la formación de capital y la división del trabajo. (PSJM y Durán 36)

Obviamente, lo que la matriz del aprendizaje capitalista neoliberal no fomenta son visiones disonantes que den cuenta de las contradicciones sobre las que se levanta la propia estructura capitalista de explotación empresarial. Como explican PSJM y Durán, los que ejercen el derecho de propiedad son herederos de aquellos propietarios que se dieron cuenta, antes que ningún otro, "de que el fruto de ese arbusto concreto es apto para satisfacer determinadas necesidades, o de que el trabajo de otros puede ser transformado en trabajo productivo, es decir, creador de riqueza, o de que los conocimientos pueden ser explotados a cambio de beneficios" (36). Y así, el proyecto colonialista capitalista se prolonga y sustenta en una matriz del aprender que enseña a pensar, a mirar y a establecer vínculos de acuerdo con un orden jerárquico y asimétrico. A la luz de la crisis de civilización dominante, podría decirse que, en este continuo proceso de violenta ocupación del poder económico de la esfera política y del ámbito del saber, la eliminación del potencial dialéctico de la matriz del aprender es lo que facilita el determinismo económico que continúa marcando la relación y el trato entre sujeto-objeto y mundo. Faltando la dialéctica, explican Rivièrre y Quiroga, como latir del aprender en la pedagogía capitalista, la relación sujeto-objeto-mundo queda desambiguada, potenciándose así una racionalidad deshistorizada y despolitizada que beneficia a la ley de la plusvalía y al ejercicio del derecho individual al bien-estar, aún a costa

<sup>7</sup> Como escriben Acosta y Ramírez Gallegos, el cambio de las Constituciones Ecuatoriana y Boliviana para reconocer a la Pacha mama como sujeto de derecho es indicativo de la voluntad de transformación que se quiere materializar en la construcción de Estados de derecho plurinacionales.



de todo lo demás. Un claro ejemplo de todo ello es la transformación de la institución educativa, de sus prácticas investigadoras y docentes, en un mecanismo empresarial que rinde pleitesía a las exigencias del mercado.<sup>8</sup> Como explica la investigadora Susana Wahnón, en el 2003 la Comisión Europea redactó un documento titulado "El papel de las universidades en la Europa del conocimiento"<sup>9</sup> (229) donde se especifica la necesaria adaptación de la educación a las expectativas del mercado en función del crecimiento económico. En este proceso globalizado se favorecen los saberes tecno-científico-económicos y los valores de la eficiencia, la competitividad y la innovación. Todo ello, obviamente, en depreciación de las humanidades—convertidas en mero ornamento o pura anécdota, precisamente por el peligro de su capacidad reveladora y su potencial emancipador.

La eliminación del potencial dialéctico latente en planteamientos ecológicos, ecofeministas, cooperativistas o humanistas colabora de la configuración de una cultura del bien-estar individual que poco tiene que ver con las máximas del buen convivir y de la buena vida. En el buen vivir y convivir se presupone una dimensión etimológica pre-moderna para "sujeto," como entidad interdependiente, "sometida a," "sujetada a" la necesidad. Frente a este modo interdependiente de entender al sujeto, en la matriz capitalista, como recuerda Rivière, la palabra "sujeto" se emplea en su sentido Moderno, significando actor o protagonista (éste sería el modo mítico-colonizador del empresario o emprendedor recogido en el mito del "self made-man"). Con la palabra "objeto" ocurre algo similar; ésta puede usarse en su forma Moderna como "lo que se presenta, lo que se expone o lo que está delante" (Quiroga 9); o, en su acepción pre-moderna como "aquello que objeta o se resiste a su revelación (9), aquello que funciona como límite. De ahí que, dependiendo de qué perspectiva se adopte al plantearse la relación entre ambas entidades, una matriz del aprendizaje puede orientar la acción hacia la erradicación o hacia la aceptación de los límites, siempre cambiantes. De ello también depende que la interdependencia—entendida como con-natural a cualquier organismo que exista en un medio—se experimente, o no, de forma dialéctica; es decir, que se potencie, o no, el crecimiento del ser humano fuera de paradigmas colonizadores, capitalistas, racistas y sexistas y dentro de ejercicio de trato y de vínculo con aquello que siendo semejante es diferente.

En la matriz de aprendizaje capitalista se desactiva la potencialidad de la dialéctica al configurarse un sujeto de acuerdo con una racionalidad que lo concibe en control y posesión del objeto y "siempre tratando de maximizar sus utilidades y, si es talentoso, poniendo en marcha su espíritu empresarial" (PSJM y Durán 40). Por el contrario, en el tipo de matrices donde la relación dialéctica sujeto-objeto es

<sup>8</sup> Para el caso de Europa, recomiendo la lectura del ensayo de Sultana Wahnón "La ideología de empresa y la precarización de las humanidades en la Europa del conocimiento."

<sup>9</sup> El texto se puede consultar en el siguiente enlace: <http://www.ecm.ub.es/ceuropea/ComUniversidadesES1.pdf>

predominante, la experiencia del límite hace que el sujeto crezca "en base a colisiones infinitas—afecciones—que la causalidad social ocasiona. Nunca funciona aislado sino siempre como parte de una compañía variopinta" (40). Si pensamos la matriz del aprendizaje capitalista, racista y patriarcal en los términos descritos, la relación y el vínculo que se establece entre sujeto-objeto-mundo no resulta horizontal, ni relacional ni histórica, sino instrumental, jerárquica, presentista y siempre orientada a satisfacer el interés y el deseo de la individualidad. Su éxito global se explica a partir del consenso—reforzado desde la cultura y los medios de comunicación de masas—en torno a la normalizada desigualdad de condiciones en que se da dicha relación y vínculo. En este relato no solo queda justificada la jerarquía, sino que, la vulnerabilidad de lo que se concibe como objeto de apropiación y explotación se aprovecha para intensificar y problematizar su necesidad convirtiendo al "sujeto a necesidad" en "sujeto de necesidad"—origen del *precarato* como nueva clase social. Este cambio en cómo se presenta la vulnerabilidad, y por tanto la interdependencia, modifica las posiciones en que se da la relación sujeto-objeto-mundo, incitando al sujeto a adoptar un perverso rol protagonista en la historia de acumulación, apropiación, explotación y violación de los derechos naturales y humanos. Al final, pareciera que todas las personas participantes del sistema capitalista neoliberal fuéramos víctimas y victimarias quedando eximido de responsabilidad el poder representado en la élite mercatorial. Asimismo, parece borrarse de esta historia la posibilidad de otras opciones, como la republicana y democrática, y su particular manera de presentar la necesidad positivamente bajo la forma de un Estado de derecho y asistencial.

La imposición violenta mediante la globalización del modo de relación y de vínculo capitalista, racista, patriarcal, instrumental y jerárquico elimina la posibilidad de "un movimiento de transformación recíproca entre sujeto y objeto" (Quiroga 36). En este contexto, y siguiendo a Rivière y Quiroga, el proceso formativo de la subjetividad y de su vínculo con lo diferente se inscribe en "un tipo concreto de interpretación de lo real que expresa los hechos y relaciones de una manera parcial y en muchos aspectos deformada" (37). De la mitología capitalista quedan fuera las relaciones histórico-causales del proceso colonizador del poder y del saber y, sin embargo, se revela claramente su victoria en el grado de apropiación y de individualización de la realidad por parte de un sector reducido de la sociedad, a costa de los derechos de la naturaleza y de otros seres humanos. Este hecho explica que, de acuerdo con Quiroga, sea urgente "en nuestra cultura y en función de las relaciones sociales dominantes [incluir] como parte del proceso formativo la problematización, el cuestionamiento de nuestros modelos de aprendizaje, una reflexión sobre ellos" (37). A esta necesidad, añade OVNI, debemos sumar una escasez de espacios para la divulgación de razonamientos, metáforas y narrativas que amplíen las condiciones de visibilidad y reinviertan los términos de la relación, vínculo y trato en el marco de una matriz del aprender dialécticamente emancipada y emancipadora del interés capitalista. Para hacer

frente a esta carencia, el video-activismo de OVNI aparece como laboratorio del aprendizaje de la ciudadanía.

### OVNI: Un laboratorio del aprender democrático

Como movimiento video-activista, OVNI funciona en forma de red internacional de archivo y distribución en una práctica curatorial abierta a la participación de cualquiera. Desde los noventa, Toni Serra o Abu Ali, junto a un reducido equipo de trabajo, viene dedicando sus esfuerzos a compilar el material recibido en un anarchivo con sede física en el Centro de Cultura Contemporánea de Barcelona (CCCB) y de consulta parcial a través de su página web [www.desorg.org](http://www.desorg.org). Su labor curatorial y archivista se complementa con la difusión pública de una selección de estos materiales, de acuerdo con diferentes ejes temáticos, en el marco de unas Jornadas de reflexión y de debate que ocurren también en la ciudad de Barcelona. Dichas Jornadas tienen lugar en el CCCB y son de acceso gratuito para visitantes presenciales y virtuales. Conscientes de que la estructura de asimetrías también se reproduce en la disposición de los tiempos, OVNI se asegura de que las Jornadas se puedan seguir de forma virtual, bien archivando las intervenciones o mediante el *streaming* de cada sesión. La finalidad de este proyecto no gubernamental y sin ánimo de lucro es dar materiales para abrir la visión y para pensar la posible participación de las personas en la clausura de un modelo de civilización no sostenible ni humana ni ecológicamente y estructurado en base a relaciones asimétricas. Persuadidos de que exigir el final de este modo de relación y de la defensa de los derechos humanos y de la naturaleza solo resulta posible si, de forma paralela, se abre camino al modo dialéctico de imaginar, aprender y pensar otra realidad; OVNI apuesta por la búsqueda, registro, divulgación y cultivo de relatos y razonamientos emancipadores y que, al mismo tiempo, afilien, relacionen, vinculen a las personas entre sí y a éstas con un horizonte libre de la lógica de exclusividad capitalista del yo-tú. De acuerdo con su página oficial, este proyecto recoge:

una constelación de trabajos dispares, cuyo denominador común es la libre expresión y reflexión sobre los miedos y placeres individuales y colectivos, construyendo en su conjunto una visión multifacética, miles de pequeños ojos, que ahondan y exploran nuestro mundo, o anuncian otros posibles. Un discurso cuyos principales valores son la heterogeneidad, la pluralidad, la contradicción y la subjetividad desde la que se realiza. Por si solo un revulsivo a la clonación y repetición de los *mass media* corporativos. En sus 16 años de existencia, OVNI ha incorporado a los Archivos más de 2000 proyectos. (OVNI)

Estamos ante un movimiento social que, de manera similar a la PAH,<sup>10</sup> representa un modelo de organización y de acción directa donde se suma la teoría con el

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<sup>10</sup> Con las siglas PAH se hace referencia a la Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca. Se trata de un movimiento social aparecido en el marco de la crisis del 2008. Su objetivo es la defensa del derecho a una vivienda digna para todos. Se puede ver su funcionamiento y alcance visitando su web oficial: <http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/contacto/>

liderazgo y con la intención de dar el paso a lo institucional, pero sin perder un pie en la calle. Partiendo de la premisa de que existimos en plena batalla por la (des)colonización del poder y del saber, OVNI enfatiza la capacidad político-poiética del video y del testimonio oral rompiendo, de este modo, el monopolio de la imagen de realidad perfectamente montada en la cultura capitalista del bienestar. Parejo a su activismo visual, OVNI también reivindica la apertura de los límites del campo artístico legitimando el vídeo-activismo como herramienta de comunicación y como dispositivo de capacitación crítica. En el marco del "videoactivismo," término explorado por Francisco Sierra y David Montero en su libro *Videoactivismo y movimientos sociales* y por varios autores como Concha Mateos en *Videoactivismo, acción política cámara en mano*, OVNI aparece como contrapoder que, siguiendo Concha Mateos, "se inicia por una motivación social y contiene una finalidad política transformadora que puede orientarse a diferentes fines tácticos, principalmente: contra-informar, formar, convocar a la acción, articular la participación y construir la identidad colectiva" (Colectivo Todoazen). A diferencia de otros movimientos video-activistas españoles (Metromuster, ZEMOS98 y Fotomovimiento), OVNI es pionero en volcar su labor curatorial anarquista en el espacio de unas Jornadas abiertas a la ciudadanía. Como explica Serra-Ali en la entrevista que le concede a Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio, OVNI nace de la doble necesidad de descolonización del poder en las esferas política y cultural. Ante el estrechamiento del campo de la video-creación que admitía solo una serie de modelos—la arqueología mediática, el documental independiente y el trabajo de archivo—OVNI decide descolonizar el campo cultural abriéndolo al video-arte y a su potencial emancipador, resaltando la riqueza testimonial, histórica y antropológica del video:

El inicio de OVNI pues fue a raíz de reflexionar sobre el principio del vídeo y darnos cuenta de que en el principio del vídeo había una mezcla de lenguajes, de intenciones, de estrategias, que de una forma u otra reflejaban la vitalidad y la capacidad de este medio, saltándose todas las barreras de género. Es un lenguaje híbrido que no tiene ni siquiera un formato propio, que tiene muchísimas referencias, y esto es precisamente lo que le da flexibilidad y su capacidad de trabajo. De aquí nace un poco el propio nombre de OVNI (Observatorio de Video no Identificado), es decir, esta voluntad de movernos entre géneros sin preocuparnos de esto, y poniendo el énfasis más en las intenciones. La primera intención de OVNI fue la de abrir este campo expresivo que en nuestro entorno particular se había estrechado—sobre todo en comparación a las visiones que habíamos conocido fuera de nuestro país—y volver a recuperar esta frescura, este carácter híbrido del vídeo y utilizarlo.

Los trabajos que alberga en su anarchivo proceden de lugares, países, culturas diferentes y todos ellos comparten el hecho de no ser producciones industriales. En algunos casos estamos ante materiales anónimos, en otros se trata de visones poéticas personales o de testimonios individuales y colectivos de carácter político y social. Todas estas piezas funcionan como teselas de un interminable mosaico de lectura del mundo en realidades diversas; con su agrupación temática, tanto en el anarchivo como en las Jornadas, se conforma un pensamiento visual colectivo en

torno a dos ejes: lo justo y la defensa de los derechos de las personas y de la naturaleza. Estamos ante una gran caja de resonancia de lo que podría ser una lectura testimonial de época y de la crisis del modelo de civilización capitalista. Para que nos hagamos una idea, estos son algunos de los ejes temáticos correspondientes a los archivos y las Jornadas de diferentes años: "Identidad versus media" (1997-1998); 'Comunidad' (2000); 'Globalización' (2002); 'Post Sept 11' (2003); 'Resistencias' (2005); 'El Sueño Colonial Zonas Autónomas' (2006); 'Exodus, Los Márgenes del Imperio' (2008); 'Rizomas' (2009); 'Des\_Realidad' (2011); 'Del Olvido' (2012); 'In Limbo' (2014); 'Arxiu de l'Observatori' (2015); "La frontera como centro. Zonas del ser y del no ser" (2016)" (OVNI).

### La labor curatorial de OVNI y la forma del anarchivo

Frente a los archivos institucionales, OVNI apuesta por la fórmula del anarchivo como ejercicio de apreciación contributiva y propositiva. Con frecuencia en los anarchivos se da el trabajo del reciclaje fruto de la arqueología mediática porque, según me explica Serra, en este ejercicio es posible elaborar archivos públicos de todo lo que en esa relación de cultura y poder queda fuera o se deja a un lado. En palabras de Toni Serra/ Abu Ali:

La idea de arqueología mediática, a diferencia de la visión histórica, no está interesada en la monumentalidad visual, los momentos clave, las pretendidas obras maestras, las grandes fachadas ... pues entiende que están demasiado definidas por el poder (...) Por el contrario, prefiere la puerta de servicio. Se interesa por aquello que teniendo una funcionalidad muy concreta está destinado a desaparecer una vez su función se cumple. (...) En los años 50, películas educativas, publireportajes y toda una serie de material efímero se proyectó en las fábricas, escuelas, asociaciones y prisiones de los EE. UU.,... miles de horas decisivas en la construcción del imaginario del *american way of life*, definiendo los roles de género, clase, trabajo, consumo... Richard Prelinger (21) rescató muchas de estas obras abandonadas en almacenes perdidos, destinadas a desaparecer ... Lo mismo sucede con los films educacionales dedicados a las comunidades indígenas en Latinoamérica, África, toda la épica visual que narró el esfuerzo de las colonias por formar a sus criaturas...El uso de esta arqueología mediática también puede verse aplicada en trabajos que optan no solo por la presentación del documento en sí, sino por su yuxtaposición o contraste con otro aparentemente dispar, a fin de alumbrar su siniestra semejanza. Así la vía abierta por los trabajos de Harun Farucki, entre ellos su impresionante *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts* (22), en el que a través de las imágenes archivadas por cámaras de vigilancia nos muestra la similitud entre la cárcel, la fábrica y el supermercado; el preso, el trabajador y el comprador, todo ello bajo observación, sus movimientos descifrados ... (...) De aquí la importancia de los archivos audiovisuales y del libre acceso a ellos.

De este modo, la necesidad de combatir al poder archivando todo lo que germina en su exterioridad cuaja en la forma del anarchivo; en palabras de Toni Serra/Abu Ali, se trata de:

Cápsulas autogestionadas de la memoria de personas, colectivos y comunidades. Pequeños archivos que escapan de los grandes nodos de poder o se enfrentan a ellos, contra-archivos, anarchivos con funcionalidades concretas, que reclamen no tanto una supuesta objetividad como una intencionalidad subjetiva. Ligados a un



lugar, a una tierra, una ciudad, un barrio... y a un momento, a su aparición y desaparición, a su recorrido, a sus necesidades, preocupaciones y sueños, a su particular balance de lo que es y no es visible. A diferencia de los grandes archivos no hay compra de fondos, ni voluntad extractivista alguna, sino un depósito que se crea, y se autogestiona en colaboración. No como resultado de una mirada exterior que fija un objeto de estudio y lo analiza y clasifica, sino como un rizoma de memorias que se entretajan, que emana de la comunidad y de los lazos que ésta haya tendido.

Ejemplos de anarchivo son todos los proyectos pensados para elaboración de una inteligencia colectiva mediante la confluencia de un diverso conjunto de actividades: la consulta, el encuentro, la participación abierta, la discusión, la lectura, el intercambio de experiencias, puntos de vista o materiales.

Tanto en su modo de ancharivar como en la forma de tejer los hilos temáticos de cada Jornada, en OVNI se intuye un trato cuidadoso que, si por un lado alerta de lo que en el relato capitalista se oculta, por otro, entrega las herramientas adecuadas para dar un paso sin caer en el abismo del apocalipsis, de la parálisis, de la frustración, del resentimiento o de la indefensión. Esta doble función del cuidado latente en su trabajo obedece a un modo de pensar la imagen audio-visual como lugar de formación de conciencia, de transformación de la praxis de trato cotidiana y de comunicación transcultural e integralmente transdisciplinar. De hecho, la importancia de este elemento explica que en el corazón de su proyecto resida la hospitalidad y que, por este motivo, no se recurra a la imagen visual para golpear, culpabilizar, paralizar o juzgar sino para abrir dialécticamente el campo de la visión y del pensar con el propósito de emancipar al sujeto en una tarea de desocupación y descolonización de imágenes y conceptos. Prueba de todo esto es el hecho de que, en cada Jornada, OVNI pone especial cuidado en crear una atmósfera de acogida de todas las personas que asisten alternando visiones esperanzadoras, emancipadoras, poéticas e íntimas, con otras críticas, desestabilizadoras, incómodas y conflictivas. En esta convivencia de lo que en la cultura capitalista se tiende a percibir como antitético brota la tensión del potencial dialéctico de un modo de aprender que, si por un lado facilita la identificación del sujeto en la estructura de lo familiar, por otro lo desvincula ante la extrañeza o el horror que le produce lo contemplado. La experiencia sincrónica de esta doble pulsión de inclusión y exclusión resulta en una invitación a imaginar una nueva *philia*; un nuevo horizonte donde el trato hacia lo propio y lo ajeno se iguale en el marco de la lógica política del Estado de derecho y de la legalidad.

La relación dialéctica establecida en este ejercicio audio-visual de deconstrucción paralizante y construcción esperanzada apela por igual a la razón y al afecto, recuperándose la cualidad *poiética* del relato oral en la cultura ocularcentrista. Por su parte, el cuidado se observa en el hecho de que cada eje temático responda a necesidades y problemas de comunidades concretas y, por eso, su modo de trabajar obedece a un materialismo histórico hecho sobre la marcha y al hilo de los acontecimientos. Como práctica cultural cuidadosa, OVNI se mantiene en un estado de vigilia y alerta y cuida de no perderse en abstracciones o



en ejercicios teóricos neutrales. De acuerdo con la explicación de Serra-Ali, el hecho de que gente en diferentes lugares del mundo apunte hacia un mismo lugar (unas mismas necesidades) indica una serie de conexiones posibles que refuerzan la idea de una lucha colectiva desde diferentes frentes. A continuación, invito a las personas que estén leyendo este trabajo a realizar el ejercicio de ver los enlaces que ofrezco mientras desarrollo esta parte de la explicación.

Por ejemplo, al hilo del incremento del número de fallecimientos y de la extrema situación de pobreza, violencia y de falta de derechos que viven las personas migrantes, OVNI decidió dedicar la convocatoria del 2016 al debate y reflexión en torno a la (neo)colonialidad y su *modus operandi*. En el transcurso de esas Jornadas, Ovni medió una reflexión colectiva sobre los siguientes hechos: la violencia implícita en la lógica de frontera que distingue entre un yo capitalista y un tú subalterno; el racismo institucionalizado y burocratizado; las leyes de extranjería y la industria lucrativa de deportaciones masivas; la insostenible, por desmedida, explotación de recursos naturales y la crisis ecológica y de reproducción; el papel que juegan los medios de comunicación como aparato de propaganda del poder, etc.<sup>11</sup> Para llevar a cabo un debate cuidadoso—uno que no fomentara la caída en la parálisis, la frustración, los estados de culpa o el resentimiento—se dispuso el tema en una yuxtaposición de planos y contra-planos en sesiones que se complementaban entre sí. Un primer conjunto de proyecciones desgranó, a base de datos y testimonios, la inhumana situación en que vive la persona migrante a causa de la legalizada, aceptada y normalizada historia de dominación y explotación capitalista sobre la naturaleza y las personas. En este conjunto de proyecciones se incluyó el trabajo de Marc Serra, Xavi Artigas y Xapo Ortega titulado *Tarajal. Desmontando la impunidad en la frontera sur* (2016);<sup>12</sup> el de Ursula Biemann, *Sahara Chronicle* (2007);<sup>13</sup> el de José Colón, Joan Roig, Guillem Valle *Neither Here Nor There* (2015);<sup>14</sup> y el Proyecto de Fotomovimiento *Los muros de Europa* (2015).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> En el siguiente enlace se encuentra el programa completo de las Jornadas en el siguiente enlace: <http://desorg.org/acts/OVNI-2016/>

<sup>12</sup> El documental coproducido por el Observatorio DESC y Metromuster narra los hechos acaecidos el 6 de febrero de 2014, fecha en que al menos 15 personas murieron ahogadas en la playa del Tarajal, en Ceuta. En el archivo OVNI se dan algunos ejemplos de su contenido: <http://desorg.org/titols/tarajal/>

<sup>13</sup> Se trata de un proyecto de investigación a través del video que ocupa de 2006 a 2009 y que documenta el movimiento migratorio a través del Sahara hacia Europa. Es, al mismo tiempo, un análisis de la política de movilidad y contención que existe en la geopolítica global actual. El Proyecto ha adoptado la forma de una antología abierta de imágenes que dan cuenta de las modalidades de migración. <http://www.geobodies.org/art-and-videos/sahara-chronicle>

<sup>14</sup> Esta trabajo relata la historia de Said, un niño sordo marroquí que como otros cientos de niños esperan en Melilla la oportunidad de poder saltar a un bote que los lleve hacia el milagro Europeo. Parte del texto se ha reproducido en el siguiente enlace: <http://memo-mag.com/reportages/never-here-nor-there/>

<sup>15</sup> Es la crónica del paso de refugiados por Hungría, Croacia y Serbia. Disponible en VIMEO: <https://vimeo.com/149734954>

La proyección de la realidad de los testimonios y de los datos, inevitablemente, (re)produjo estados de indefensión aprendida,<sup>16</sup> de resentimiento, de culpa y de parálisis. Este hecho se evidenció, especialmente, en el caso de *Tarajal*, documental donde el gobierno aparece como posible responsable de la impune violencia con la que se impone la ley del poder neoliberal. El conjunto de estas emociones se conjuró con la sesión del día siguiente al introducir en el espacio colectivo alternativas de realidad y voces de resistencia procedentes de los mismos países que, en la sesión anterior, fueron metáfora del expolio neoliberal: América Latina y África. En esta segunda sesión se proyectaron los vídeos de Maja Tillmann y Rodrigo Otero en *Iskay Yachay: Los dos saberes* (2005); Xavier Hurtado con Nawpa (2005) y Bakary Sanon *Le Naufrage Negro-Liberal* (2006).<sup>17</sup> El conjunto de los tres documentos facilitó un umbral imaginario de salida propositiva al estado de desamparo que aparece con la caída en la cuenta del relato capitalista. El concepto de los buenos vivires y con-vivires<sup>18</sup> como posible modelo civilizatorio se ofreció como punto de partida para pensar e imaginar, por analogía, otras posibles formas de vida. Irónica y paradójicamente, las propuestas esperanzadoras llegaban a Europa desde África y América latina, esos lugares que, de acuerdo con la lógica de frontera, son epítome del subdesarrollo y de la subalternidad.

Como vemos en el ejemplo dado, a diferencia de la imagen perfectamente alineada y uniforme de los dispositivos culturales capitalistas de bien-estar, OVNI se afana por indicar los cortes del montaje capitalista, del plano y del contra-plano, provocando una perspectiva dialéctica y discontinua. Por otro lado, al incorporar en el escenario europeo el concepto andino y kichaw del buen-vivir o “Sumak Kasay”, ofrece una herramienta útil para pensar en términos políticos que sujeto y

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<sup>16</sup> Con este concepto se hace referencia a un estado de pasividad que Martin Seligman bautizó en los años 70 como *indefensión aprendida* y cuya adopción elimina cualquier posible brote de protesta o resistencia.

<sup>17</sup> [Todos estos vídeos están disponibles en la página de OVNI.](#)

<sup>18</sup> En el marco de la cosmogonía andina, explica René Martínez Gallegos, el buen vivir “es un concepto complejo, vivo, no lineal, sino históricamente construido, y que por lo tanto está en constante estado de resignificación (...) la satisfacción de las necesidades, la consecución de una calidad de vida y muerte dignas, el amar y ser amado, y el florecimiento saludable de todos, en paz y armonía con la naturaleza, para la prolongación indefinida de las culturas humanas y de la biodiversidad. El buen vivir o sumak kawsay supone tener tiempo para la contemplación, la amistad, la emancipación, la ampliación de las posibilidades de socialización”. Para Luis I. Prádanos y Leonardo Esteban Figueroa Helland este concepto “can be read not only as an Indigenous political manifesto, but as an ecotestimonio conveying, among many timely lessons, the Indigenous teaching that humans must listen carefully to the non-human world to learn from Pachamama (the living Earth) how to interrelate as humans and with non-humans who must collaborate in ensuring the continuing vitality of the ayllu, or community of life.” “El Vivir Bien convincingly articulates a critique of the dominant globalizing economic model coming from classical, neoclassical, and neoliberal economic theory, and of the hubristic and pathological logics supporting it (...) views cultural consumerism, Western development, and constant economic growth as a deadly ideology that confuses and equates wealth creation with environmental degradation and social fragmentation”

objeto no tienen por qué existir como entidades violentamente enfrentadas en una batalla por el lugar del poder. En su lugar, se presenta otro modelo de desarrollo social, ecológico y político fundado en la convivencia armónica de dimensiones antagónicas: "sumak" significa lo ideal, lo hermoso, lo bueno, la realización" (Acosta 56) y "kawsay" es "la vida, en referencia a una vida digna, en armonía y equilibrio con el universo y el ser humano" (Acosta 56). En la yuxtaposición de opuestas imágenes de realidad se logra un cortocircuito cognitivo que desocupa al poder hegemónico del lugar del saber. Y es en este gesto donde se abre la posibilidad de la visión esperanzada porque no todo está perdido; de hecho, quizá el progreso esté en esa mirada dialéctica siempre por desarrollar.

Y mientras se ensaya esa fórmula política que sirva de alternativa al modelo de inclusiones y exclusiones vigente, OVNI invita a pensar soluciones temporales a estados de indefensión, paralizantes o apocalípticos en la práctica cotidiana de la razón dialéctica y de la resistencia a la tentación cínica, nihilista o nostálgica. Esta posibilidad de la resistencia esperanzada se confirma en testimonios como el de Cesar Pilataxi (protagonista de Nawpa)— quechua de la zona andina y activista del movimiento indígena de Ecuador; también la comprobamos en la comunidad peruana protagonista de *Los dos saberes*; y en la elección vital del Dr. Laurent Bado, profesor de la Universidad de Derecho y Ciencias políticas de Ouagadougou y protagonista de *El naufragio negro-liberal*. En los tres relatos, la resistencia nace de la constatación del grado de deshumanización del proyecto racionalista de civilización capitalista y de su estructura de reparto asimétrico de libertades y derechos. La solución política la ubican en la recuperación de un sentido pre-moderno de las palabras "sujeto" y "objeto" por el que cualquier sujeto a necesidad—la tierra incluida—sea considerado, por justicia y derecho, sujeto y objeto de cuidados. Respecto a la hechura ética y política de los tres planteamientos, en los tres se enfatiza lo justo como "lo suficiente para toda la comunidad, y no solamente para el individuo" (Acosta, 61) y, en torno a este principio igualador, se organiza la con-vivencia. Desde esta perspectiva, la falta de respeto hacia la tierra y hacia la persona, nos dice el profesor Bado, no es indicadora de progreso sino todo lo contrario. El progreso está en el desarrollo interdependiente de la unidad—seres humanos y tierra—en un orden político de trato justo y hospitalario.

La filósofa española Marina Garcés, al hilo del texto de Merleau-Ponty *Fenomenología de la percepción*, se pregunta, "¿Cómo poner el yo en plural?" es decir, "¿cómo cortocircuitar la ficción idealista del ser autosuficiente moderno y proponer en su lugar el desarrollo de una lógica relacional, centrada en el cultivo de un 'nosotros' 'aún no disponible pero a la vez existente?'" (82). Pienso que OVNI acierta a dar respuesta a esta pregunta habilitando herramientas culturales para la formación de una ciudadanía capaz de discutir su participación legítima en la arena política. Al mismo tiempo, la relación de trato y vínculo con lo familiar y lo conflictivo, a través de la convivencia con los testimonios y otros puntos de vista en

los debates, sirve de umbral para dar el paso de la lógica fronteriza del yo-tú capitalista, al dialéctico trato del yo-con-nos-otros. En las Jornadas del 2016 ese plural está por venir, pero, potencialmente, ya había venido.

### Por una cultura pública, oral y visual

Para salir de los límites de una ciudad sitiada—la que simboliza la frontera yo-tú de la matriz del aprender capitalista—y adentrarnos en la exterioridad del poder vigente es necesario abandonar lo familiar y entrar en un nuevo modo de relación a-filiativo<sup>19</sup> con lo extranjero—lo no fundado en un orden de igualdad sino de semejante diferencia. La cultura oral facilita esta salida y trato porque comunica el interior de la ciudad sitiada con su exterioridad. Que gran parte de los ensayistas y video-activistas reunidos en el archivo OVNI opten por la grabación de testimonios y relatos orales no resulta en absoluto arbitrario. Desde mi punto de vista, en la cultura oral-visual se re-politizan y re-historizan las prácticas de acción política y de su razonamiento, al tiempo que se ubica al sujeto interpelado en el recinto de la contemplación y de la atenta escucha como formas del aprender dialéctico. La oralidad se presenta, de algún modo, como lugar ideal para la intersección de memoria, historia y lenguaje y para la reaparición de esas palabras que han sido marginadas en una estrategia de las clases dominantes por delimitar la legítima participación ciudadana en las decisiones políticas.<sup>20</sup> El recuento oral de estas palabras— "clase," "raza," "género," "explotación," "colonización," "violación de los derechos humanos y de la naturaleza," "insurgencia," "desigualdad," "injusticia," "insostenibilidad," "crisis ecológica y de reproducción," etc.—como escribe el ensayista Javier Pérez de Andújar en su *Diccionario enciclopédico de la vieja escuela*, nos comunica con el significado actual y "además contiene[n] todo lo que ha[n] querido decir desde que se vaciaron y desde antes" (11). Un ejemplo de esto que escribo aparece en el trabajo que realiza Jean Pierre Gambarotta en el video recopilatorio "La frontera com a centre. Zones de ser i no ser" (2014) (OVNI). En este ensayo visual se reintroduce el concepto de frontera para abrirlo e inscribir en él la historia de la lógica capitalista y colonial de domesticación, formación y expansión de una estructura emergente de estereotipos culturales—el africano, el asiático, el árabe, "fantasmas colectivos, clichés paternalistas y racistas" (minuto 8:42). Como se nos explica, esta estructura y lenguaje de diferenciación

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<sup>19</sup> Edward Said explica este modo relacional en su obra *The World, the Text, and the Critic* cuando escribe: "if a filial relationship was held together by natural bonds and natural forms of authority—involving obedience, fear, love, respect, and instinctual conflict—the new affiliative relationship changes these bonds into what seem to be transpersonal forms—such as guild consciousness, consensus, collegiality, professional respect, class, and the hegemony of a dominant culture" (20).

<sup>20</sup> En el ensayo de Steven Torres "El discurso metacultural y la precariedad" este crítico nos propone pensar las tres estrategias de las clases dominantes para apartar al resto de la población de una participación política legítima. Una de las estrategias consiste en "evitar una verdadera discusión política dentro del mismo campo político para lo cual se traslada su discusión al ámbito cultural, donde queda desvirtuada, en gran medida, su capacidad de subversión real." (257)

asimétrica se reproduce y se reconfigura visualmente, primero con la cinematografía, a partir del siglo XIX, y más tarde con el aceleramiento de los adelantos técnicos y la multiplicación de medios de comunicación de masas. En esta segunda etapa de (neo)colonialidad cultural capitalista, la lógica de la frontera—ese ejercicio de diferenciación y sublimación de la superioridad de una cultura frente al resto, se internaliza siendo el marco en que se despliega la mirada y el pensar Occidentales. De este modo se explicita en términos políticos, históricos y culturales la evolución de la violencia del proceso colonial y de su culminación en un modo globalizado de aprender, de saber, de nombrar y de mirar la realidad.

Con Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui en su obra *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores* OVNI aprende que esta lógica fronteriza está vinculada al concepto ya apuntado del “colonialismo interno” (4) y a su matriz del aprender. Como escribe Cusicanqui “hay en el colonialismo una función muy peculiar para las palabras [y añadido yo para las imágenes]: ellas no designan, sino que encubren” (6). Por eso, como paliativo a su efecto, encuentra en la oralidad la manera de liberar y desocupar del poder el lenguaje y el imaginario sitiado. Otro ejemplo de un ejercicio de encubrimiento del lenguaje y de su descubrimiento mediante el relato oral se nos ofrece en el video de Bakary Sanon (Burkina Faso) titulado “Le Naufrage Negro-Liberal” (2006) (OVNI). En este vídeo conocemos al Dr. Laurent Bado, profesor de la Universidad de Derecho y Ciencias políticas de Ouagadougou. Se trata de “un hombre de pueblo que ama la tierra” y que trabaja para sensibilizar a los jóvenes sobre la importancia de abandonar la lógica de frontera internalizada con el fin de validar y dignificar las propias raíces culturales. La reflexión de Bado sobre la historia de la destrucción de África resulta en un claro análisis de las causas históricas y políticas de la pobreza y del analfabetismo en África. Como explica, el colonialismo interno o nueva esclavitud llega, paradójicamente, con la lógica neo-colonial del independentismo. Agotada la posibilidad de la esclavitud forzada de la etapa colonial, el capitalismo recurre a la cultura como incitación a la mimesis y asimilación del materialismo neoliberal desenfrenado—hecho que, de acuerdo con Bado, explica el aumento de migración joven del país en busca del sueño europeo. Este proceso de (neo)colonización o colonialismo interno mantiene intacta la estructura de asimetrías que Bado combate identificando en el mal neoliberal el origen del “mal africano” y la causa del “naufragio negro-liberal.” Al archivar el testimonio histórico de Laurent Bado, Bakary no solo está abriendo y vaciando del poder capitalista neocolonial el concepto de intelectualidad; también está historiando y politizando las razones de la todavía vigente lógica fronteriza que beneficia al bien-estar capitalista—1/5 parte de la población mundial—a costa de la explotación y acaparamiento de las 4/5 partes de la riqueza del mundo. Tanto para OVNI como para Bado la transformación de África en una periferia económica es resultado directo del abandono, por asimilación cultural, de lo que llama “la personalidad africana” y del empobrecimiento acelerado de un país convertido en suministro de materias



primas y de mano de obra y en vertedero de residuos del bien-estar. Por último, el testimonio personal que Bado ofrece sobre el trato vejatorio, por causa de su negritud, recibido en un viaje a Europa confirma la realidad de una frontera que no es imaginaria y que ubica a la civilización capitalista y blanca en un orden superior a la africana.

Para terminar, señalar que los ensayos de Bakary, Sanon y Gambarotta confirman en el relato oral un marco ideal para hacer visible esa frontera que se (re)politiza y se (re)historiza a través de la palabra dicha, descubriéndose así lo que se ha logrado encubrir—el éxito de ese doble proceso de colonización que estudia Cusicanqui. El orden de la oralidad posiciona a los sujetos interpelados en un diálogo político y horizontal del que se elimina la distancia aséptica entre sujeto y objeto; esto ocurre al facilitarse un contexto afectivo-discursivo de personas que piensan juntas en torno al derecho de lo que es justo para el ser cualquiera. Igualmente, en la oralidad se da la oportunidad de entablar un modo de relación y trato a-filiativo al centrar la actividad en la comunicación y escucha recíprocas. Del mismo modo, se enfatiza la necesidad del vínculo de todos—activistas, videoartistas, protagonistas, investigadores y ciudadanos—como activos interactores del proceso político de transformación y de cambio civilizatorio. De la contribución justa de todos depende la defensa del derecho del *ser cualquiera* pero, y por eso debemos estar atentos, para que ésta dure es imprescindible que se den, y este parece ser el talón de Aquiles de la democracia por venir, relaciones de solidaridad, de cuidado, de escucha y de respeto en la diferencia. Por último, si el relato oral resulta transformador es porque en la escucha atenta y la contemplación cuidadosa encontramos el tiempo para un pensar acompañado que genera, no solo visiones del mundo y maneras de leerlo distintas, sino también movimientos concretos hacia el cambio. El encuentro que nos facilita OVNI, en el archivo y en sus Jornadas, con el relato oral de lo plural, lo subjetivo, lo contradictorio y lo diferente, se propone, en sí mismo, como práctica política de hospitalidad. Por esta razón, pienso que el activismo que representa, aunque parezca una manera de relatar la realidad, supone más bien una manera de vivir y, en este sentido, nos ofrece un testimonio transformador vivido en carne propia. Igualmente, la apuesta por el archivo de los materiales de cada una de las Jornadas permite analizar y volver sobre el pensar colectivo, abriendo un tiempo para transformar lo privado en una cuestión pública y viceversa.

### **OVNI: Un horizonte imaginario propositivo**

Mauricio Ferraris en un momento de su ensayo *Manifiesto del nuevo realismo*, explica que, dados los tiempos con los que nos toca lidiar, toda deconstrucción sin reconstrucción es un ejercicio, en cierto modo, irresponsable. En este sentido, creo que OVNI ejerce su labor de manera responsable al sembrar la esfera pública de imágenes, pero no con el fin de reproducir una versión inmovilista de la realidad representada—en la línea del mimético realismo social-



neoliberal tan presente en la cultura capitalista de masas— sino para procurar rituales de paso esperanzados y trascendentes. A la pregunta ¿qué es la realidad?, nos dice Serra-Ali, es imprescindible sumar la pregunta "¿a qué podríamos llamar realidad?"<sup>21</sup> Llevar a cabo este trabajo creativo e imaginario, según Serra-Ali, requiere de un acceso a otras realidades y para ello es necesario salir del ocularcentrismo y de Occidente porque "fuera de la entelequia que es Occidente encontramos corrientes que aún están vivas y que nos sirven para saber realmente qué es la noción de realidad, la noción de verdad relacionada con la de realidad" (Entrevista de la autora a Toni Serra-Abu Ali). Solo una vez fuera de esta ensoñadora visión y desarraigados de su desambiguada matriz de aprendizaje, será posible ver fuera de la lógica de la frontera (yo-tú) y observar que, efectivamente, hay ciudades, comunidades y países sitiados y también imágenes y palabras ocupadas.

En el libro colectivo que publica Ecologistas en Acción bajo el título *Cambiar las gafas para mirar el mundo* (2015) se plantea la siguiente pregunta: ¿de qué dispositivos y mecanismos disponemos las personas para imaginar y dar el paso hacia un modelo utópico reflexivo de mundo justo y sostenible? A esta pregunta OVNI contesta con un trabajo donde lo importante no es solo aprender a ver la realidad sino también dar herramientas con las que imaginar eso que podríamos llamar realidad. Para ello es indispensable proporcionar modelos, establecer analogías posibles y fomentar un diálogo horizontal, desde abajo, desde antes y en colectivo, pero en el marco de una relación de trato y vínculo fuera de los límites del yo-tú capitalista. En este sentido, OVNI es un movimiento pionero que viene, ya desde los años noventa, enfatizando la necesidad de mecanismos culturales destinados a reforzar la exigencia del cambio político. Su larga experiencia como ensayo de realidad puede servir de referencia a los que, desde el ámbito educativo y cultural, queremos contribuir al proceso de cambio civilizatorio. Mi propia experiencia como participante de las Jornadas del 2016 me permite afirmar que, lejos de ser una muestra audio-visual, OVNI es una experiencia transformadora y de transformación. Su cuidadosa combinación de proyecciones, presentaciones orales, testimonios, conversaciones al margen, etc., hacen de estas Jornadas una experiencia ritual de paso individual y colectivo hacia un modo diferente de pensar, de mirar, de entablar trato y de imaginar.<sup>22</sup>

Estamos ante una potente herramienta performativa y de ensayo que funda en la experiencia oral y visual la posibilidad de un renacer de la imaginación empática, necesaria para consolidar un proyecto político justo para todas las personas. Se trata de un poderoso dispositivo en el que convergen acción, emoción y pensamiento para una praxis de lo individual-colectivo. Parafraseando a Luis Martín Cabrera, OVNI logra dar salida a una forma de enunciación en la que "el

<sup>21</sup> La cita de Toni Serra, Abu Ali, procede de la entrevista recopilada en: [blogs.carleton.edu/21stfilmfiction/ovni-interviews](http://blogs.carleton.edu/21stfilmfiction/ovni-interviews).

<sup>22</sup> Se puede seguir el archivo del 2016 titulado "La frontera como centro. Zonas del ser y del no ser" en este enlace: <http://desorg.org/acts/OVNI-2016/>.

nosotros no oblitere las diferencias entre tú y yo" (162). Por último, al hospedar en su anarchivo y en las Jornadas piezas procedentes de diferentes latitudes, OVNI manifiesta su rechazo hacia modelos culturales mono-céntricos y apuesta por una ecología y una arqueología socio-culturalmente biodiversa, heterogénea y no neutral. Escribe Bourdieu que "los intelectuales y todos los que realmente se preocupan por el bienestar de la humanidad deben restaurar un pensamiento utopista elaborado científicamente y compatible en sus fines con las tendencias objetivas. Deben trabajar colectivamente en análisis capaces de fundar proyectos y acciones realistas, estrechamente ajustadas a los procesos objetivos del orden que buscan transformar" (34). Desde mi análisis, OVNI responde a esta descripción de Bourdieu abriéndonos camino y horizonte hacia un hacer democrático en el que razón y afecto se actualicen en sintonía inmediata con la vida y con la experiencia de todas las personas. Estemos atentos a su próxima convocatoria.

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## Impegno ecologico: Malerba e Calvino a confronto

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### Abstract

In questo saggio si svolgerà una comparazione dei tre brevi romanzi di Calvino *La formica argentina* (1952), *La nuvola di smog* (1958), *La speculazione edilizia* (1957), con le opere di Malerba in cui maggiormente emerge il suo impegno ecologico: *Il serpente* (1966), *Salto mortale* (1968) e *Fantasmî romani* (2006). Tra questi romanzi che trattano con nerbo la tematica etico-ambientale, esiste un dialogo molto forte a livello testuale e ideologico, certamente maturato dall'amicizia e dagli scambi tra i due autori. Malerba e Calvino, uomini di città cresciuti però in stretto rapporto con la campagna, si rivelano attenti osservatori dei mutamenti economici, antropologici e ambientali che l'Italia subiva nell'epoca del boom. Lontana da qualsiasi lirismo romantico e da sentimenti nostalgici per un mitico passato, la relazione tra letteratura e ambiente affiora nei testi come una forma di denuncia ecologica contro inquinamento, speculazione edilizia e sottomissione degli organismi non-umani. Sia Malerba sia Calvino si fanno portavoce della necessità di smascherare le ideologie dominanti e boicottare le logiche binarie come natura / cultura. Nella battaglia che inscenano tra umano e non-umano emerge la loro prospettiva "ecocentrica" che attribuisce un valore intrinseco ad ogni organismo vivente e al loro spazio naturale a prescindere dalla loro utilità e profitto per l'essere umano.

*Parole-chiave:* ecocritica, ecologia, animal studies.

### Abstract

This essay compares Italo Calvino's short novels *La Formica Argentina* (1952), *La Nuvola di Smog* (1958), and *La Speculazione Edilizia* (1957), with Luigi Malerba's works, in which his strong environmental consciousness most comes to light: *Il Serpente* (1966), *Salto Mortale* (1968) and *Fantasmî Romani* (2006). These works engage in a textual and ideological "ecocentric" dialogue about the environment and society, which was certainly the result of the close friendship and professional exchanges between the two authors. This project thus participates in ecocriticism through an investigation of the textual and ideological dialogue between these texts. Rather than merely romantic lyricism and feelings of nostalgia for the mythical past, the relationship between literature and the environment emerges in the texts as a form of ecological denunciation against pollution, building development, and the subjugation of non-human organisms. Malerba and Calvino, city men who spent their upbringing in close contact with nature, reveal themselves to be attentive observers of the economical, anthropological, and environmental changes that Italy underwent in the period known as the economic boom. Both Malerba and Calvino bring to the fore the urgency to unmask dominant ideologies and to boycott perceived binary oppositions of nature *versus* culture. Through these texts, they stage a battle between the human and non-human, bringing together their "ecocentric" perspective with their goal of bestowing an intrinsic value to every living organism and their natural space.

*Keywords:* ecocriticism, ecology, animal studies.

## Resumen

Este ensayo compara tres novelas cortas de Italo Calvino *La formica argentina* (1952), *La nuvola di smog* (1958), *La speculazione edilizia* (1957), con las obras de Luigi Malerba, en las que más manifiesta su empeño ecológico: *Il serpente* (1966), *Salto mortale* (1968) e *Fantasmî romani* (2006). Entre estas novelas, que tratan con vigor la temática ético-medioambientalista, existe un diálogo muy fuerte a un nivel textual e ideológico, ciertamente madurado desde la amistad y los intercambios entre los dos autores. Malerba y Calvino, hombres de ciudad pero que crecieron en cercano contacto con la naturaleza, se revelan cuidadosos observadores de los mutaciones económicas, antropológicas y medioambientales que el Italia sufría en la época del boom de los años cincuenta y sesenta. Lejana de cualquier lirismo romántico y de sentimientos nostálgicos por un pasado mítico, la relación entre literatura y medio ambiente aparece en los textos como una forma de denuncia ecológica contra la contaminación, la especulación edil y la sumisión de los organismos no-humanos. Tanto Malerba como Calvino devienen portavoces de la necesidad de desenmascarar las ideologías dominantes y boicotear las lógicas binarias como naturaleza / cultura. En la lucha que escenifican entre el humano y no-humano emerge su perspectiva “ecocéntrica” que atribuye un valor intrínseco a cada organismo viviente y a su espacio natural sin importar los beneficios económicos.

*Palabras clave:* ecocrítica, ecología, estudios de los animales.

In questo saggio si svolgerà un confronto dei tre brevi romanzi di Calvino *La formica argentina* (1952), *La nuvola di smog* (1958), *La speculazione edilizia* (1957), con le opere di Malerba in cui maggiormente emerge il suo impegno ecologico: *Il serpente* (1966), *Salto mortale* (1968) e *Fantasmî romani* (2006). Tra questi romanzi, che trattano con nerbo la tematica etico-ambientale, esiste un dialogo molto forte a livello testuale e ideologico, certamente maturato dagli scambi tra i due scrittori. Entrambi gli autori sono consapevoli che la crisi ecologica coincide essenzialmente con la crisi culturale. Ma uno dei fondamenti di ogni lettura ecocritica di un testo letterario è proprio l'analisi del rapporto tra cultura e natura<sup>1</sup> come ci informa Cheryl Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, una delle prime e tra le più note raccolte di saggi ecocritici. La curatrice scrive:

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other one on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human. (XIX)

Cultura e natura sono entità connesse e malleate l'una dall'altra, che esistono in un continuo rapporto di scambio e sovrapposizione e l'immaginario letterario degli autori riflette esattamente questa profonda relazione. In questo saggio si

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<sup>1</sup> Per il concetto di “natura” mi avvalgo della definizione del critico e attivista ambientale Gary Snyder: la “natura” intesa come “the physical universe and all its properties,” come un insieme di sistemi “self-organizing,” ma anche in modo più specifico come “wilderness” e “non-human realm;” in *The Gary Snyder Reader* (171-173) e in *A Place in Space* (388-389).

dimostrerà come Malerba e Calvino, attraverso i loro testi, manifestano una forte coscienza ecologica e denunciano le conseguenze di processi produttivi privi di moralità e dell'abuso della tecnologia e dell'inquinamento, sollecitando il lettore a riflettere sulla necessità di una riconsiderazione del discorso sull'"etica della terra"<sup>2</sup> in un'era d'inarrestabile avanzamento tecnologico. Si illustrerà, inoltre, come dall'impiego di comicità e ironia (soprattutto in Malerba) e dall'assenza di qualsiasi lirismo romantico e di sentimenti nostalgici per un passato mitico (soprattutto in Calvino) emerge nei romanzi la proposta di una politica di compromesso etico-ambientalista, che implica la necessità di ristabilire un equilibrio tra i nostri bisogni e quelli dell'ambiente in cui viviamo.

In generale, l'ecocritica esplora i modi in cui le varie forme culturali e la letteratura in particolare, riproducono la relazione tra umanità e natura (Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria* 14). Tuttavia non è impresa facile fornire una definizione esaustiva di questo termine, poiché i suoi obiettivi si sono rapidamente diversificati dalla coniazione della parola da parte di William Rueckert nel suo saggio del 1978 intitolato "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (*The Ecocriticism Reader* 105), fino ai nostri giorni. L'ecocritica infatti, tratta temi specificamente relativi alla natura (*nature writing*) se si pensa ad esempio ai testi pastorali, alla poesia romantica, o al mondo animale e botanico (inteso come tutto l'universo non-umano), ma include anche studi sul rapporto tra l'individuo e lo spazio da lui abitato. Qui le tematiche variano: dall'architettura ai contesti urbani e dagli ambienti naturali e selvaggi al giardino. Contemporaneamente però, l'ecocritica ha attinto a metodologie e teorie nel campo di studi letterari, sociali e scientifici. Ne è un esempio il legame tra il concetto di sottomissione della natura da parte dell'essere umano e le questioni di *gender* (omosessualità e condizioni impari tra uomo e donna, da cui il termine *eco-feminism*) e razzismo (*eco-racism*), e recentemente la divulgazione di un nuovo ramo dell'ecocritica che studia la rappresentazione degli animali in letteratura (*animal studies*).

Nel presente studio ci si occuperà del rapporto tra l'individuo e la natura, dello spazio urbano, dell'universo non-umano (piante e animali) e del degrado ambientale, in particolare dello smog. Nei testi che si analizzeranno i protagonisti si trovano infatti alle prese con un ambiente naturale alterato o dall'invasione delle formiche o delle mosche (ne *La formica argentina* e *Salto mortale*) o dalla distruzione del paesaggio a causa dell'invasione del cemento (ne *La speculazione edilizia* e in *Fantasma romani*) o ancora dallo smog che sovrasta la città (ne *La nuvola* e ne *Il serpente*), ma non sanno come reagire alle conseguenze negative di

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<sup>2</sup> Sono numerosi gli antropologi, i filosofi e i critici che trattano questo argomento. Per citarne alcuni: Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), noto autore, scienziato, ecologista e ambientalista americano e precursore dell'etica ambientale moderna, ha scritto di "Land ethic" come filosofia necessaria per la sopravvivenza dell'umanità (*For the Health of the Land*); Lawrence Buell (1939-), pioniere dell'*ecocriticism* americano, tratta nella sua opera di "Earth ethics" (*Environmental Imagination*); e ancora il saggio di Larry L. Rasmussen, professore emerito di etiche sociali, in cui affronta il rapporto tra etica ed ambiente (*Ethics and the Environment*).



tali mutamenti. La cultura del profitto economico sembra schiacciare sia l'individuo sia il paesaggio e l'esplorazione della dimensione socio-ambientale dei testi presi in esame, permette ad entrambi gli autori di confrontarsi con i meccanismi del potere che hanno reso la "vita difficile."<sup>3</sup> La corrispondenza tra letteratura e ambiente affiora nelle narrazioni come una forma di denuncia ecologica che sarà analizzata all'interno dei seguenti sottogruppi: 1) formiche e mosche, 2) smog, 3) speculazione edilizia. Ma prima di addentrarci nell'analisi testuale delle opere citate, occorre soffermarsi brevemente sul rapporto tra i due autori.

## Malerba e Calvino

Il dialogo tra Malerba e Calvino nasce prima di tutto da una profonda amicizia che ha legato i due scrittori per ventiquattro anni:

A Roma -- scrive Malerba -- abitavamo molto vicino, io a via Tor Millina e Calvino a via delle Coppelle, ma anche durante l'estate ci scambiavamo qualche visita da Orvieto a Roccamare e da Roccamare a Orvieto. Era per me un punto di riferimento oltre che un amico. (Malerba, *Parole* 159)

In un'intervista del 2006, Dorian Fasoli domanda a Malerba quali autori conosciuti personalmente gli abbiano lasciato davvero un segno. Oltre all'amico Rodolfo Wilcock, l'autore ammette di sentire molto la mancanza di Italo Calvino (Malerba, *Parole* 159). E ancora, in risposta a un'intervista del 1992 con la critica Grazia Menechella, Malerba confessa di avere "maggiori affinità" (Malerba, *Parole* 61) con Calvino che con altri autori. Si tratta di affinità ideologiche, senza dubbio. Entrambi gli scrittori hanno sentito la responsabilità di rappresentare la realtà che hanno vissuto: "Il romanzo, scrive Calvino nel saggio 'Il midollo del leone', vive nella dimensione della storia [...] il vero tema di un romanzo dovrà essere una definizione del nostro tempo [...] dovrà essere un'immagine che ci spieghi il nostro inserimento nel mondo" (*Una pietra sopra* 11); parole queste che echeggiano quelle di Malerba secondo cui attraverso il romanzo "lo scrittore [ci propone] una sua immagine del mondo" (*Parole* 19). Ma non solo somiglianze ideologiche li accomunano: entrambi condividono un'infanzia e un'educazione a stretto contatto con la campagna<sup>4</sup> che li ha resi attenti osservatori dei profondi cambiamenti economici, antropologici e ambientali che subiva l'Italia nell'immediato dopoguerra.

Calvino impara a conoscere il paesaggio dell'entroterra ligure attraverso le figure della madre botanista e del padre agronomo. I luoghi dell'infanzia e

<sup>3</sup> Le tre novelle di Calvino sono presentate inizialmente nel volume dell'Einaudi *I Racconti* (1958) proprio con il titolo "La vita difficile."

<sup>4</sup> Per la definizione del termine "campagna" mi avvalgo della spiegazione di Gary Snyder, secondo cui la campagna costituisce una natura poco incontaminata, in cui l'uomo vive in armonia con l'universo non-umano (animali, piante, minerali); in *Gary Snyder Reader* (170-171).

dell'adolescenza costituiscono i soggetti principali de *La strada di San Giovanni* (1990), che include alcuni dei suoi pensieri più autobiografici sul rapporto con il padre e con la campagna. Anche l'avvicinamento di Malerba alla natura nasce dal rapporto con il padre:

Siamo vissuti molto in campagna, nella valle del Taro e lui [il padre] amministrava le proprietà. (*Parole* 187). [...] L'educazione che trasmetteva, a mio fratello e a me, era questo rapporto con la terra, con le cose che possedevamo. E con i contadini (188).[...] Ho appreso più dalla campagna che dalla scuola. (10)

È opportuno sottolineare tuttavia che, nonostante la passione per il paesaggio campestre, affiora dai romanzi di questi due autori anche un loro legame affettivo con lo spazio urbano. Malerba e Calvino sono di fatto uomini di città. Dopo l'infanzia e l'adolescenza trascorse a Parma, Malerba si trasferisce a Roma nel gennaio del 1950, mentre Calvino è stato associato tutta la vita a città come Sanremo, Torino, Parigi e Roma, dove si reca definitivamente nel 1980. È proprio a causa del loro duplice attaccamento—da un lato alla città, spazio che rappresenta la sfera umana per eccellenza e dall'altro alla campagna, intesa come universo naturale non contaminato dall'uomo (*Gary Snyder Reader* 171)—che gli autori, attraverso le opere considerate, propongono una riconsiderazione del posto che l'essere umano occupa nel mondo naturale.

### Formiche e mosche

Serenella Iovino sostiene che uno degli obiettivi dell'ecocritica è la denuncia della logica di dominio dell'uomo su tutti gli organismi non-umani, quindi anche sugli animali: "Nella sua combinazione di creatività e di ricerca di senso, l'ecologia letteraria prelude così a un 'umanesimo non antropocentrico': un umanesimo 'evoluto' che ridisponga l'umano all'orizzontalità, e che sia per questo più adatto a riconoscere l'alterità nelle sue manifestazioni [...]" (*Ecologia letteraria* 21). Italo Calvino prima, con il breve racconto *La formica argentina* e in seguito Malerba con *Salto mortale* forniscono una chiave per comprendere il concetto di umanesimo non antropocentrico. Questi due testi sono edificanti nel mettere in luce "le incongruenze di un atteggiamento epistemologico che, nel tentativo di servire l'uomo per 'aggiogare' la natura, ha prodotto strumenti e metodi di ricerca che danneggiano equilibri ecologici e forme di vita, umane e non-umane" (*Ecologia letteraria* 23).

*La formica argentina* narra del futile tentativo di una famiglia di trasferirsi in campagna, attirata dalla possibilità di una vita più serena, lontano dalla città. Ma la casa in cui si reca presto si scopre infestata dalle formiche. Il racconto caratterizza in maniera ludica l'angoscia dei personaggi di fronte alla lotta contro un nemico quasi invisibile e in esso Calvino, parodiando l'opposizione binaria umano / non-umano tipico della logica di dominio antropocentrica, presenta il caso in cui l'uomo finisce per soccombere a un insetto. Il paragrafo iniziale

presagisce immediatamente la presenza invasiva di questi esseri minuscoli: “noi non lo sapevamo, delle formiche, quando venimmo a stabilirci qui” (85). La dislocazione a destra del complemento di argomento “delle formiche” posto tra le virgole e in posizione centrale tra la proposizione principale e la coordinata, dirige subito l’attenzione del lettore sul problema degli insetti importuni. Il lemma “formiche” è ripetuto ben otto volte in un solo paragrafo ed è collocato in posizione enfatica:

come potevamo supporre la storia delle formiche? [...] dovrete vedere le formiche...non come qui, le formiche...[...] forse a proposito di formiche [...] che dico: formiche? Una formica, avremmo visto, sperduta, una di quelle nostre formiche grasse (mi sembravano grasse, ora, le formiche dei miei paesi [...]). (85)

Da qui inizia la ricerca disperata da parte del marito di un metodo per sterminare i piccoli invasori che poco per volta si spargono per tutta casa.<sup>5</sup> Contrariamente alla visione rosea della campagna che lo zio Augusto aveva loro prospettato, inizia la “vita difficile” dei protagonisti in quanto, come spiega Franco Ricci,

the relationship between man and Nature, however, has now become problematic. Where once the protagonist saw magic, enchantment, friends, and adventure, he now encounters a surrealistically macabre and vindictive colony of one of the nature’s smallest creatures, ants. (91)

Quando il protagonista si rende conto che il problema accomuna tutto il vicinato, si fa acuta l’ironia di Calvino attraverso la descrizione degli svariati metodi utilizzati dai vicini per sterminare la formica argentina. L’incontro con il signor Reginaudo, una sorta di chimico alle prese con soffietti (88), imbuti (96) intrugli (96) e polveri (96) e con sua moglie, si apre sotto il segno della risata: “Ah, ah, ah! Le formiche! - [...] Ah, ah, ah! Le formiche anche loro! Ah, ah, ah!” (96)

La reiterazione dell’onomatopea contribuisce a soffocare immediatamente la possibilità di una soluzione. Nonostante gli intrugli e le polveri chimiche, il protagonista e con lui il lettore, ha già compreso che i vicini si sono da tempo rassegnati a convivere con le formiche. L’episodio si regge tutto sulla figura dell’antitesi: alla disperazione che affligge il protagonista si oppone la “gran farsa” (97) dei coniugi Reginaudo nel finto tentativo di offrirgli aiuto. Le pagine che seguono aderiscono ai moduli stilistici e scenici di una commedia teatrale e vale la pena riportarli per esteso:

Un rimedio, ah, ah, ah!- ridevano a più non posso i coniugi Reginaudo.- Se abbiamo un rimedio? Ma venti, cento rimedi, abbiamo! E uno, ah, ah, ah, uno meglio dell’altro! [...] Vuole il Profosfàn? Vuole il Mirminèc? Oppure il Tiobroflit? L’Arsopàn in polvere o in miscela?- E si passavano di mano spruzzatori a stantuffo, pennelli, soffietti, alzavano nuvole di polveri giallastre e di goccioline minutissime, e un miscuglio d’odori da farmacia e da consorzio agrario, sempre ridendo sgangheratamente.  
- E c’è qualcosa che serve davvero? - chiesi.

<sup>5</sup> Le formiche vanno “sui muri della casa (90), entrano nella culla del bambino (91), infestano i vestiti (91), camminano sulle provviste (92), sulle tazze, sul bavaglino e sulla frutta.” (93)

Smisero di ridere. - No, niente,- risposero. (96-97)

Nell'elenco dei numerosi veleni e degli strumenti che moglie e marito si passano ridendo, prevale la nominalizzazione, che contribuisce a rafforzare la prolissità dei metodi, ma anche la loro inefficacia. Quest'ultimo aspetto è segnalato dalla decisione dello scrittore di andare a capo alla domanda del protagonista oramai scettico: "E c'è qualcosa che serve davvero?" e alla risposta secca dei Reginaudo: "No, niente." La costruzione paratattica per asindeto dell'enunciato: "Smisero di ridere. - No, niente, - risposero" mira ad intensificare il cambio di reazione dei coniugi che diventano improvvisamente seri dopo una pagina e mezzo di "risate sgangherate." La ricerca del protagonista raggiunge la sua fase parossistica quando entra sulla scena il personaggio di Baudino, che da vent'anni sparge invano per le case del paese la sua "melassa avvelenata" (112). Alla fine, il protagonista è costretto a rassegnarsi a una coesistenza con gli insetti. Con questo racconto Calvino mostra come il tentativo dell'individuo di soggiogare la natura attraverso l'impiego della tecnologia (gli intrugli chimici, le polveri e le melasse) e quindi, di rinforzare la bipartizione umano / non-umano, sia un'illusione qui smascherata dalla vittoria inconfutabile delle formiche.

La dicotomia umano / non-umano è anche bersaglio polemico di Luigi Malerba nell'episodio di *Salto mortale*, in cui Giuseppe, peregrinando con la sua bicicletta alla ricerca dell'assassino, finisce per interrogare il "demoscatore" (65). Questi per mestiere disinfesta Roma e i suoi dintorni dalle mosche: "faccio questa guerra, diceva, io le odio le mosche. Posso pompare la melassa e il Ddt per ore e ore senza stancarmi, i muri i tronchi degli alberi i pali della luce le siepi i campi di bocce e quelli da tennis i cortili i giardini delle case e delle ville" (65). Ripercorrendo la descrizione, si noti che Malerba non solo utilizza lo stesso sostantivo con cui Calvino identifica uno dei veleni insetticidi ("melassa"), ma anche il medesimo aggettivo ("avvelenata"): "io arrivo in bicicletta con la mia pompa e il bidone di melassa avvelenata" (66). Come Calvino, anche Malerba opta per la nominalizzazione nell'elenco dei luoghi avvelenati da melassa e Ddt ("i muri...ville"). Nel passo citato, la scomparsa della punteggiatura contribuisce all'accelerazione della lettura, intensificando la lunghezza della lista. La presenza dei veleni e dei diversi prodotti chimici nel testo calviniano ricompare in Malerba:

Io arrivo in bicicletta con la mia pompa e il bidone di melassa avvelenata. Tutti mi tengono lontano dalle cucine e dai cibi in generale. [...] Mi tengono lontano anche dal vino, sempre per via del veleno. [...] Hanno ragione il Ddt è un veleno potentissimo e mortale, grazie tante. Con questi veleni per le mosche, dicevo, qualche volta può succedere di avvelenare anche un cristiano [...]. (66)

Quest'ultimo scenario è presentato da Calvino ne *La formica argentina*, quando il bambino del protagonista finisce per ingerire gli insetticidi fortunatamente senza conseguenze letali (105).

Entrambi gli autori scherniscono gli inutili tentativi dell'uomo di liberarsi dagli insetti, ma Malerba veicola il suo pensiero in modo più esplicito e,

immergendosi in una denuncia contro veleni e disinfestanti, sottolinea la minaccia ai processi naturali che sostengono la vita:

Le mosche, dicevo, si abitueranno anche al Ddt. È già successo in Sardegna [...] alla fine del 1940, in Danimarca nel 1944 e in Egitto nel 1948. Ormai le mosche egiziane sono completamente refrattarie, si mettono a ridere quando sentono l'odore del Ddt. Lo stesso succede anche in Sardegna e in Danimarca le mosche ridono a crepappele. Sarà vero, diceva il demoscattore, ma per adesso dove passo io il terreno diventa nero di mosche come un campo di battaglia. Va bene un campo di battaglia, ma intanto infettate l'aria con questi insetticidi, finirete per infettare tutto il Pianeta con i vostri veleni. [...] e intanto stai avvelenando l'atmosfera. Presto anche gli uomini incominceranno a morire come le mosche, per piacere. (*Salto mortale* 66-67)

Se prima erano i Reginaudo ora sono le zanzare a “ridere a crepappele” di fronte ai molteplici tentativi di sterminio da parte dell'uomo.<sup>6</sup> L'espressione “campo di battaglia,” reiterata due volte nel passo malerbiano, appare anche ne *La formica argentina* - “I nostri vicini usavano casa e giardino come una campo di battaglia” (98) - rafforzando così il legame tra i due testi.

Laddove Calvino presenta l'episodio del bambino che accidentalmente ingerisce gli insetticidi, Malerba attraverso il personaggio di Giuseppe avvia una vera e propria polemica sulle conseguenze rovinose della “lotta”<sup>7</sup> tra umano / non-umano, come l'avvelenamento di tutto il pianeta o la morte degli uomini insieme alle mosche. Al demoscattore, fervido sostenitore dell'assenza di umanità nelle mosche—LE MOSCHE NON HANNO NESSUNA UMANITÀ (69), Giuseppe rivolge una semplice domanda: “Va bene non hanno nessuna umanità ma forse credi di essere meglio di loro con la tua melassa e il tuo Ddt? In piccolo assomigli a quelli delle camere a gas, con le tue stragi” (69). La frase suscita la riflessione sul dualismo mosche / uomo, ma il paragone con “quelli delle camere a gas” smorza improvvisamente la forza ironica dei passaggi precedenti, rivelando un grave sentimento di indignazione dell'autore nei confronti di qualsiasi logica di dominio, degli abusi e delle sopraffazioni. Per questo motivo sia Calvino sia Malerba offrono lo scenario in cui saranno gli uomini a soccombere o per mano della natura (Calvino) o in maniera più catastrofica per loro stessa mano (Malerba).

Gli autori, dando voce a istanze della natura considerate nell'ottica antropocentrica “marginali” (Iovino 68), come le formiche o le mosche, si fanno portavoce di un altro tipo di umanesimo: un umanesimo non antropocentrico, “un tipo di umanesimo esteso, capace di stabilire relazioni di prossimità costruttiva (“buon vicinato”) [...] con le altre specie e con l'ambiente naturale” e di attuare una

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<sup>6</sup> Un linguaggio che normalmente serve per descrivere gli uomini, se utilizzato per rappresentare gli animali -- le zanzare che “ridono a crepappele” -- apre un punto importante analizzato da Iovino: “The humanization of cats, hares, cows, fishes, is not the sign of an anthropocentric or hierarchical vision but, quite the opposite, it ‘works against anthropocentrism’ [...] it reveals similarities and symmetries between the human and nonhuman [...] (“Toxic Epiphanies” 46).

<sup>7</sup> Ne *La formica argentina* esiste “l'Ente per la lotta contro la formica argentina” (123).

“com-presenza non dualistica di umanità e natura” (68). Deridendo uno dei tratti distintivi dell’umanesimo, vale a dire il chiasmo metafisico che distanzia l’uomo dall’animale, gli autori mostrano come l’uomo non sia un’identità indipendente e superiore ma faccia parte di un contesto insieme ad altri organismi non-umani in una relazione di interdipendenza, all’interno della quale tutto si muove in conseguenza dell’altro. Nonostante ne *La formica argentina* e in *Salto mortale* la lotta uomo / insetto termina con la sconfitta dell’uomo e del suo senso di superiorità, l’impiego di parodia, ironia e aspetti comici nelle descrizioni di questa guerra tra umano e non-umano da parte di entrambi gli autori—i moduli stilistici della commedia teatrale in Calvino ad esempio, o il linguaggio divertente e fuori dalle righe di Giuseppe detto Giuseppe e inoltre, la presenza di una certa suggestione angosciosa nelle narrazioni dell’invasione degli insetti—contribuiscono a mio avviso ad attenuare l’idea di uno schieramento definitivo degli autori a favore degli insetti. Malerba e Calvino insistono piuttosto sulla necessità di creare un equilibrio tra umano e non-umano, conseguenza logica dell’intrinseca relazione di interdipendenza tra questi due universi che se osservati all’interno dell’ottica non antropocentrica, sono in realtà uno solo.

## Smog

Il problema dell’inquinamento dell’aria in Italia si configura come conseguenza di una collisione violenta tra industrializzazione, traffico e produzioni di rifiuti all’indomani dell’epoca del boom. Se Calvino, attraverso i protagonisti del suo breve romanzo *La nuvola di smog*, decide di osservare i paradossi e le implicazioni celate dietro l’emergenza smog, anticipando una minaccia che solo in questo secolo inizia ad essere presa seriamente in considerazione, Malerba invece, ne *Il serpente* e *Salto mortale*, imbastisce una vera e propria invettiva contro l’inquinamento dell’aria. In particolare, Calvino sembra essere in linea con il principio di “giustizia ambientale” come argomentato da Lawrence Buell, vale a dire quel ramo dell’ecocritica che si occupa non solo di come l’ambiente impatti l’individuo, ma in modo specifico degli effetti sproporzionati che i problemi ambientali hanno su gruppi socio-economici svantaggiati (642-643). L’obiettivo di Malerba, quando tratta la questione dello smog, è soprattutto pungolare la coscienza del lettore e colpire quelle persone che si mostrano cieche nel riconoscere l’inquinamento come una minaccia concreta.

Nel 1958, nel volume 34 della rivista *Nuovi Argomenti* esce la prima edizione de *La nuvola di smog* di Calvino. Il titolo parla chiaro: la trama coinvolgerà in qualche modo il problema della contaminazione dell’aria. Si tratta della storia di un intellettuale senza nome che si trasferisce in una città non specificata per lavorare come redattore de *La Purificazione*, periodico dell’EPAUCI (“Ente per la Purificazione dell’Atmosfera Urbana dei Centri Industriali”) (9). Dall’inizio della narrazione ci si avvede presto che il racconto si regge sulla figura dell’antitesi. Il



nome della rivista “La Purificazione” è un termine posto in contrasto sin dalla prima pagina con la rappresentazione della sporcizia cittadina:

Per uno appena sbarcato dal treno, si sa, la città è tutta una stazione: gira gira e si ritrova in vie sempre più squallide, [...] caffè col banco di zinco, camion che gli soffiano in faccia getti puzzolenti, [...] si sente le mani gonfie, sudice, la biancheria appiccicata addosso, il nervoso [...]. (9)

Lo smog sembra infiltrarsi nella vita del protagonista attraverso la polvere e la sporcizia che, di fatto, accompagnano ogni momento della sua giornata.<sup>8</sup> L’antitesi tra l’obiettivo dell’EPAUCI di purificare l’atmosfera e la sporcizia concreta che contamina l’aria è corroborata anche dalla struttura chiastica dei primi cinque capitoli: alla comparsa del termine “purificazione” nella prima pagina segue la descrizione della polvere e della sporcizia che si protrae nei quattro capitoli successivi e termina con i sostantivi “unto e polvere” (55) in posizione antinomica con il termine “purificazione” all’inizio del quinto capitolo.<sup>9</sup> Questo forte contrasto purificazione / sporcizia è utilizzato in modo efficace dallo scrittore per presentare l’ambientazione di un romanzo in cui lo smog penetra prima metaforicamente nelle pagine del libro attraverso la descrizione della polvere, poi in maniera concreta a partire dal quinto capitolo, quando la questione dello smog è presentata al lettore come “grave” (56) e di dimensione internazionale. È Monica Seger che nella sua attenta analisi ecocritica de *La nuvola di smog* evidenzia questo aspetto: “Calvino employs *La nuvola di smog* to confront the role of pollution not only in post-war Italy but in the industrial world at large” (*Landscapes* 41). Lo smog infatti è il risultato dell’insieme complesso delle forze politiche, economiche, culturali che dagli anni Cinquanta in poi, con la sfrenata industrializzazione, hanno cambiato per sempre il volto dell’Italia.

In dialogo con *La Nuvola di Smog*, anche *Salto mortale* si apre col tema della polvere: “l’aria era pesante e polverosa come quando stavano per arrivare gli aeroplani americani a bombardare. [...] Si sentiva qualcosa da lontano, l’aria si metteva a vibrare, la polvere e il vento si sollevavano insieme [...]” (3). Malerba si concentra immediatamente sulla minaccia dello smog:

Naturalmente l’aria è molto inquinata  
FACCIO FATICA A RESPIRARE. (102)

<sup>8</sup> “[...] dalla vestizione mattutina quando le impronte grigie del gatto appaiono sul colletto della camicia ai momenti intimi con la compagna Claudia nel tentativo di toglierle un po’ di polvere caduta sui seni” (*La nuvola* 52). Inoltre, il colore grigio tipico dello smog è “associato -- commenta la critica Pina Gorgoni -- alla piattezza della vita del protagonista” (200) e s’infiltra in ogni episodio della storia.

<sup>9</sup> Il chiasmo strutturale può essere così schematizzato:

1° capitolo, 1° pag. : “Mi fu offerto un posto di redattore del periodico «La Purificazione»[...].

2° capitolo: descrizione della sporcizia e della polvere

3° capitolo: descrizione della sporcizia e della polvere

4° capitolo: descrizione della sporcizia e della polvere

5° capitolo, 1° pag.: «La Purificazione» era un quindicinale [...].

Il tema del traffico automobilistico e aereo di Roma percorre invece molte pagine de *Il Serpente* e insieme alle numerose descrizioni degli spostamenti in auto a tutta velocità del filatelico e alla sua attrazione per gli aerei, nel romanzo coesiste la consapevolezza che i fumi delle auto e delle ciminiere avvelenano l'aria: "Io chiudevo tutti i finestrini per non respirare la nafta delle altre macchine e allora scoppiavo dal caldo, aprivo e respiravo la nafta. In quella zona l'aria è già avvelenata per conto suo dallo stabilimento della Purfina che emana veleni" (77). Sia nel *Serpente* sia in *Salto mortale* al termine "smog" Malerba predilige "aria," maggiormente adatto ad agire sulla coscienza del lettore. L'aria è necessaria per vivere, ma è satura di veleni, di cui ci è presentata una lista sia ne *Il serpente*:

Bisogna approfittare di questi lavaggi naturali della pioggia per respirare, ma già le macchine incominciano a sporcare l'aria un'altra volta, già i pedoni aspirano aria buona per mettere in circolazione milioni di miliardi di microbi. Fra poco tutto sarà come prima, il catrame, la nafta, i microbi. Sono già avvelenato. (103)

Sia in *Salto mortale*:

L'ossido di carbonio stagna nelle strade, entra nei negozi nelle case, attraverso le trombe degli ascensori arriva anche agli ultimi piani e avvelena tutti quanti.

QUI NON SI RESPIRA. (103)

Cambiate l'aria che sarà meglio invece di cambiare il calendario. Qui non si respira mi sento soffocare, per piacere. E voi come fate?

CE LI AVETE I POLMONI? Oppure respirate con i piedi? (104)

Gli enunciati, enfaticizzati dal carattere maiuscolo, rivolgono l'attenzione alla gravità del problema (già evidenziata nella *Nuvola*), vale a dire l'impossibilità di svolgere un'operazione vitale come respirare e preannunciano la polemica contro un "voi" generico ("ce li avete i polmoni?") che allude in generale a tutte le forze di potere responsabili.

Il tema della contaminazione dell'aria occupa un ruolo da protagonista in numerosi romanzi ecologici e può essere inserito nelle argomentazioni di Lawrence Buell sul "toxic discourse" dell'epoca postmoderna. L'ambientalista esorta gli scrittori a spostarsi dal tradizionale "nature writing" che miticizza l'ambiente naturale e ne auspica la protezione fine a se stessa, affinché approdino piuttosto a un tipo di giustizia ambientale che si adoperi per evitare pratiche dannose come "Love Canal, Three Mile island, Bophal, Chrenobyl, e Exxon Valdez" (*Toxic Discourse* 642). Il suo saggio mette in luce "the point that environmentalism must make concerns for human and social health more central and salient than it traditionally has if it is to thrive, perhaps even to survive" (*Toxic Discourse* 639-640).<sup>10</sup> Se la preoccupazione per la salute dell'uomo e della società affiora nel testo di Calvino attraverso la nuvola di smog che avvolge la città e si infila in modo subdolo nella vita dei personaggi—"the toxic penetration" per dirla con Buell

<sup>10</sup> Sul concetto di tossicità vedi anche l'articolo di S. Iovino: "Toxic Epiphanies: Dioxin, Power and Gendered Bodies in Laura Conti's narratives on Seveso."

(642)—a Malerba preme evidenziare come la minaccia di una “toxic penetration” sia un’urgenza che deve essere presa in considerazione il prima possibile.

In Calvino lo smog, sintomo dell’inquinamento, è qualcosa di misterioso, poiché nascondendo gli edifici urbani con la sua nebbia, sembra metaforicamente offuscare la percezione della città moderna, il ricordo di un antico equilibrio tra individuo e natura e il legame tra problemi ambientali da un lato e squilibri economici dall’altro. Per alcuni il fenomeno è oggetto di ammirazione poiché annuncia un futuro in nome del progresso, per altri è il risultato di quello che Buell definisce “the threat of hegemonic oppression” (*Toxic Discourse* 642), vale a dire la minaccia alla salute dell’uomo a causa di sistemi di potere corrotti che abusano della tecnologia e ancora oggi non scendono a compromessi per portare avanti senza scrupoli la propria politica di produzione. La nuvola di smog, ma anche di nebbia o di polvere, nasconde per esempio la menzogna dell’ingegner Cordà che pretende di essere il padrone di un giornale il cui obiettivo è la divulgazione della consapevolezza sui danni ambientali e insieme il consigliere delegato di una fabbrica, dalle cui ciminiere fuoriescono fiamme che invadono tutto il cielo (57).<sup>11</sup> Ma paradossi e ambiguità coesistono anche nel carattere del protagonista che da un lato sembra attribuire alla nuvola di smog un aspetto quasi soprannaturale, come si evince dall’episodio in cui si reca con Claudia in un luogo panoramico per ammirare la città dall’alto: “Fu allora che vidi quella cosa. [...]Lo smog! [...] e io restavo lì affascinato a guardare per la prima volta dal di fuori la nuvola che mi circondava in ogni ora, la nuvola che abitavo e che m’abitava, e sapevo che di tutto il mondo variegato che m’era intorno solo quella m’importava” (48-49). La descrizione del grigiore della vita del protagonista nelle pagine precedenti a questo passo si pone in antitesi con l’atteggiamento di gioia e stupore quasi fanciullesco alla vista della nuvola. Allo stesso tempo però, proprio in questo momento, osservando la nuvola, il protagonista sembra avere una sorta di epifania e diventa così improvvisamente consapevole della battaglia tra salute e interessi economici immediati.

È possibile rimarcare un altro confronto con Malerba: l’aria avvelenata crea una sorta di nebbia (la nuvola) che in Calvino oscura città e paesaggi, ma dall’alto di una collina il protagonista calviniano è finalmente in grado di osservare la nuvola di smog e svelarne le verità nascoste. È solo attraverso la visione panottica che egli ha una rivelazione. In generale la visione panottica implica la possibilità di vedere le cose da una posizione elevata, da una prospettiva differente e offre la sensazione di possedere il controllo. Lo smog spesso può essere notato esclusivamente dall’alto, dalla cima di una collina o dal finestrino di un aereo ad

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<sup>11</sup> “E io -- riflette il protagonista -- che tante volte di fronte a lui, negli uffici dell’Ente, sfogavo il mio naturale antagonismo di dipendente dichiarandomi mentalmente dalla parte dello smog, [...] ora capivo quanto il mio gioco era insensato, perché era l’ingegner Cordà il padrone dello smog, era lui che lo soffiava ininterrottamente sulla città, e l’EPAUCI era una creatura dello smog, nata dal bisogno di dare a chi lavorava per lo smog la speranza di una vita che non fosse solo di smog, ma nello stesso tempo per celebrarne la potenza” (57).

esempio. Ma la visione panottica e il paradosso tra l'attrazione per il progresso tecnologico e il sentimento di disagio che ne consegue, accomuna anche il protagonista de *Il Serpente*, ossessionato con il volo:

Ero sicuro di poter volare, l'aria diventa soffice come un materasso di piume, io ero leggero (59) [...]. Può alzarsi da terra e librarsi nell'aria, può sorvolare i tetti e le nuvole un commerciante di fracobolli? (73) [...] lì in alto l'aria era calda e soffice e laggiù si vedevano i tetti (126).

L'ammirazione del filatelico per gli aerei e dunque per la tecnologia sembra costituire un paradosso se pensata insieme alle sue fantasie sul volo. Queste infatti sono interpretabili come desiderio di fuga dalle pressioni di un mondo reale (rappresentato dal suolo e in generale da ciò che sta in basso),<sup>12</sup> che è proprio l'artefice dell'avanzamento tecnologico e il responsabile dello smog che tanto fa star male il protagonista.

Laddove Calvino predilige il senso di mistero e ci mostra il gesto di ammirazione per la nuvola di smog in contrasto con la verità celata nella sua valenza simbolica,<sup>13</sup> se ci si sposta su *Salto mortale*, si nota che la critica al problema dell'aria inquinata è più esplicita e acquista progressivamente un tono sentenzioso, che unisce domande retoriche a vere e proprie glosse didascaliche:

Ma perché domando, non mettono in circolazione le automobili elettriche già che le hanno inventate? Allora che cosa le avete inventate a fare? Mi dicono che i Grandi Trusts Petroliferi non vogliono. Così l'aria è piena di ossido di carbonio e soltanto negli ultimi piani dei grattacieli si può respirare. Giù nelle strade della Metropoli l'aria è avvelenata e io dico dovrete per forza prendere qualche provvedimento, che cosa intendete fare?

È uno scandalo che in una città così moderna non si sia trovato il sistema per tenere pulita l'atmosfera. Che cosa ci vuole? Se non potete usare le automobili elettriche andate in bicicletta [...] io faccio un ragionamento elementare e dico signori avete costruito le fogne per portare via gli scoli della Metropoli? E allora costruite anche dei grandi tubi che portano via l'aria inquinata. (102-103)

Si tratta di sentenze dirette e di domande incalzanti rivolte ancora una volta a un "voi" generico e tutte votate ad avere un effetto sul lettore, progressivamente costretto a concordare con il "ragionamento elementare" di Giuseppe: "è uno scandalo" che nessuno si impegni concretamente a risolvere la questione quando le soluzioni sarebbero a disposizione.

In Calvino, lo smog sembra metaforicamente offuscare non solo il fatto che lo sviluppo industriale sia pericolosamente incontrollato, ma persino la percezione delle persone che leggono gli articoli de *La Purificazione* come ci informa il protagonista: "leggere, leggevano, ma ormai per queste cose era nata una specie

<sup>12</sup> Per approfondimenti sul tema del volo ne *Il Serpente* si veda R. Ballerini, *Malerba e la topografia del vuoto*. Vecchio faggio: 1988.

<sup>13</sup> Il paradosso di Cordà nel voler essere "un abile uomo d'affari e un puntiglioso ecologista" (Milanini 252) o il paradosso del protagonista che scrive un giornale contro lo smog e, ciononostante, resta affascinato dalla nuvola di smog.

d'assuefazione, e anche se c'era scritto che la fine del genere umano era vicina, nessuno ci badava"<sup>14</sup> (77). Il concetto di assuefazione menzionato da Calvino rientra nella logica dell'"avoidance of unpleasant reality" (243) così definita dall'ecologista David Ehrenfel, è ben spiegato dal critico Glen Love: "for the most part, our society goes on with its bread and circuses, exemplified by the mindless diversion reflected in mass culture [...]. In the face of profound threats to our biological survival, we continue, in the proud tradition of humanism, to "love ourselves best of all [...]"(226). Così le denunce del protagonista cadono nel vuoto e le persone si mostrano cieche o, per dirla con Ehrenfel, troppo arroganti nel riconoscere lo smog come una minaccia concreta. Se ne *La nuvola* la gente è divenuta "assuefatta"<sup>15</sup> alle notizie catastrofiche sullo smog, così anche in *Salto mortale* Giuseppe sottolinea come nessuno protesti di fronte alla scomparsa di prati, siepi e fossi, o come tutti siano dimentichi "di quello che c'era prima" (103).

In Calvino l'episodio in cui la nuvola è osservata dall'alto di una collina, sembra stabilire una cesura tra il protagonista e i ciechi lettori de *La Purificazione*. Il protagonista ha una rivelazione e, incapace a questo punto di conciliare la minaccia globale di distruzione e tragedia con la "supremazia e la potenza" dell'ingegner Cordà, incontra difficoltà sempre maggiori nella stesura degli articoli del periodico che causano così costanti malintesi con l'ingegnere:

Capivo anche che non avremmo potuto capirci mai. Quelle facciate di case annerite, quei vetri opachi, quei davanzali a cui non ci si poteva appoggiare, quei visi umani quasi cancellati, quella foschia che ora col progredire dell'autunno perdeva il suo umido sentore d'intemperie e diventava come una qualità degli oggetti, come se ognuno e ogni cosa avesse di giorno in giorno meno forma, meno senso e valore, tutto quel che per me era sostanza d'una miseria generale, per gli uomini come lui [l'ingegnere] doveva essere segno di ricchezza supremazia e potenza, e insieme di pericolo, distruzione e tragedia, un modo per sentirsi investiti, a stare lì sospesi, d'una grandezza eroica. (30)

Il tono cupo di questo passaggio che sfiora lo stile poetico, si trova in linea con il concetto di "gothicization of squalor and pollution characteristic of the environmental exposé" (*Toxic Discourse* 653) che Buell delinea come la rappresentazione gotica delle conseguenze (in genere problemi di salute) di una

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<sup>14</sup> M. Seger riflette su questo aspetto: "The EPAUCI also seeks with the paper to keep its working population in a sort of limbo (43). [...] Cordà manages to keep his newspaper readers at arm's length from their environmental reality by emphasizing the magnitude of the still nebulous situation" (44).

<sup>15</sup> È interessante aggiungere l'osservazione di Elena Past, secondo la quale le sostanze tossiche possono spesso alterare le nostre percezioni. Per esempio, "The toxic crisis in Naples, thus, is not only hard to see; it may also make those exposed to it *less able* to observe the problem" (600; enfasi nel testo). Dunque l'assuefazione delle persone non è solamente psicologica, ma psicofisica e comporta l'impossibilità di percepire come nociva qualsiasi sostanza tossica.

continua esposizione a un ambiente malsano e tossico.<sup>16</sup> Nel passo citato, espressioni icastiche come “i visi umani cancellati,” la scomparsa delle “forma” delle persone e “la miseria generale” sono in contrasto con la “grandezza eroica” dell’ingegner Cordà. È opportuno sottolineare un ulteriore parallelismo con Malerba. Come il protagonista calviniano non può fare a meno di notare che i visi umani siano “senza forma,” così anche Giuseppe esprime un commento proprio sulle fattezze somatiche dei passanti: “Guardate che facce avete. Siete tutti malati, siete brutti di forma e di colore. AVETE UN ASPETTO ORRIBILE” (*Salto mortale* 105).

Secondo Giuseppe l’inquinamento ha reso tutti “malati e brutti.” Il termine “inquinare” significa “rendere malsano” e dunque implica un precedente stato di purezza, forse un’epoca in cui gli spazi (oppure, all’interno di altri discorsi, le culture, i corpi, le religioni e le lingue) erano intatti e puri. Di questo spazio intatto e puro ci offre un esempio Calvino, che oppone all’epigono fortemente catastrofico di “distruzione” e “tragedia” della *Nuvola* l’episodio finale della “confraternita premodernamente operosa dei lavandai di Barca Betulla” (Milanini 258). Se il romanzo si apre sotto il segno del grigiore e della polvere, si conclude invece con la celebrazione della “purificazione” attraverso uno sguardo non nostalgico come si illustrerà a breve, al passato e alle antiche tradizioni:

E là in fondo, oltre i pioppi, vidi un prato veleggiante di bianco: roba stesa. [...] Larghi prati erano attraversati da fili ad altezza d’uomo [...] e per ogni prato intorno si ripeteva questo biancheggiare delle file lunghissime di panni. [...] Io giravo tra i campi biancheggianti di roba stesa e mi voltai di scatto a uno scoppio di risa, [...] e la campagna nel sole dava fuori il suo verde tra quel bianco, e l’acqua correva via gonfia di bolle azzurrine. (81)

Improvvisamente la natura torna rigogliosa. La transizione dal grigiore delle pagine precedenti al bianco dei panni stesi carica l’opera di soprassensi metaforici. Il colore bianco nel mondo occidentale è generalmente associato alla luce, all’innocenza, alla purezza e significa sicurezza, pulizia e purificazione. Come il protagonista calviniano per allontanarsi dalla nuvola e da tutto ciò che essa rappresenta alla fine si reca in questo sobborgo isolato, “miracolosamente risparmiato alla nuvola di smog” (*Nuvola* 251), il filatelico ne *Il serpente* si allontana da Roma verso una “zona periferica” chiamata Semenzaio (196) nei pressi di un cimitero alla ricerca del silenzio assoluto:

siamo nella estrema periferia verso il Muraglione Est, è finito l’asfalto, è finita anche la ghiaia e incominciano i vialetti di terra battuta, un cartello dice Semenzaio. [...] Non passano automobili da queste parti (è severamente proibito), i viali non portano passaggi zebrati, semafori, non ci sono Vigili Urbani. [...] da lontano si sente ancora il ronzio del frullino elettrico e poi silenzio [...]. (196-197)

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<sup>16</sup> Buell fa notare che il legame tra il gotico e le questioni di salute pubblica inizia nella storia letteraria americana con il romanzo di Charles Brockden Brown, *Arthur Mervyn* (1798), in cui si narra della raccapricciante epidemia di febbre gialla a Philadelphia nel 1793 (653).



Qui “l’odore di terra fresca” (197) si pone in contrasto con il “puzzo” (91) della terra marcia che emerge dal suolo durante gli scavi vicino a casa sua. “Qui si trova tutto quello che [...] può servire, [...] il marmo il bronzo i fiori il silenzio. Amen” (198).

Si è accennato all’inizio del capitolo che nonostante la presenza di tematiche ecologiche, nei loro testi gli autori si trattengono dal fare esplicite dichiarazioni in nome della difesa e conservazione della natura o dal lasciarsi andare a nostalgiche rievocazioni del passato.<sup>17</sup> Sarà necessario dunque soffermarsi con maggiore attenzione sui due finali. Nell’episodio dei lavandai di Barca Bertulla, la descrizione idillica della campagna è bruscamente interrotta da una frase stonante con il lirismo pastorale: “Io ormai avevo visto, e non avevo niente da dire o da ficcare il naso” (81). Il protagonista dopo aver ammirato la purezza del paesaggio incontaminato dallo smog, si accontenta di portare con sé solo l’immagine-ricordo e torna poi al grigiore della sua vita cittadina. Sulla stessa linea, lo stile poetico impiegato da Malerba per descrivere l’avvicinamento fisico del protagonista al suolo cimiteriale e la sua ricerca del silenzio eterno, è spezzato dalla forza ironica del lemma “amen” (198). Il termine “amen” provoca una cesura con le profonde riflessioni sulla morte e sul silenzio e suscita l’ilarità del lettore. La situazione è infatti paradossale: “amen” costituisce solitamente la formula conclusiva di preghiere e inni; in questo caso sembrerebbe utilizzato per una sorta di discorso funebre, aspetto assurdo poiché il filatelico, sebbene sia alla ricerca del terreno per la sua tomba, è vivo e vegeto. Inoltre, l’utilizzo del termine “amen” sembra discordare con un protagonista che non possiede alcuna profondità religiosa, ed è quindi utilizzato piuttosto come intercalare, caratteristica linguistica con la quale spesso terminano i discorsi dei personaggi malerbiani.<sup>18</sup>

Secondo Buell a causa della “toxic penetration” un ecosistema o più ecosistemi diventano biologicamente non vivibili per le specie che vi appartengono. Calvino affronta il tema della “toxic penetration” (la nuvola di smog) attraverso l’utilizzo di rappresentazioni “gotiche” della nuvola e dei suoi effetti e del carattere ambiguo dei personaggi, mentre Malerba lo fa mediando la gravità del questione ecologica attraverso l’ironia. Nessuno degli autori tuttavia, ricorre mai a un tono patetico e melanconico, “the mythography of betrayed Edens” per dirla ancora con Buell (*Toxic Discourse* 650): Calvino sottolineando il nesso tra la tossicità di questi ecosistemi e l’interesse delle grandi imprese che si sono ormai arrogate il nuovo diritto di inquinare l’aria, sembra suggerire l’importanza di fare

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<sup>17</sup> Come fa notare Franco Ricci: “nell’opera di Calvino la natura non è mai semplicemente innocente, né l’industria sempre letale” (335) e ci informa Claudio Milanini: “Calvino detestava i vagheggiamenti nostalgici ed era lontanissimo dal condividere gli stolidi sospiri dei *laudatores temporis acti*” (258). Malerba dal canto suo, ammette in un’intervista con Antonio Mascolo che “[n]essuno può proporre oggi un ritorno alla vita rustica e bucolica, questa è soltanto cattiva letteratura o utopia regressiva alla Pasolini” (*Parole al vento* 230).

<sup>18</sup> Si vedano ad esempio i divertenti intercalari con cui Giuseppe conclude i suoi ragionamenti: “per piacere,” “non scherziamo,” “per cortesia.”

un passo indietro e di cercare un equilibrio tra pratiche industriali ormai inevitabili e il rispetto dell'ambiente, mentre Malerba, anch'egli consapevole dell'impossibilità di ridurre un ecosistema a un grado zero di tossicità,<sup>19</sup> preferisce concentrarsi sull'impatto sul lettore, ritenendo imperativo il risveglio delle coscienze sulla gravità del problema smog.

## La speculazione edilizia

Come l'ecologia studia le complesse relazioni tra le specie nei vari ecosistemi, così Malerba e Calvino enfatizzano nei romanzi analizzati le relazioni umane con le specie (ad esempio, formiche e mosche) e gli ecosistemi (città e campagna inquinate) in cui abitano. Proseguendo su questa linea, occorre ora soffermarsi sulla centralità dello spazio nelle opere prese in esame. In particolare, ci si occuperà della conquista dello spazio geografico attraverso il dominio sulla natura. La smania di costruzione in seguito al rapido sviluppo urbano e all'incremento demografico che si diffonde in Italia a partire dal boom economico degli anni Cinquanta-Sessanta si denota come il risultato di una crescita impari e insensata che non tiene conto delle leggi di tutela dell'ambiente (per altro le più antiche del mondo) presenti nella costituzione italiana.<sup>20</sup> Malerba e Calvino nei loro scritti mostrano come sia venuto a mancare in Italia un nesso virtuoso tra sviluppo e territorio. Se da un lato dunque, la costruzione edilizia è segno di modernizzazione, di crescita demografica, di mutamento delle culture del lavoro, del profilo dei consumi e dei costumi, dall'altro, emerge nei romanzi come il fenomeno abbia provocato un impoverimento di pratiche secolari, di legami sociali e tradizioni e un irrecuperabile degrado ambientale.

È ancora Monica Seger che per prima interpreta ecocriticamente *La speculazione edilizia*, evidenziando come Calvino attraverso il testo "asks how humanity might go forward in a culture of mass production, construction and consumption without losing sight of the natural world" (*Landscapes* 40). Il breve romanzo diviene infatti l'opera portavoce di un processo di modernizzazione e di crescita economica in cui ha luogo un sempre più rapace rapporto con l'ambiente e con i beni comuni. Il protagonista Quinto fa ritorno al suo paese natale della Liguria per edificare un suo appezzamento di terreno agricolo e destinarlo all'affitto di case-vacanza. Egli è tuttavia combattuto tra il rimpianto per un paesaggio che ogni giorno muta ai suoi occhi sotto i colpi degli scavatori e il desiderio di adattarsi ai vari mutamenti dettati dalla cultura del consumismo:

un misterioso senso di "fastidio" gli intralcia il piacere di osservare il paesaggio dal finestrino [...]

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<sup>19</sup> H. Baarshers parla di "pragmatic environmental discourse" che miri a obiettivi di riduzione della tossicità molto più concreti e realizzabili (7).

<sup>20</sup> L'Art. 9 della Costituzione italiana cita: "La Repubblica promuove lo sviluppo della cultura e la ricerca scientifica e tecnica. Tutela il paesaggio e il patrimonio storico e artistico della Nazione."

Erano le case: tutti questi nuovi fabbricati che tiravano su, casamenti cittadini di sei otto piani, a biancheggiare massicci come barriere di rinalzo al franante digradare della costa, affacciando più finestre e balconi che potevano verso mare. La febbre del cemento s'era impadronita della Riviera [...]. (9)

Lo stile narrativo della descrizione degli effetti della speculazione edilizia sulla riviera ligure trasmette una sensazione di disordine tutta tesa a porre enfasi sull'esplosività del fenomeno. I due punti posti dopo l'enunciato "erano le case" introducono una serie di frasi nominali che accelerano la lettura e l'accomunano a molteplici visioni di velocità: il paesaggio che passa osservato dal finestrino del treno, la costruzione delle case, il cemento che si espande a macchia d'olio. Ma l'immagine nostalgica del suo paese che svanisce è inaspettatamente accostata ad una antitetica: Quinto che torna al paese "per intraprendervi proprio una *speculazione edilizia*" (12).

Dal nesso tra speculazione edilizia e distruzione del paesaggio tradizionale emerge il personaggio di Caisotti, un uomo rozzo che compra e costruisce "alla bell'e meglio" (18-19), attraverso il quale Calvino ci offre un quadro sospetto dello sviluppo immobiliare di questo periodo, in cui i terreni agricoli erano resi edificabili molto spesso da manovre poco trasparenti. Da qui deriva l'attuazione di costruzioni totalmente avulse dal contesto e in disarmonia con le preesistenze ambientali. Il tentativo di dominare la natura è di fatto un concetto fondamentale nello sviluppo dello spazio urbano, che affiora dalla convinzione che l'oggettivazione della natura assicuri la crescita economica. Se il personaggio di Caisotti è fedele a questo concetto e rappresenta gli effetti della speculazione edilizia, la madre di Quinto si delinea invece come la quintessenza dell'armonia con l'ambiente naturale e la tradizione. Da un lato ne è prova il legame tra il termine "madre" e i lemmi "natura" o "terra,"<sup>21</sup> dall'altro il testo rivela la predilezione della madre di Quinto per la cura delle piante del suo giardino: "Quest'orto, la madre, via via sminuito il fabbisogno familiare di verdure [...], la madre era andata invadendolo delle sue piante da giardino [...] e là più che in ogni altro luogo aiuolato e inghiaiato del giardino alla madre piaceva di sostare" (16). In questo breve passo il termine "madre" è reiterato tre volte: la dislocazione a destra (quest'orto, la madre) conferisce una maggiore intensità espressiva e contribuisce a marcare il legame tra soggetto e complemento oggetto, (madre / orto) quindi tra la madre di Quinto e la natura. Nella coordinata per asindeto che segue, il lemma

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<sup>21</sup> La personificazione di Madre-Natura è tradizionalmente donna. Esiste un ramo della ricerca ecocritica che sostiene l'esistenza di un legame naturale che unisce le donne all'ambiente in modo maggiore rispetto agli uomini. Si vedano l'articolo di G. Pepe, "Perché la donna è Madre-Terra," in cui il giornalista sostiene che l'approccio maschile con la natura sia più ideologico che biologico e l'articolo di J. Biehl, "Féminisme et écologie," in cui la critica si domanda se le donne siano più "verdi" degli uomini. Ma è ancora Monica Seger che fa notare come il paralellismo donna/natura sia stato criticato da ecofemministe contemporanee come Val Plumwood and Stacy Alamo. "As they and others rightly note, women and nature have long been linked in such a way that assigns them less agency and worth than the pairing of men and culture" (*Landscapes* 36).

“madre” posto in posizione incipitaria, è soggetto del verbo “era andata invadendolo,” ma leggendo la proposizione con attenzione, si percepisce che qualcosa non quadra: sono infatti le piante che normalmente “invadono” gli spazi laddove l’uomo non intervenga a spuntarle per tenerle sotto controllo. Si evince così una sorta di simbiosi tra la madre e le piante: l’orto, simbolo del potere dell’uomo sulla natura in quanto interpretabile come retaggio dell’invenzione dell’agricoltura, è presto sostituito da un giardino selvaggio sovrastato dalle piante e, esattamente in questo luogo “alla madre”—terza ripetizione del termine, enfaticizzata in quanto del tutto ridondante—“piace [...] sostare”(11).

Il testo calviniano ingaggia un dialogo tra il lettore e l’universo non-umano. È impossibile, infatti, non prestare attenzione alla presenza dei nomi insoliti delle piante menzionati dalla madre, i quali sembrano sfidare il lettore ad un puzzle botanico: “l’araucaria, le calceolarie, i pittospori, il plumbago” e, progredendo con la narrazione, le aiuole di “miosotis”(49). La nomenclatura mira a prostrarre la bellezza di un paesaggio progressivamente distrutto dalla cementificazione. La conoscenza e la passione per le piante, ereditata dall’autore principalmente dalla madre, docente di botanica presso le università di Pavia e Cagliari, caratterizza numerose sue opere. Ma la tassonomia di piante e fiori denominate scientificamente e osservate in parallelo a “fabbriche, scavi, e nuovi tetti che spuntano” (17) conferisce a queste uno spazio privilegiato: in un’epoca in cui il cemento ha preso il sopravvento, attraverso la loro enumerazione l’autore sembra voglia cristallizzarle almeno sulla pagina. Calvino, concentrandosi in modo disinteressato sull’unicità e specificità di una pianta attraverso l’utilizzo del nome scientifico probabilmente sconosciuto a un inesperto di botanica e trascurandone il nome volgare (“myosotis” anziché “nontiscordardimé”), non solo incita il lettore più sensibile a entrare in un’interazione con l’ambiente naturale, ma evidenzia anche come l’osservazione della natura così com’è, lontana da interessi di profitto, si pone in antitesi con la speculazione edilizia tutta intrisa di preoccupazioni utilitaristiche.

Come Calvino, anche Malerba nelle sue opere dedica ampio spazio agli elenchi di nomi di piante e fiori appresi nell’infanzia. Ma la digressione sulla speculazione edilizia in *Salto mortale* sembra offrirci uno scenario completamente distopico dell’epoca moderna, in cui non esiste più una vera e propria distinzione tra cemento e piante, che appaiono esclusivamente come prodotti della società consumistica:

Non ci sono case e non ci sono ville da queste parti. Se non ci sono si possono costruire con un po' di calce e un po' di mattoni, ci sono le imprese che lavorano anche con il cemento armato e ci sono quelle con gli elementi prefabbricati in due mesi tirano su una villa fino al tetto. Un altro mese per gli infissi e le rifiniture. Pagando [...] si può avere anche il campo da bocce con la rena speciale. E grandi alberi intorno che nascondono tutto, tigli eucalipti oleandri e pini romani. Giuseppe, amico caro, non ci sono nemmeno alberi da queste parti. Se non ci sono si possono piantare, basta rivolgersi alle ditte specializzate come Sgaravatti e Ansaloni possono piantare anche alberi molto grandi, in certi casi sono riusciti a

piantare degli alberi secolari. Queste ditte pensano loro a tutto, hanno gli autocarri le gru le ruspe e tutto l'occorrente. Gli alberi vengono venduti con la garanzia cioè si pagano solo quando hanno attecchito altrimenti non si paga niente. (21)

L'elenco nei nomi (oleandri, tigli, eucalipti, pini) diventa un'ironica associazione a una qualsiasi merce in vendita, una sorta di lista della spesa. Questo aspetto è corroborato dalla reiterazione del verbo "pagare" ("pagando / pagano/ non si paga"). La merce fabbricata dall'uomo è dunque messa in relazione simmetrica con "prodotti" che dovrebbero essere il risultato di un processo naturale. La rapidità con cui "si tirano su le case" è paragonata alla facilità con cui crescono piante persino secolari. Se in passato si notava più facilmente la costruzione di un palazzo spuntato dal nulla della crescita naturale di una pianta, ora il protagonista malerbiano si domanda se i progetti edilizi siano organicamente legati al ciclo naturale:

Vedo da lontano i tetti e le torri e le vetrate delle fabbriche nate all'Epoca del Boom. Ho sentito che faranno delle altre con l'aiuto della Cassa del Mezzogiorno e poi i grattacieli per la gente che ci lavora, cioè poco alla volta

UNA METROPOLI

molto più grande di Roma e Milano messe insieme. C'è già qualcuno che sta lavorando a costruire questa grande Metropoli senza saperlo. [...] C'è una Mente Segreta che lavora a questo progetto o cresce da solo con il progredire della natura? Me lo domando. [...] Dall'altro si vede già il disegno della Metropoli ma nessuno se ne accorge. [...] A un certo punto apri gli occhi e la Metropoli è tutta in piedi e tu dici guarda quanti grattacieli, guarda quante automobili, come corrono.<sup>22</sup> (101)

Qui, speculazione edilizia e natura paradossalmente crescono in simbiosi e questa visione della sfrenata attività umana che usurpa quella naturale è simboleggiata dall'immagine dei "fiori gialli del ginestrino [...] macchiati del sangue rosso della vittima che è schizzato lontano" (*Salto mortale* 23). La figurazione sollecita una riflessione: il sangue che ha sporcato un fiore dagli effetti benefici è una metafora per riflettere sull'incessante attività umana (la speculazione edilizia) che invade la natura e ne prende il posto, privando l'uomo del suo benessere mentale.<sup>23</sup>

Malerba e Calvino pongono enfasi sulla relazione dei personaggi con lo spazio urbano in cui vivono per evidenziare come l'impatto del degrado

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<sup>22</sup> E ancora una comica descrizione della speculazione edilizia si trova in *Mozziconi* quando il protagonista osserva il panorama di Roma: "rimase colpito da una lunga fila di palazzacci veramente schifosi che stonavano sia con il cielo che con la terra. Si fregò gli occhi e guardò meglio perché era la prima volta che notava la loro bruttezza. Erano proprio i palazzi della via Fleming, quelli che valevano un miliardo l'uno [...] quei palazzacci appiccicati l'uno all'altro, con quei brutti colori, quelle brutte architetture?" (69).

<sup>23</sup> Secondo l'ecopsicologo Paul Shepard il conflitto tra progresso tecnologico e la conservazione della natura concerne processi connessi alla formazione dell'identità: la natura è essenziale per la formazione della mente. Altri ecologisti sostengono l'esistenza di una profonda connessione tra mente e natura, spazio e identità. Tra questi, ci informa la critica Daniela Fargione, "Scott Slovic nel suo articolo 'Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology' esamina la connessione tra mente e natura (351).

ambientale sconfini verso altri fattori deterioranti: lo straniamento, la solitudine, il vuoto, l'assurdo, la nevrosi. L'eccessiva costruzione edilizia sembra condurre i protagonisti a un'esistenza precaria che li trasforma in esseri spesso emarginati dalla società. A ben vedere, tutte le storie qui riportate hanno come protagonista un uomo in conflitto con la società in cui vive, basata sul consumo e sulla produzione di prodotti. Oggetto di consumo egli stesso e manipolato da chi in questa società riesce invece a destreggiarsi, soffre per la consapevolezza della situazione, ma mostra inettitudine a reagire (soprattutto in Calvino) o nevrosi (condizione tipica dei protagonisti malerbiani). I personaggi, non trovano più pace nel loro habitat (si pensi al demoscattore e al protagonista de *La formica argentina* nella loro lotta contro gli insetti), sono *outsider* nella società in cui vivono, (il filatelico de *Il Serpente* detesta andare al mare ma ci va perché desidera conformarsi), si adattano difficilmente alle transizioni causate dallo sviluppo tecnologico (si ricordi Quinto e la sua reazione al mutamento del paesaggio osservato dal treno). Un'attività umana intrusiva e fuori misura (qui analizzata attraverso le tematiche di cemento, smog, scomparsa delle piante etc.) che sottomette e sfrutta la natura causa la perdita dell'identità umana. Come si è precedentemente fatto notare, in Calvino e Malerba non vi è miticizzazione della natura; esiste però il riconoscimento delle forze che hanno cancellato questo mito e tramite i personaggi gli autori evidenziano la necessità dell'individuo di instaurare un legame organico con uno spazio proprio, un desiderio innato di cercare le proprie radici, di sentirsi "a casa" nel proprio pianeta.

Se i protagonisti calviniani, come fa notare Monica Seger citando Calvino, sono degli antieroi "che pure si credono, si vorrebbero uomini nuovi, rinnovatori della storia" (*Landscapes* 30), ma che in realtà posseggono esclusivamente il desiderio di essere ribelli, Malerba giunge nel suo ultimo romanzo, *Fantasmî romani*, alla creazione di un personaggio unico nel suo genere, che manifesta un'evoluzione rispetto agli altri. L'architetto Giano è costantemente turbato dall'eccessiva immoralità nel mondo: è molto attento ai veleni inquinanti (*Fantasmî* 35) e gli prendono le convulsioni quando gli Stati Uniti rifiutano di firmare il protocollo di Kyoto (37). Con *Fantasmî romani* Malerba ritorna a parlare di speculazione edilizia a Roma esattamente quarantatré anni dopo la pubblicazione del breve romanzo calviniano. Il mondo nel suo contesto globale non può sopravvivere così com'è, a meno che non si faccia un passo indietro, ponendo fine a un'aggressione del paesaggio come quella descritta ne *La speculazione edilizia*. È necessario, quindi, ricorrere alla decostruzione prima di una ricostruzione entro l'armonia equilibrata tra individuo e natura. Giano ha in serbo proprio un progetto concreto di decostruzione e ricostruzione che prende forma non agli antipodi, in un luogo esotico immerso nella natura incontaminata, ma proprio nella capitale romana.<sup>24</sup> Egli mira a creare una città con "molto spazio

<sup>24</sup> Suggestisce la critica Oksana A. Zelenova: "While the house once served as a place for human psyche, today the image of the city and its urban landscape constitute an architectural embodiment



intorno, molto verde molta aria molta luce” (70); “Il suo progetto di distruzione d’interi isolati” ha l’obiettivo di “dare aria ai quartieri romani soffocati dall’eccessiva densità delle abitazioni” (76). Ne *Il mare dell’oggettività* Calvino scrive: “Rivoluzionario è chi non accetta il dato naturale e storico e vuole cambiarlo.”<sup>25</sup> Malerba attribuisce a Giano questo ruolo di “rivoluzionario” a cui hanno sempre anelato i personaggi nevrotici delle sue opere precedenti e gli inetti calviniani.

## Malerba e Calvino a confronto

Attraverso una capillare analisi testuale si è voluto illustrare come queste opere di Malerba e Calvino presentano numerose affinità. Esse sono il risultato di una profonda coscienza ecologica degli autori che esprimono la loro denuncia ecologica senza tuttavia ricorrere mai a idealismi pastorali o a malinconiche contemplazioni del passato. Si è affermato all’inizio che gli scrittori, nonostante l’infanzia trascorsa a stretto contatto con la natura, siano profondamente legati al contesto urbano. Pur non ignorando lo sgretolarsi di un mondo di antichi valori, entrambi si esimono dal concepire la natura esclusivamente come oggetto di vagheggiamento, opposta alla disforica realtà presente tutta inquinamento e smog. L’attenzione all’impatto brutale della speculazione edilizia, alla botanica, all’inquinamento, all’universo non-umano è dagli autori enfatizzata piuttosto per invitare a riflettere sulla necessità di riconsiderare la dialettica stereotipa tra natura e cultura e di rivisitare quindi il ruolo che l’uomo esercita nel mondo naturale: natura e cultura esistono in un rapporto di reciprocità. Per questo motivo le narrazioni, caratterizzate a livelli differenti da umorismo, aspetti ludici e acuta ironia, respingono linee drammatiche e non concedono nulla all’emozione nostalgica. Di questo aspetto si è già trattato nell’episodio del sobborgo di Barca Betulla e del Semenzaio. Ma poi ci sono le umoristiche invettive di Giuseppe detto Giuseppe, la cui serietà dei contenuti è smorzata dal linguaggio giocoso, dalla forma della scrittura (l’alternanza del carattere maiuscolo e minuscolo), dal pensiero che non segue sempre la logica, dai vari intercalari del personaggio. E ancora, ne *La formica argentina* e in *Salto mortale* formiche e mosche non sembrano appartenere a una Natura con la N maiuscola, stabile, armoniosa e

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of social structure and values.” Zelenova spiega che i cittadini si relazionano ogni giorno con le strade, gli edifici e gli indirizzi della città. Esiste una sensibilità e una vulnerabilità nella psiche umana e nell’identità ogni qual volta si svolga una costruzione o una decostruzione all’interno della città, in “The Image of the City as Architectural Embodiment of Self-Respect” (274).

<sup>25</sup> Calvino asserisce: “rivoluzionario è chi non accetta il dato naturale e storico e vuole cambiarlo. La resa all’oggettività, fenomeno storico di questo dopoguerra, nasce in un periodo in cui all’uomo viene meno la fiducia nell’indirizzare il corso delle cose, non perché sia reduce da una bruciante sconfitta, ma al contrario perché vede che le cose (la grande politica di due contrapposti sistemi di forze, lo sviluppo della tecnica e del dominio delle forze naturali) vanno avanti da sole, fanno parte d’un insieme così complesso che lo sforzo più eroico può essere applicato solo al cercar di aver un’idea di come è fatto, al comprenderlo, all’accettarlo” in *Una pietra sopra* (41-42).

benigna opposta a un uomo crudele e senza scrupoli; esse appaiono piuttosto come un vero e proprio disturbo, incutono paura e angoscia. E dunque attraverso la rappresentazione della vittoria delle formiche o delle mosche sull'individuo, Calvino prima e Malerba poi non mirano a ingenerare la convinzione che gli insetti siano più validi degli umani e che la logica antropocentrica sia stata o debba essere superata come vorrebbero gli ecocritici più radicali.<sup>26</sup> Gli autori, sollecitano con i loro testi la ricerca di un compromesso tra processi urbani economici e quelli del mondo naturale. Quella di entrambi gli scrittori è una vera e propria "scommessa culturale" (*Quanto scommettiamo?* 107), per dirla con Serenella Iovino, che attribuisce ai testi narrativi il potere di generare una coscienza etico-ambientale nel lettore. L'ecologia letteraria "scommette cioè che i modelli culturali 'ecologicamente evoluti,' [...] possano aiutarci a rendere 'sostenibili' le nostre interazioni con l'ambiente e con tutte le forme non-umane che condividono con noi la biosfera" (Iovino 107). Attraverso la politica del compromesso dunque, affiora un'epistemologia ecocentrica non escapistica bensì impegnata. È dunque chiaro che l'estetica malerbiana e calviniana va di pari passo con un impegno ecologico che dona la voce alla necessità di un compromesso tra l'incessante attività dell'uomo all'interno di una natura di cui egli stesso fa parte, e la maniera di proseguire il suo cammino verso il progresso. Forse, specialmente nel nostro secolo, tale equilibrio potrebbe essere l'unica "strategia di sopravvivenza" (Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria* 2) rimasta per garantire l'esistenza di generazioni future.

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<sup>26</sup> Secondo gli attivisti più radicali (quelli della "deep ecology"), gli esseri umani non dovrebbero assolutamente interferire con la natura poiché ogni loro intervento è distruttivo. Secondo altri teorici dell'*ecocriticism*, che considerano un testo letterario un prodotto culturale, linguistico ed estetico, l'ecocritica letteraria non è sufficiente a dare voce alla natura e tutti gli organismi non-umani. Michael Cohen, nel suo saggio "Literary theory and nature writing" sostiene che "representation gives us not nature, but literature" (1011). Secondo Christopher Manes, "the status of speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusive human prerogative" in "Nature and Silence," *The Ecocriticism Reader* (15). Dana Philips asserisce che "nature is man-made" in "Is nature necessary?" in *Ecocriticism Reader* (216). Secondo Andrew McMurray è impossibile conferire un "subject status" agli animali, in "In their own language: Sarah Orne Jewett and the question of non-human speaking subject" (61). Per approfondire il dibattito vedi A. De Vivo, "Ecocriticism: Una nuova epistemologia?" (49-62).

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## Les biographies animales: histoires naturelles, histoires personnelles

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### Résumé

Cet article aborde la question des biographies animales dans la littérature de langue française. Alors qu'elle intéresse depuis peu l'éthologie, la philosophie, l'histoire, elle a toujours passionné les écrivains, en particulier les auteurs d'inspiration naturaliste soucieux de décrire les vies des bêtes observées, et les écrivains « animaliers » fascinés par des bêtes dont ils partagent les vies ou dont ils fréquentent quotidiennement les mondes. A partir des oeuvres de Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949), Jacques Delamain (1874-1953), Louis Pergaud (1882-1915) et Maurice Genevoix (1890-1980), j'examine dans quelle mesure ce corpus littéraire individualise et personnalise les existences animales, c'est-à-dire représente leurs vécus. On comprend en dernière analyse combien la question des biographies personnelles des bêtes est lourde d'enjeux.

*Mots clés* : zoopoétique, animal studies, biographies animales, histoires naturelles, personnalisation et vécu de l'animal.

### Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of animal biographies in French-language literature. While ethology, philosophy and history have only been recently interested in it, this issue has always fascinated writers, especially authors of naturalistic inspiration desirous of describing the lives of the animals they were observing, and « animalistic » writers fascinated by the animals whose lives they share or whose worlds they dwell in. I examine the works of Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949), Jacques Delamain (1874-1953), Louis Pergaud (1882-1915) and Maurice Genevoix (1890-1980), to highlight to what extent this literary corpus individualizes and personalizes animal existences, that is to say, represents their lived experiences. In the end, we come to understand how important the issue of personal biographies of animals is.

*Keywords* : zoopoetics, animal studies, animal biographies, natural histories, personalization and lived experienced of animals.

### Resumen

En este artículo se aborda el tema de las biografías animales en la literatura en lengua francesa. Mientras que la etología, la filosofía y la historia las estudian desde hace poco, siempre fascinaron a los escritores, especialmente a los escritores naturalistas deseosos de describir la vida de los animales observados, y a los escritores "animalistas" apasionados por los animales con los que coexisten o interaccionan en sus propios mundos. Examino las obras de Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949), Jacques Delamain (1874-1953), Louis Pergaud (1882-1915) y Maurice Genevoix

(1890-1980), para mostrar cómo este corpus literario individualiza y personaliza las existencias animales, es decir, representa sus vivencias. Se destaca y se valora a fin de cuentas la importancia del tema de las biografías personales de los animales.

*Palabras clave:* zoopoética, estudios de los animales, biografías animales, historias naturales, personalización y vivencias de los animales.

Abordant la question des biographies animales, Florence Burgat écrit que « [l]a littérature fait figure de contre-pied au silence imposé aux bêtes par la philosophie » (*Une autre* 360) ; elle estime que « [c]’est à la littérature qu’il faudrait laisser une très longue parole » (360) et nous invite à partir « en quête de ces récits que l’on aimerait citer » (360). Je m’y suis employé, et il est vrai que de nombreux textes littéraires élaborent des biographies d’animaux. Mais qu’entend-on par « biographie ? » La racine *graphein* signifie en grec « faire des entailles, » « graver des caractères, » « écrire, » « décrire, » mais aussi « dessiner, » « peindre. » Etymologiquement, cette notion ne contient donc pas forcément la dimension narrative, c’est-à-dire temporelle que nous lui attribuons spontanément lorsque l’on parle, par exemple, de la biographie d’une personne célèbre. Ceci explique l’emploi fréquent du terme, dans les ouvrages naturalistes, pour désigner simplement l’étude des animaux. On rejoint là le sens primitif d’« histoire » (« ἱστορία ») chez Hérodote, « enquête » ou « recherche, exploration, » un sens qui définira jusqu’à nos jours l’histoire naturelle comme science d’observation. Si l’on consulte, par exemple, *l’Histoire des animaux* d’Aristote, on constate d’emblée qu’elle n’est pas un récit historique des événements marquants de leurs vies sinon un classement zoologique basé sur leurs caractéristiques structurelles. L’histoire naturelle est largement descriptive, mais ne négligeons pas sa dimension narrative car nombre de textes, ceux de Plin l’Ancien, ceux de Buffon pour ne citer que les plus célèbres, sont imprégnés de récits et d’anecdotes sur les bêtes qui racontent des faits étonnants. Il y aurait donc, malgré tout, une narrativité des vies animales mais peut-on faire des biographies animales comme l’on fait ces biographies de personnages célèbres, en prenant en compte le vécu de l’animal ? Peut-on raconter l’histoire individuelle ou personnelle d’une bête ?

Les textes littéraires abordent diversement cette question des « biographies » animales. Ce que je souhaite ici, c’est la mettre en perspective en montrant comment la traitent les ouvrages d’inspiration naturaliste, ceux de Maurice Maeterlinck et de Jacques Delamain, et les récits de fiction, ceux de Louis Pergaud et de Maurice Genevoix. Ce sera l’occasion de mesurer la place accordée en littérature aux biographies personnelles des animaux et de faire ressortir les enjeux qui sont attachés à cette question.



## Bio-graphies d'espèces

Non plus que *La Vie des abeilles* (1901), *La Vie des termites* (1926) « n'est une biographie romancée, comme il est de mode d'en faire en ce moment » (*Termites* 11), précise Maeterlinck dans l'introduction de cet ouvrage. L'écrivain est « resté fidèle au principe qui [l]'a guidé dans l'œuvre précédente, qui est de ne jamais céder à la tentation d'ajouter un merveilleux imaginé ou complaisant au merveilleux réel » (11). S'il rejette la dimension romanesque des biographies à la mode, il ne souhaite pas non plus reproduire le discours des entomologistes professionnels, « écrivains purement objectifs et très froids qui n'ont que le culte de l'observation scientifique » (12). Il propose de relier et grouper les faits récoltés dans leurs ouvrages le plus harmonieusement possible (12), faisant ainsi de son texte un récit hybride à mi-chemin entre la science et la littérature. La facture littéraire du texte, narrative, esthétique, nous donne l'impression de participer à une aventure merveilleuse. Au fil des pages nous dévoilons les « mystères » (20) de la termitière et découvrons le « caractère extraordinaire » (12) de ses habitants. Il n'y a certes pas, à proprement parler, d'intrigue romanesque, mais cette mise sous tension par la curiosité confère au texte une dimension narrative globale qui ne disparaît jamais totalement,<sup>1</sup> malgré de longs passages descriptifs ou philosophiques. Précisons en outre que l'auteur ne peut s'empêcher de romancer régulièrement son discours, en faisant par exemple référence au « roi » (29, 42) et à la « reine » (29, 42) de la termitière, à ses « princes » (74) et « princesses » (74), en précisant que la loi de la Cité y est « plus dure que celle de Sparte » (58), ou encore que les guerriers sont les « mercenaires fidèles et toujours héroïques, d'une Carthage impitoyable » (50). Il faut dire que la vie des termites est pleine de péripéties, d'événements surprenants, de suspense :

A un signal, donné comme tous les autres par la puissance qu'on ne voit pas, les soldats se retirent, démasquent les issues et livrent passage aux frémissantes fiançailles. Aussitôt, au dire de tous les voyageurs qui l'ont contemplé, se déroule un spectacle à côté duquel l'essaimage des abeilles paraît insignifiant. De l'énorme édifice, tantôt meule, tantôt pyramide ou château fort [...] s'élève, comme d'une chaudière surchauffée sur le point d'exploser, et jaillissant de toutes les fissures, un nuage de vapeur formé de millions d'ails qui montent vers l'azur à la recherche incertaine et presque toujours bafouée de l'amour. (59)

Maeterlinck évoque ici l'essaimage d'une colonie de termites équatoriales, il rapporte ailleurs les observations d'entomologistes qui concernent d'autres colonies et d'autres espèces de termites, émaillant ainsi son texte d'anecdotes, de micro-récits plus ou moins dilués dans son propre discours. La bio-graphie qu'il nous propose met donc en lumière les vies de plusieurs espèces de fourmis blanches : nous comprenons que les comportements, les organisations sociales, les morphologies varient en fonction des environnements dans lesquels les insectes

<sup>1</sup> Je m'inspire de la conception de l'intrigue selon Raphaël Baroni (*La Tension narrative*, 2007).

évoluent. Nous ne trouvons pas, toutefois, d'individualisation des existences animales, si l'on conçoit l'individu, à l'instar de Dominique Lestel, comme « une créature qui a une personnalité qui la distingue des autres, en particulier par ses particularités cognitives et comportementales ou par les spécificités de son caractère, qui permettent de la caractériser sans ambiguïté une fois nommée et qui montrent des préférences » (35).

Certes l'auteur théorise la notion d'« individu, » mais pour définir la termitière guidée par une « puissance occulte » (73–79):

il n'y a peut-être pas d'autre solution que de considérer la termitière comme un individu. « L'individu, dit très justement le docteur Jaworski, n'est constitué ni par l'ensemble des parties, ni par l'origine commune, ni par la continuité de substance, mais uniquement par la réalisation d'une fonction d'ensemble, en d'autres termes, par l'unité de but. » (79)

*La Vie des termites* s'inscrit dans la tradition de l'histoire naturelle en élaborant une bio-graphie d'espèces, qui, malgré des focalisations sur des colonies particulières, reste générale et modélisante. Maeterlinck narre, décrit, pense le spectacle de la nature. D'une part, il observe, rapporte des faits, mène son « enquête, » sans évoquer les vécus des insectes. D'autre part, il inscrit la vie des termites dans une chronologie, celle de l'histoire de l'évolution de l'espèce.<sup>2</sup> Le mot « histoire » qu'il emploie à plusieurs reprises, par exemple lorsqu'il annonce en introduction son « histoire d'une peuplade inconnue » (13), contient, il me semble, ce double sens d'observation (au présent) du spectacle de la nature et d'histoire de la nature.<sup>3</sup> Ajoutons que le récit des épisodes marquants de la vie des termites implique, quant à lui, la temporalité cyclique ou spirale des rythmes biologiques et saisonniers.

Parce qu'il se consacre à l'observation et à l'étude des oiseaux de France, le texte de Jacques Delamain, *Pourquoi les oiseaux chantent* (1928) se présente aussi comme un ouvrage d'histoire naturelle. Mais, contrairement à *La Vie des termites* qui rapporte, synthétise et organise un savoir de spécialistes et de témoins, ce texte est le fruit d'un naturalisme de terrain : muni d'une paire de jumelles, Delamain part à la rencontre des oiseaux dans leurs environnements, il les révèle « tels que nous les voyons mener leur existence et déployer leurs activités principales dans le cadre de leur milieu naturel » (*Les Oiseaux* 9). Delamain se réclame des *fieldnaturalists* anglais, dont Edmund Selous, W. H. Hudson ou Eliot Howard (*Pourquoi* 3–12) qui privilégient « l'observation de l'oiseau comme individu plutôt que comme espèce » (9). En effet, alors même qu'il traite d'espèces

<sup>2</sup> Par exemple, s'interrogeant sur le rôle des parasites, il écrit : « [i]l est vraisemblable qu'il y a des millions d'années, les ancêtres des termites qu'on découvre dans le secondaire ou le tertiaire trouvaient en abondance des aliments qu'ils pouvaient digérer sans le secours d'un parasite. Une longue disette survint-t-elle qui les força de se nourrir de débris ligneux, et seuls ceux qui, parmi des milliers d'autres infusoires, hébergeaient le protozoaire spécifique, survécurent-ils ? [...] Mais pourquoi ont-ils renoncé à l'humus ? » (*Termites* 36–37).

<sup>3</sup> Jean Varloot met en avant ce double plan sur lequel joue le terme d'« histoire naturelle » (Buffon 8).

d'oiseaux, nous avons souvent l'impression de découvrir des vies individuelles. De fait, les oiseaux apparaissent à la fois comme des individus-types, représentants d'espèces, et comme des individus possédant un vécu propre. L'usage de la narration ou description simultanée y est, je crois, pour beaucoup, parce que celle-ci crée un effet de direct, elle permet de saisir les moments d'une histoire :

Un matin de novembre. Les chœurs d'oiseaux ont commencé par un chuchotement doux. En lisière du bois, dans la tourbière où des traînées de brouillards s'attardent encore au-dessus des fossés gorgés d'eau, la troupe des Tarins verts, arrivée depuis quelques jours des forêts du nord, fait jaillir des aunes un crépitement de notes métalliques. Plus loin, dans la vallée abritée, une bande d'Étourneaux emplit la cime du peuplier d'un bavardage à la fois chanté, parlé et sifflé, composé de tous les bruits de la nature, que ces mimes au manteau noir pointillé de blanc ont recueillis dans leur va-et-vient entre la plaine et la forêt. Une douzaine de petits Cinis, verts comme les Tarins, mais plus courts de bec et plus menus, laissent filtrer, entre les aiguilles de pins maritimes, un filet de son, mince, strident, pareil à un bruissement de sauterelles. (15–16)

Au rythme des saisons, nous surprenons des histoires animales en cours de déroulement, elles surgissent pour ainsi dire devant nos yeux. Peu importe qu'elles soient à peine entrevues, on comprend intuitivement qu'elles peuvent se déployer. Par exemple, nous imaginons fugitivement le périple de la troupe de Tarins, leur existence dans les forêts nordiques durant une partie de l'année. Nous nous demandons pourquoi les étourneaux effectuent ces va-et-vient entre la plaine et la forêt. Le chant des Cinis, semblable à un « bruissement de sauterelles, » nous étonne : quels sont ces oiseaux ? Comment vivent-ils ? Les existences animales, révélées à travers des précisions comportementales et formelles, configurent des potentialités narratives plus ou moins actualisées selon la scène représentée. Pour citer une phrase célèbre de Merleau-Ponty, elles sont « une transcendance dans un sillage de subjectivité, une nature qui transparaît à travers une histoire » (Merleau-Ponty 382). Le phénoménologue Wilhelm Schapp voit dans le « surgissement des histoires » (Schapp 137–142) le phénomène le plus originaire qui soit. Il postule que « nous n'obtenons un accès à l'arbre, à la plante et à l'animal que pour autant qu'ils surgissent devant nous en tant qu'empêtrés dans des histoires » (162), que « l'animal et la plante ne peuvent venir à notre rencontre que sous la catégorie de l'histoire » (163–164). L'être serait ontologiquement empêtré dans des histoires, les histoires existeraient avant même d'être entrevues, en-deçà et au-delà de leur perception par un observateur extérieur.<sup>4</sup> *Pourquoi les oiseaux chantent* manifeste significativement, me semble-t-il, cette narrativité inhérente à l'être animal. Il suffit d'une observation, d'une précision comportementale pour déclencher la mise en histoire :

Dans l'eau même, parmi les sagittaires et les joncs auxquels il s'est amarré, le petit radeau flottant du Grèbe Castagneux contient déjà des œufs ; sur le bord, la Poule

<sup>4</sup> Voir l'analyse de J. Greisch, « Empêtrément et intrigue : une phénoménologie pure de la narrativité est-elle concevable ? » (Schapp 239–275).

d'eau construit sa plate-forme de plantes aquatiques, cachée par le rideau des rubaniers ou les grandes feuilles du rumex. (118)

La plupart du temps, Delamain ne fait que suggérer ou esquisser l'histoire animale, il consacre cependant le dernier chapitre de son ouvrage à nous raconter en détail « L'histoire d'une famille de Busards Montagu » (159-204) : « Une petite colonie de ces rapaces nichait chaque année régulièrement sur une lande de bruyères toute proche de mon habitation. C'est là que, pendant plusieurs années, j'ai pu suivre presque jour par jour l'existence des Busards et noter minutieusement chacun de leurs actes » (161), écrit-il dans l'introduction du chapitre. Ce récit est une étude ornithologique visant à élucider des questions scientifiques générales sur la parade, l'alimentation, l'incubation et l'éducation des jeunes, mais elle est dans le même temps la biographie extrêmement précise d'une famille de Busards Montagu, qui nous donne accès à l'existence propre de chaque membre de la famille : l'individualisation ouvre ici sur l'histoire personnelle.

### Biographies personnelles

Louis Pergaud et Maurice Genevoix élaborent l'histoire personnelle des animaux. Ils leur attribuent un nom propre : Pergaud nous raconte *Le Roman de Miraut, chien de chasse* (1913), Genevoix l'histoire du chat *Rroû* (1931). Alors que le nom commun ou le nom scientifique latin désignent sans les différencier chaque membre d'une espèce ou d'une famille zoologique, les noms propres singularisent les existences animales qui peuvent être définies, au sens fort, comme des « expérience[s] vécue[s] en première personne » (Burgat 23) : « donner un nom, c'est inscrire biographiquement, c'est penser déjà au jour de la mort de tout individu nommé, à la mémoire qui sera conservée de lui, au vide qu'il laissera, à son caractère irremplaçable » (362). En exergue dans les titres des deux ouvrages, les noms « Miraut » et « Rroû » contiennent déjà toute l'histoire du chien et du chat désignés. Il s'agit pour Pergaud et Genevoix de rendre compte de leurs vécus singuliers, de leurs expériences vitales personnelles. La force de leurs romans tient à la manière dont ils configurent les subjectivités animales. Au lieu de rester à l'extérieur des êtres, comme le font Maeterlinck et Delamain dans une optique naturaliste, ils plongent dans leurs intériorités pour traduire leurs émotions, leurs sentiments et leurs pensées :

Et qui aurait pu savoir les sombres pensées qu[e] [Miraut] roula, les problèmes qu'il agita, et dont les manifestations extérieures se traduisaient juste par une inquiétude du regard, un froncement de paupières, des frémissements de mufle, de légers tremblements de pattes et l'obstination avec laquelle il regardait du côté de la porte (Pergaud, *Le Roman...*273) ; Rroû était descendu, très doucement, sur le toit incliné au midi. [...] Et c'est là qu'il s'était tapi, le menton sur les pattes, le corps inerte, enseveli dans une joie sans limites. Au-dessous de l'auvent, les hommes continuaient leurs futiles allées et venues, parfois levant les yeux vers lui pour s'assurer qu'il était toujours là, ou bien l'interpellant avec vulgarité. [...] Leurs paroles, s'il eût pu les comprendre, il les aurait jugées absurdes, plus dépourvues

de sens que les moindres bruits de l'espace : le tapotement contre la tuile d'une feuille rouge d'ampélopsis, le ronflement soudain, puis le silence du frelon bleu qui plongeait au cœur de la rose. (Genevoix *Rroû* 369)

Traduire le contenu psychique des bêtes revient à mettre en jeu des problématiques fondamentales -celles de la pensée, des émotions et du langage animal, et à définir des mondes de significations qui leur sont propres. L'*Umwelt*<sup>5</sup> forge l'identité de l'animal, configure son histoire personnelle. Cette histoire, Rroû et Miraut la partagent avec les hommes au sein de « communautés hybrides » :<sup>6</sup> l'histoire de Rroû est aussi celle de la vieille fille Clémence, le roman de Miraut celui du chasseur Lisée. L'histoire animale et l'histoire humaine s'avèrent ontologiquement co-enchevêtrées ; il y aurait, selon Wilhelm Schapp, un « être co-empêtré de l'homme et de l'animal dans une histoire » (Schapp 165), dont la parabole ou l'allégorie serait chez Homère la rencontre d'Ulysse avec son chien Argos après vingt ans de séparation.<sup>7</sup> Genevoix et Pergaud mettent aussi en lumière, dans leurs dénouements, des scènes de retrouvailles entre les bêtes et leurs amis humains qui montrent à quel point leurs histoires sont liées :

Les mots ont jailli malgré elle. [...] C'est la Clémence d'autrefois qui parle, dont la voix caresse le chat noir, la douce bête un peu sauvage qui jouait avec l'écheveau de laine. [...] Et peu à peu les yeux du chat s'éclairent. Un point d'or s'y allume, y palpite. Le chat soulève la tête, et maintenant regarde Clémence (Genevoix, *Rroû* 448-9); Miraut ne pouvait plus douter. Allongeant comme un fou, de toute sa longueur, et jappotant, et pleurant, et riant, il arriva aux pieds de Lisée et s'y roula, lui lécha les souliers, les genoux, les mains, lui sauta au visage, lui peigna la barbe, lui parlant, ne sachant comment faire, comment se tordre et battre du fouet assez vite pour lui dire toute sa joie, tout son bonheur. (Pergaud *Le Roman* 312)

Si on les compare par exemple à celle de Colette, les œuvres de Pergaud et Genevoix ont ceci d'original qu'elles élaborent aussi des biographies d'animaux « familiers » ou « sauvages » qui ne partagent pas le quotidien des humains, à moins d'y être forcés. Avec *La Dernière Harde* (1938), Genevoix prend pour leitmotiv la vie d'« [une] harde au sein de la forêt vivante » (*La Dernière* 29), son

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<sup>5</sup> Je reprends ici le concept de Jakob von Uexküll qui fait référence au monde vécu de l'animal, au milieu subjectif qu'il habite et configure en percevant et en agissant ; voir J.V. Uexküll, *Mondes animaux et monde humain* suivi de *La Théorie de la signification* (2004 [1965]) ; consulter également la récente traduction de C. Martin-Freville, *Milieu animal et milieu humain* (2010).

<sup>6</sup> Dominique Lestel définit une communauté hybride homme/animal comme une « association d'hommes et d'animaux, dans une culture donnée, qui constitue un espace de vie pour les uns et pour les autres, dans lequel sont partagés des intérêts, des affects et du sens » (Lestel 19).

<sup>7</sup> W. Schapp nous remémore la scène : « Ulysse revient à sa cour royale comme un mendiant. Vieux, malade et méprisé, Argos est couché sur le grand tas de fumier devant le portail du palais. Lorsque Ulysse s'approche il redresse d'abord la tête et les oreilles. Ensuite il reconnaît son maître et il remue la queue et abaisse les oreilles, mais il est trop faible pour s'approcher de son maître. Ulysse le voit et il sèche en cachette ses larmes » (165) ; Schapp y voit « une parabole de l'être co-empêtré de l'homme et de l'animal dans une histoire, une allégorie de l'abîme entre l'homme et l'animal et du pont par-dessus cet abîme ou bien, autrement dit encore, elle est également une île dans l'horizon de l'animalité telle qu'elle vient à notre rencontre, une île qui porte et qui éclaire le domaine entier de l'animalité » (166).

« [é]nergie vitale » (30). Il s'intéresse précisément à la biographie du Rouge, l'un des cerfs de la harde dont l'ontogenèse coïncide avec le développement de l'intrigue, une intrigue rythmée par le passage des saisons et les chasses qui déciment les membres du clan. Petit faon d'à peine sept mois au début de l'histoire, il devient grand dix cors, le mâle dominant de la harde dont l'allure révèle « la perfection d'un organisme parvenu au faîte de sa courbe, à l'apogée de sa beauté vivante » (182). De même que Rroû et Miraut, le Rouge se constitue un savoir pratique, développe sa vie émotionnelle, son intelligence sémiotique, une mémoire spatiale et sensorielle. On découvre par exemple la manière dont il s'initie auprès du Vieux des Orfosses durant l'hiver :

A présent [...] [il] connaissait sa force et sa prudence, son dévouement aux bêtes de son clan. Alors même qu'il s'écartait d'elles, il se souciait encore de leur salut. Puisqu'il était le plus robuste et le plus sage, où donc le Rouge aurait-il pu trouver une protection plus vigilante, une plus stable sécurité ? (67)

On ressent la joie qu'il éprouve au printemps lorsque, « pour la première fois de sa vie » (175), il prend son buisson et « laiss[e] la vie submerger son corps » (177) : « [l]a solitude lui était joie ; joie, chacun de ses pas sur la mousse ou dans l'eau vive du ruisseau, le ploïement des jeunes tiges contre lesquelles il frottait sa ramure, le passage du pivert qui volait d'un chêne à un autre » (177). On mesure également toute l'amplitude et la force de sa *métis*<sup>8</sup> qui lui permet, au fil des années, d'anticiper et de déjouer les pièges des hommes en imitant ou en inventant de multiples ruses.

Cette *métis* animale est omniprésente chez Pergaud. Ses nombreux récits et nouvelles narrent en effet des épisodes tragiques de la « vie personnelle » (*De Goupil* 99) des bêtes qui, confrontées à l'ennemi humain ou animal, doivent élaborer des stratégies efficaces de survie. Traqué par le braconnier Lisée, Goupil, « vieux forestier à l'oreille exercée [qui] sait fort bien discerner les bruits humains des rumeurs sylvestres » (10), perçoit la présence de Miraut, « le timbre de son aboi ou le tintement du grelot » (11). « [C]ontrairement aux instincts de tous les renards » (11), il fuit au loin en suivant les chemins « à la façon des lièvres » (11) puis revient vers son trou, « certain que ses pattes n'[ont] pas laissé à son ennemi le fret suffisant pour arriver jusqu'à lui » (11). Goupil perçoit donc les signes ou signaux auditifs de danger qu'il reconnaît d'expérience, puis élabore une stratégie de fuite pour laisser au sol le moins d'indices olfactifs possible. La première partie

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<sup>8</sup> Comme nom commun, « métis » désigne en grec ancien « une forme particulière d'intelligence, une prudence avisée » (Détienne et Vernant, *Les Ruses de l'intelligence...*17); précisément l'« [i]ntelligence à l'œuvre dans le devenir, en situation de lutte, [...] la forme d'une puissance d'affrontement, utilisant des qualités intellectuelles, – prudence, perspicacité, promptitude et pénétration de l'esprit, rouerie, voire même mensonge –, mais ces qualités jouent comme autant de sortilèges dont elle disposerait pour opposer à la force brute les armes qui sont son apanage : l'insaisissabilité et la duplicité. Comme l'eau courante, l'être à *métis* glisse entre les doigts de son adversaire ; à force de souplesse il se fait polymorphe ; comme le piège, il est aussi bien le contraire de ce qu'il apparaît : ambigu, inversé, il agit par retournement » (Détienne et Vernant, « La métis du renard » 312).



de la nouvelle (chapitres I à IV) montre la manière dont Goupil essaie d'échapper à l'homme, se fait capturer, puis est relâché avec un grelot autour du cou. Le reste du récit (chapitres V à VIII) relate sa nouvelle vie dans la forêt depuis le début du printemps jusqu'au 24 décembre, le jour de sa mort. L'histoire de Goupil est prise en cours de déroulement car il est déjà adulte en début du récit, mais quelques retours en arrière évoquant ses chasses, ses amitiés et ses amours passées, viennent compléter sa biographie. Outre le fait qu'elle nous livre de part en part la perspective de Goupil, cette biographie est intéressante parce qu'elle dévoile minutieusement les sémoses et processus de cognition grâce auxquels le renard s'adapte à ses nouvelles conditions de vie. Par exemple, il interprète le rire de Lisée :

Si Miraut, observateur et fin, avait pu comprendre que ce signe extérieur chez son maître correspondait pour lui à des caresses et à des bons morceaux ; s'il s'essayait lui-même comme beaucoup de ses congénères à un retroussis plus ou moins gracieux des babines pour faire comprendre à l'homme sa bonne humeur et sa soumission, il n'en était pas ainsi pour le vieux sauvage qui ne voyait dans cette manifestation que les chicots de dents, jaunies par le tabac, trouant des mâchoires féroces, et des ventres qui bougeaient comme s'ils eussent voulu happer d'eux-mêmes une proie convoitée. (25)

Pour Miraut qui vit avec son maître au sein d'une communauté hybride, le rire stimule une réponse, engage un processus de communication : le chien signifie à Lisée, au moyen d'expressions faciales, qu'il est heureux et soumis. Goupil, se focalisant sur les signes corporels, n'y voit qu'une menace vitale : il adopte le point de vue de la proie qui va être mangée. Miraut et Goupil configurent des mondes de signification bien distincts parce qu'ils n'ont pas le même vécu : le premier a grandi aux côtés de l'homme, l'autre dans la forêt. Deux histoires sont mises en regard.

### « L'histoire contre la classification ? »<sup>9</sup>

La représentation du vécu des bêtes est centrale, nous l'avons compris, dans la mesure où elle fait ressortir leurs expériences vitales personnelles. Avec les œuvres de Genevoix et Pergaud, nous assistons, non pas à l'émergence de l'histoire personnelle des animaux car des auteurs plus anciens comme Gaspard de Cherville l'avaient déjà mise au jour,<sup>10</sup> sinon à l'une de ses manifestations les plus abouties. Le corpus étudié révèle, en fin de compte, trois expressions biographiques : Maeterlinck propose une biographie d'espèces sans individualisation ; Delamain une biographie d'espèces avec individualisation ; Genevoix et Pergaud des biographies personnelles. Le discours naturaliste et zoologique de Maeterlinck

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<sup>9</sup> J'emprunte cette problématique à Tim Ingold, voir « Stories against classification: transport, wayfaring and the integration of knowledge, » *Being Alive. Essays on movement, knowledge and description* (156-164).

<sup>10</sup> Je songe par exemple à son ouvrage *Histoire d'un trop bon chien* (source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France), qui nous livre le récit que fait un chien de ses propres aventures.

obéit à une logique classificatoire qui ne prend pas en compte le vécu individuel des termites, mais focalise sur certaines colonies et certains épisodes marquants de leurs vies ; l'œuvre de Delamain, inspirée par un naturalisme de terrain, fait surgir une multiplicité d'histoires individuelles plus ou moins actualisées et nous fait appréhender la narrativité inhérente à l'être animal ; fictionnaliser les existences des bêtes dans le roman et la nouvelle permet à Pergaud et Genevoix de transcrire en détail leurs vécus personnels, psychiques et corporels, de faire ressortir leur intelligence, leur savoir, leur conscience de soi.

Une polarisation se dessine avec, d'un côté, la science naturelle qui classe les êtres vivants, définit des taxons ; de l'autre la littérature qui narre des histoires personnelles. Faut-il opposer ces deux modes de connaissance ? Wilhelm Schapp souhaite que « les histoires [soient] le modèle et la base pour les sciences de la nature » (Schapp 175). L'écrivain Charles Derennes, auteur de plusieurs biographies naturalistes dans les années 1920, critique l'histoire naturelle classique et propose quant à lui, non pas de supprimer la classification comme méthode, sinon une nouvelle classification des êtres vivants « en deux grandes catégories, selon que les individus des diverses espèces sont ou non capables de montrer de la personnalité ou de n'en montrer point » (Derennes 59). Je pense qu'il faut mesurer, en dernière analyse, toute la valeur des biographies personnelles parce qu'elles explorent les vécus des bêtes, racontent leurs singularités existentielles, et parce qu'elles donnent un nom aux animaux. L'attribution du nom, qui condense l'histoire personnelle, parachève à mon sens le processus de personnalisation de l'animal. Il est aussi la marque de l'intrication des histoires animales et des histoires humaines.<sup>11</sup> On pourrait sans doute, à une plus large échelle, figurer ce co-enchevêtrement des histoires sous la forme d'un « maillage, » à l'instar de Tim Ingold<sup>12</sup> pour souligner le fait que les histoires n'obéissent pas à un ordonnancement ni à une hiérarchisation organisés : des lignes de vie se croisent, s'entrecroisent, convergent et divergent, au gré des existences et des rencontres. On assiste ces dernières années à un « mouvement de 'personnalisation' de l'animal » (Christen 534) en éthologie, en philosophie, en histoire. J'espère avoir montré que les corpus littéraires figurent aussi ce mouvement, un mouvement qui ressemble à un trajet anthropologique vers les animaux et qui est une autre manière de proclamer la « fin de l'exception humaine » (Schaeffer, *La Fin*).

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<sup>11</sup> Comme le remarque F. Burgat (363).

<sup>12</sup> Voir « The meshwork » (63-94).

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## Editorial

### Creative Writing and Art South Atlantic Ecocriticism<sup>1</sup>

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“Subaltern environmentalisms” has emerged as a compelling new research area of the ecological humanities in the last decade. Connected to the rise of environmental justice studies, ecofeminism, post- and decolonialism, indigenous studies, degrowth discourse and anti-capitalist ecologies, it constitutes an attempt to reconfigure the maps of environmental discourse, re-locating their pivot from the “North(s)” to the “South(s)” of the world. Converging on the “abyssal divides” imposed by colonialism in its various historical and cultural forms, the projects within this growing paradigm promote the reintegration of non-dominant epistemologies and visions with awareness that, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos has written, “a massive epistemicide has been under way for the past five centuries, whereby an immense wealth of cognitive experiences has been wasted” (74). The Transatlantic regions of Latin America, the Iberian Peninsula, and Lusophone Africa belong to those “Souths,” and while they are certainly major sites of “epistemicide”, they are nevertheless still vibrant with cognitive wealth.

Skillfully edited by Luis I. Prádanos-García and Mark Anderson, our *Ecozon@* special focus issue on “South Atlantic Ecocriticism” is situated within this conceptual and political horizon. The territory explored in this issue is a very complex one: it is a territory of multiple colonizations, a territory in which different layers of culture coexist, but not without tensions: the culture of the natives, that of the colonizers, and the culture of the “West,” steeped in capitalist-consumerist and imperialist practices that often clash with traditional visions. To understand the South Atlantic area means therefore to disentangle a series of knots: the knot of biopolitics and political ecology; the knot of colonial and postcolonial history; and the knot of cultural anthropology and indigeneity. And this is the task of ecocritical analysis. As the guest editors explain in their Introduction, South Atlantic ecocriticism “engages cultural production from nations around the Atlantic Basin to study the ways in which environments and cultures are affected and transformed by the multidirectional circulation of animal and plant species, capital, commodities, development and land management practices, forms of activism and resistance, and people.”

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<sup>1</sup> My heartfelt thanks to Juan Carlos Galeano, Mark Anderson, and María Isabel Pérez Ramos for their cooperative spirit and enriching conversations.

Privileged subjects of this ecocriticism, they clarify, are the “counter-hegemonic socioecological movements and theories” that “bring to the fore the interlocking structural causes of environmental destruction and social injustice.”

What is the role of the arts in this process of exposure? How can poetry, storytelling, and artistic performance contribute to shedding light on the knots that history and power politics have entangled in the bodies, minds, and elements of these “subaltern” environments over the last few centuries? The aim of our Creative Writing and Art Section is to address these very important questions.

The selection of contributors is, this time, particularly significant. We begin with two live performances and lyrics by Guatemala artist and poet Regina José Galindo (b. 1974), “Desierto” (Desert) and “Piedra” (Stone)—and it is from this latter performance that the striking cover of this issue is taken. The recipient of a number of extremely prestigious international art prizes—the Leone d’Oro for young artists at the 51st Venice Biennale (2005), the Dutch Prince Claus Award (2011) and the Grand Prix at the 29<sup>th</sup> Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts (2011), among many others—Galindo is acclaimed the world over for her capacity to “transform personal anger and injustice in powerful public acts demanding an answer that interrupt ignorance and complacency,” as the announcement of one of these awards reads. Commissioned and produced in 2015 by the Galería Gabriela Mistral in Santiago de Chile, “Desierto” is a performance in which the artist remains buried up to her head within a heap of desert sand. As Regina explains in her description, which I recommend reading, the performance “tells the forms of oppression, abuse, racism and colonialism” hidden behind the profitable industry of pine monoculture, which has severely affected the local ecosystem. Conceived in a Chilean context, this performance also echoes the same ecocidal practice taking place in Guatemala due to the palm oil industry—a disastrous monoculture which has contaminated watersheds and land, endangering the local biodiversity. The performance is eloquently complemented by a poem with the same title, where Galindo envisions a world in which humans—like her body buried in the sand—will be turned into desert. In “Piedra” the setting is a street in São Paulo, Brazil. As Regina explains, “my body remains immobile, covered with charcoal. Two volunteers and someone from the audience urinate on the stone-body.” The sense of this arresting and provocative performance is splendidly conveyed by her poem as the cipher of an existential horizon saturated by violence but still crisscrossed by the vibrancy of elemental powers: “I am a stone / I don’t feel the beatings / humiliation / ... / other bodies over mine / hate / I am a stone / in me / the history of the world” (trans. Mark Anderson). It is intriguing to think these postcolonial verses in combination with a passage from Calvino’s short monologue “Being Stone,” written in 1981 for an exhibit of sculptures by Alberto Magnelli, where the stone affirms: “our mineral nature [...] implies and includes the human [...]. Stone remains and the human goes; humans serve the stones’ design, and not stones the design of man” (420, my translation). In Galindo, stone’s impersonal agency is also a bearer of both the violence and vitality embedded in the geology of society.

The socio-political message of Galindo's works is complemented by the cosmological imagination of Rember Yahuarcani López (b. 1985) and his collection of paintings "Cosmovisiones Amazónicas / Amazonian Cosmovisions." Here, too, our readers will find an insightful description by art critic Gabriela Germana, which is warmly recommended to better understand the creative prospect of the "cosmovisions" of this painter born in the Peruvian Amazon. Acknowledged both locally and internationally, Yahuarcani López's work relates in very original ways to the cosmology of his native community of Huitoto (Ancón Colonia, Loreto). Through a lively palette of complementary colors and soft drops and strokes over a nocturne setting, "La primera chacra" (The First Little Farm) represents vegetal life in its archetypical appearance. According to the Amazonian epistemologies, Germano underlines, "plants have distinct spirits that are able to influence the material world and human bodies, and can communicate with people. This perspective on nature questions modern Western views on farming and the place of plants in society." The trees and plants of this painting are therefore something more than a naturalist representation, being in fact a material-spiritual power embedded in natural cycles. Here, as in the other two paintings "El río" (River) and "Al caer la noche" (Nightfall), playing with Amazonian myths and epistemologies, Yahuarcani adopts an abstract and non-narrative pictorial language to convey the lasting authority of Amazonian cosmologies.

In close dialogue with this visual artist is Colombian writer, translator, and filmmaker Juan Carlos Galeano's bilingual tale "Moniya amena: El origen del río Amazonas" (Moniya amena: The Origin of the Amazon River). Based on oral narratives about the tree of abundance which are found across the whole Amazonian basin, this story underlines the regenerative power of vital energy in its cycle of transformations through life, death, and re-birth. The landscape and natural elements in their relations to the human dimension are the privileged embodiments of these metamorphoses. As Joni Adamson argues, commenting on Galeano's "neo-Boasian" imagination, "the oral tales found in Galeano's poetry are rooted in Amazonian concepts of boundary differentiation that help us rethink anthropomorphism as a 'dis-anthropocentric strategy'" (256). In "Moniya amena," Galeano explains in his description: "The ecological concern of the inhabitants seems to coincide with the urgent outcry of our era toward the creation of a new environmental imagination that erases the dichotomies between human and non-human life." This reinforces the urgency of the environmental message of these stories and folktales, here aiming to denounce practices of land and water overexploitation. As Adamson again clarifies, "Galeano's *Folktales* clearly shows that the forest and its protector spirits [...] inhabit a decidedly social space [...]. They 'listen' and are aware of human hubris or arrogance, sometimes transforming themselves into a desirable shape and leading the misbehavers or those who overhunt or overfish away, never to be seen again" (261).

This rich section comes to a lyrical close with "Two Poems" by Lilianet Brintrup Hertling, and "Trash Returns to Being" by Mark Anderson. A Chilean poet



and travel writer, Brintrup Hertling gives us quasi-photographic visions of sensuous reconnection with the elements. In the first, “Nada me une a los árboles” (Nothing Unites Me with the Trees), the apparent distance of two natures as different as the human and the arboreal is bridged by the immediacy of a copresence suspended between silence and a deeper, more substantial communication: “Never a gesture of rejection never a bad shade / never a misunderstanding / not from their wood nor from their sap.” In the second, “Mar” (Sea), the ocean is both a metaphor and a very material reality—a materiality which progressively prevails as the poems develop. The sea, for Brintrup Hertling, is the future of human history as well the future of life forms, threatened and violated by the leftovers of Western capitalist activities and *Machtpolitik* (“Oils / Ships / Nuclear experiments / Deep excavations”). And yet, this ocean is also, like Galeano’s elemental spirits, a source of life and a willing a-personal subject “simply being there / giving / [...] rejecting our trash,” able to influence human existence (“diverting the course / of our hurried decisions”).

And the sea is also an actor in “Trash Returns to Being” by Mark Anderson, poet and ecocritical scholar from the United States, and co-editor of the themed section of this issue. Tacitly reminiscent of A. R. Ammons’s poem “Garbage” (especially in the last verses) and stylistically suspended between symbolism and expressionism, Anderson’s poem mimics the movement of residual objects scattered in the slow and forceful cadence of waves on a beach in Huanchaco, Peru. In these loose lines and words, graphically organized as to give the impression of the undertow, we sense the coming and going of fragments of trash (mostly plastic), suspended in water and given back to the life of the sea as a backlash of a synthetic violence that “returns into being.” With the regular slowness of its lyrical tempo and the stubborn presence of “shoes / bags / bandages / tires / bottle caps / syringes / cups / condoms / reconstitute from liquid q u i e s c e n c e / [...] into b u r n i s h e d / forms like stones,” Anderson’s poetic imaginary engages in implicit conversation with Jorge Luis Borges’s “Las cosas,” where we are reminded of how all the things we discard—“Files, sills, atlases, wine glasses, nails, / Which serve us, like unspeaking slaves”—will “long outlast our oblivion” and “never know that we are gone” (“Durarán más allá de nuestro olvido; / no sabrán nunca que nos hemos ido”; 277).<sup>2</sup> The effective final image (“o u r o w n b o n e s / lost outside our bodies / exteriorized / They are forsaken by currents / and colonized by enterprising souls / m i n u t e c r u s t a c e a n s / recyclers of us”) evokes the last passage of *Let mots and les choses*, where Foucault hypothesized that the human could be “erased like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (422).

Faced with an original and urgent topic like “South Atlantic Ecocriticism” and inspired by such an outstanding choice of artworks, this editorial has sought to prompt reflection about the power of creative cultural forms. As the diverse

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<sup>2</sup> Translation slightly changed from the Penguin edition (in this case, by Stephen Kessler).

contributions in this issue's Creative Writing & Art Section show, cultural emergences are an integral part of the struggle against "invisibilization" (Öhman). They indeed convey "alternative understandings of the world (other than the hegemonic 'Western' values of commodification and constant economic growth) [which] are [...] necessary [...] to rethink our moral standpoint" (Pérez Ramos 48). Such creative work is a concrete demonstration of how art and literature, with their "immersive quality," enable readers to "shift from the here and now of their actual world" to the vantage point that Erin James has called "storyworld"—an intersubjective field resulting from "the world-creating power of narratives that catalyzes an imaginative relocation of readers to a new, often unfamiliar world and experience" (ix). Seen in this perspective, art and literature really are world-making practices: by revealing the "invisibilized" cosmovisions and epistemologies of the colonized, in fact, they enable a reintegration of what has been "marginalized, neglected, or repressed in dominant discourses" (Zapf 90). It is through their power to re-activate a society's "ecology of mind" that literature and art may underpin "conscious" dynamics in the evolution of cultural systems, helping establish different orders of priority and forging communication between "central" and "marginal" subjects.<sup>3</sup>

"The first condition for a postabyssal thinking is radical copresence," writes Santos (66). Returning voice and visibility to the dispossessed and delegitimized subjects of historically diverse colonialisms, the South Atlantic artists and poets included in this section convey radical and postabyssal energies to restore, at least tentatively, paths of copresence.

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## Poem Desierto-Piedra

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### Desierto

Seguirá naciendo raíces enfermas  
seguirán dándose frutos sin semilla  
seguirá secándose la tierra  
seguirán quemándose las hojas  
seguirá muriéndose el oxígeno  
seguirá incendiándose la vida

seguirá entonces el dolor  
y seremos entonces desierto.

### Desert

Infirm roots will keep being born  
fruits without seeds will keep growing  
the earth will keep withering  
leaves will keep burning  
oxygen will keep dying  
life will keep combusting

pain will thus continue  
and we will thus become desert.

(English translation by Mark Anderson)

## Desierto



1



2





3



4



## **Piedra**

Piedra  
Soy una piedra  
no siento los golpes  
la humillación  
las miradas lascivas  
los cuerpos sobre el mío  
el odio.  
Soy una piedra  
en mí  
la historia del mundo.

## **Stone**

Stone  
I am a stone  
I don't feel the beatings  
humiliation  
lascivious stares  
other bodies over mine  
hate.  
I am a stone  
in me  
the history of the world.

(English translation by Mark Anderson)

## Piedra



1



2









## Cosmovisiones amazónicas / Amazonian Cosmovisiones

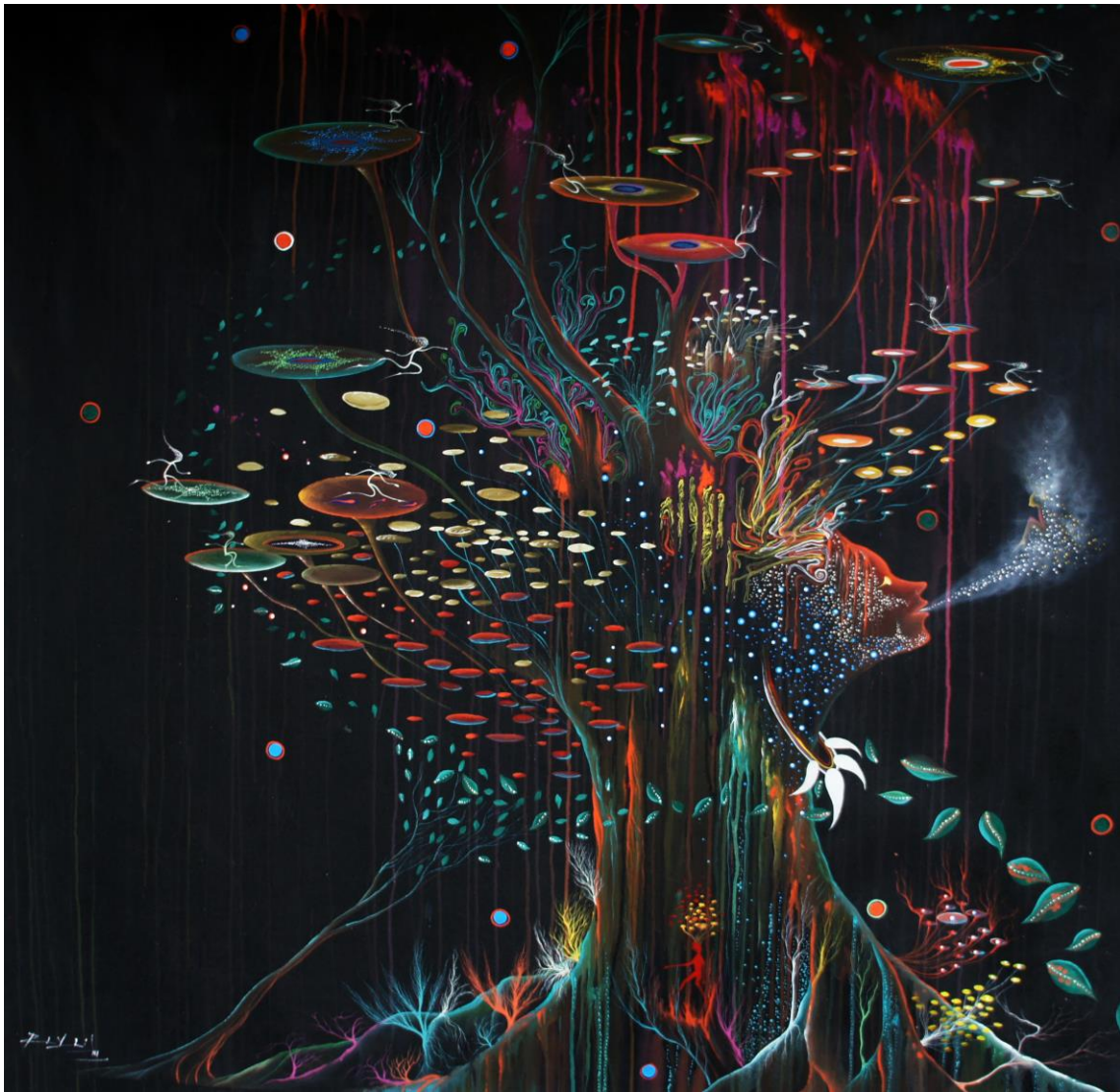
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Ecozon@

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### 1. Al caer de la noche



## 2. La primera chacra





### 3. El río

## Moniya amena El origen del río Amazonas

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Sucedió que una vez en la selva comenzó a escasear la comida y la gente andaba desesperada por el hambre. Cierta día, una muchacha que trataba de encontrar frutas para llevarle a sus familiares, se topó con una lombriz. Tuvo un gran susto, pero al mirarla de nuevo la lombriz se convirtió en un joven que le dijo: “Moniya amena, yo vivo muy solo cerca de aquí; si vienes todos los días a verme, podría regalarte comida para tu gente”.

Ella se alegró con la propuesta, pues se sentía atraída por él, y en adelante regresó a su casa con yucas, copoasú, uvillas y otras frutas.

Pero en otra ocasión, cuando el muchacho y Moniya amena se encontraban abrazados en su nido de hojas, se apareció la madre enfurecida: “Traidora, te he estado buscando por todas partes. Así era como quería agarrarlos”, y les echó una ollada de agua hirviendo.

La muchacha se salvó tapándose con unas hojas de platanillo. Él murió dando gritos.

Desde su muerte, la comida se puso todavía más escasa y volvieron a pasar hambre. Sin embargo, en el lugar donde murió comenzó a crecer un árbol tan grande que llegaba hasta el cielo; y como les daba variedad de frutos lo llamaron el árbol de la abundancia. Así les volvió la tranquilidad.

Pero algunos que venían a comer decidieron tumbar el árbol y llevarse todos los frutos.

Después de la caída del árbol, vinieron la oscuridad y tristeza. Y los hijos de quienes lo cortaron pasaban años difíciles y recordaban los días abundantes cuando vivían sus padres.

Viéndolos así, los espíritus de la selva dijeron: “Esta gente está sufriendo. Hagamos que el árbol comience a pudrirse y que su tronco se convierta en el río más grande de la tierra con peces y frutas para que ellos coman”.

Desde entonces nadie ha vuelto a sentir hambre. El río ha estado siempre, alimentando a animales y árboles, y a las nubes que beben de sus aguas. De las hojas que cayeron hacia el oriente, se formaron muchos mares, y de sus ramas quisieron los espíritus amigos que nacieran el río Putumayo, el río Caquetá, el río Madeira y otros que le llevan sus aguas a este río que llaman el Amazonas.

La gente dice que ojalá a ninguno de los que viven ahora en la selva se le vaya a ocurrir coger toda la comida solo para él.

## **Moniya amena** **The Origin of the Amazon River**

Once, in the rainforest, food became scarce and the people wandered around, desperate with hunger. One day, a young woman who gathered fruit to bring to her family stumbled across an earthworm. She was very afraid, but upon looking again, the earthworm transformed into a young man who said to her: “Moniya amena, I live nearby and I am very lonely; if you come every day to see me, I will give you food for your people.”

She was happy with the proposal, given that she felt attracted to him, and right away returned home with *yuca*, *copoasú*, *uvilla*, and other fruits.

But on another occasion, when the young man and Moniya amena found themselves embracing in a nest of leaves, her infuriated mother appeared: “Traitor, I have been looking for you everywhere. I knew that I would find you this way,” and she poured a pot of boiling water onto them.

The young woman was saved by covering herself with some *platanillo* leaves. The young man died, screaming.

After his death, food became even scarcer and the people again felt hungry. However, in the place where he died, a tree began to grow so large that it touched the sky; and since it provided a variety of fruits, they called it the tree of abundance. This was how tranquility was restored.

But some of the people who used to come to eat decided to knock the tree down and take away all of its fruits.

After the tree fell, darkness and sadness came. And the children of those who cut the tree experienced difficult times and remembered the abundant days when their parents lived.

Seeing them this way, the spirits of the rainforest said: “These people are suffering. Let’s make the tree begin to decay, and its trunk will convert itself into the largest river in the land with fish and fruit so that they can eat again.”

Since then, no one has felt hunger again. The river has always been there, feeding animals, trees, and the clouds that drink from its waters. From the leaves that fell toward the east, many seas formed, and from its branches, the spirit friends birthed the Putumayo River, the Caquetá River, the Madeira River, and others that carry their waters east to the river that they call the Amazon.

The people say that they hope now that no one who lives in the rainforest gets the idea to take all of the food only for him.

(English translation by Jennifer Erin Irish)

## Dos Poemas / Two Poems

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### Nada me une a los árboles

Nada me une a los árboles  
y sin embargo  
recojo su sombra  
toco sus hojas  
respiro su aire  
me abrazo a su tronco.  
Nunca un gesto de rechazo nunca una mala sombra  
nunca un gesto equívoco  
ni de su madera ni de su savia.

### Nothing Unites Me with the Trees

Nothing unites me with the trees  
and yet  
I bask in their shade  
I touch their leaves  
I breathe their air  
I cling to their trunks.  
Never a gesture of rejection never a bad shade  
never a misunderstanding  
not from their wood nor from their sap.

### Mar

Yo te imagino hoy mar del futuro  
como simplemente estando ahí  
dando  
dando de tus frutos  
rechazando nuestras basuras  
Aceites

**Barcos**

Experimentos nucleares  
Excavaciones profundas.  
Yo te imagino  
desviando el curso  
de nuestras decisiones apresuradas  
que como los ríos  
van a dar a tu mar  
que es el morir  
para no rehacer.

**Sea**

Today I imagine you, sea of the future  
simply being there  
giving  
giving your fruits  
rejecting our trash  
Oils  
Ships  
Nuclear experiments  
Deep excavations.  
I imagine you  
diverting the course  
of our hurried decisions  
which like the rivers  
end up in your sea  
which is death  
to not do it all again.

(Translation by Juan Carlos Galeano and Jennifer Irish)



## Trash Returns to Being

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Trash returns to being  
from detritus                    born on the waves  
                                  buried in water  
all those graceless forms  
soles of shoes  
    bags  
    bandages  
    tires  
    bottle caps  
    syringes  
    cups  
    condoms  
    toothbrushes  
                                  they all reconstitute from liquid q u i e s c e n c e  
    p o l i s h e d by sand and decay  
into b u r n i s h e d  
    forms like stones  
  
i n a s l o w e b b

The bones of TRASH

litter

beach

like

seashells

like

our

own bones

lost outside our bodies

exteriorized

They are forsaken by

currents

and colonized by enterprising souls

minute crustaceans

recyclers of us

They s t r i n g o u t in front of me

all those f r a g m e n t s  
gouged from existence

the ephemeral moment

in which they were of USE

and they bind me

my eyes  
to the consumed lives of others

each the r e m

nant  
of a moment

s  
h  
i  
p  
w  
r  
e  
c  
k  
e

d

chronology

as f a r a s t h e e y e r e a c h e s

e n d l e s s

AT LEAST

up to the •

where the **smog** d i s s o l v e s

w a t e r s a n d t r a s h

i n t o i n d e t e r m i n a c y,

there they all become

g r a i n s  
o f  
w a t e r  
a n d  
s m o k e

s u s p e n d e d

as the memory of THINGS

l i v e s  
e t c h e d  
i n  
w a t e r

s t r e w n

o n

s a n d s a n d s a n d s a n d

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Book Review: Ian Morris. *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 400 pp.



In *Why the West Rules—For Now* (2010), the archaeologist and historian Ian Morris argued that geography has been the primary factor shaping the relative political and cultural power of Asian and European civilizations over the last fifteen millennia. *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* continues in this same controversially materialist and macro-historical vein. In this new book, Morris outlines “a general theory of the cultural evolution of human values across the last twenty thousand years” (3), which he argues has been driven by cultural adaptation to changes in the way societies “captur[e] energy from the world” (4). The book developed out of Morris’s 2012 Princeton Tanner Lectures, and the second half of the volume contains four critical responses (by classicist Richard Seaford, historian Jonathan Spence, philosopher Christine Korsgaard, and novelist Margaret Atwood), as well as Morris’s own response to this commentary.

“Values,” in Morris’s functionalist account, are “adaptive traits, which people adjust to maximize their effectiveness” at group survival (10). Because different energy capture practices pose different challenges, Morris argues that “the competitive process of cultural evolution” dictates that all societies organized around a given form of energy capture will eventually adopt “whatever values work best” (14) to promote survival in that situation. For example, farming, the practice of capturing energy from domesticated plants and animals, requires a large work force and complex divisions of labor; Morris suggests that farming thus pushes communities to adopt values compatible with stable and extensive social hierarchies, including an acceptance of social inequality and an aversion to interpersonal violence. One could of course engage in farming without such values, but Morris argues that the material realities of farming are such that communities with these values are more likely to survive than those with other values, and that it thus becomes overwhelmingly likely that all farming societies will eventually adopt the same survival-optimized value system. Thus the value system in place at any given point in history will be the one that best promotes collective survival in the context of the particular material realities of that moment; or, as Morris puts it, “each age gets the thought it needs” (24).

After outlining this premise, Morris identifies three stages of human history: the age of foragers, of farmers, and of fossil fuel users. Each of these evolutionary stages involves unique material challenges and a corresponding value



system. Prehistoric foragers “value equality over most kinds of hierarchy and are quite tolerant of violence” (4); farmers—a category that for Morris includes “pretty much everyone who lived in the ten thousand years before AD 1800” (217)—value “hierarchy over equality and are less tolerant of violence” (4); and the citizens of modern fossil-fuel societies “tend to value equality of most kinds over hierarchy and to be very intolerant of violence” (4). Morris acknowledges that cultural differences exist within each of these categories, but argues that these differences represent variations on basic global patterns. “[T]o make sense of the vast, confusing mass of historical and anthropological material,” he writes, “I clustered both energy capture and values into three ideal types [. . .] what ideal types lose in reality, they make up for in clarity” (240). This abstraction, he argues, “is the price we have to pay if we are to identify causes behind the chaos of real life” (9).

Jonathan Spence offers a sharp rebuke to this methodological claim in his response, objecting to “a certain blandness to [Morris’s] picture of the world,” which provides no “deeper feeling of ‘what it was like’” to live in any of the historical societies discussed (181). Richard Seaford makes a similar point; focusing on the category of farming societies, Seaford identifies classical Athens in particular as an exception to the type that “cannot be marginalized as merely ‘qualifying’ rather than challenging the model” (175). Morris responds to these critiques by reiterating an argument made in his opening chapter: “rather than denying the obvious fact of my reductionism, I want to embrace the charge. My defense is that *all* scholarship is reductionist [. . .] The question we should be asking is not whether [a scholar] is being reductionist—the answer is always yes—but what level of reduction is required to resolve the problem being posed” (9-10; italics original). It is true that even the most diligent scholar must work, to some extent, with abstractions; the world is bottomlessly complicated, and scholarly language is no more capable of perfect mimesis than any other representational system. But Morris’s rather flippant response to the suggestion that he has gone too far in the direction of abstraction is irresponsible. The question that we should ask of scholarship is not, how well did it make use of reductionism to abstract clarity from the confusions of the real, but rather, how well did it avoid the worst of reductionism’s obfuscatory pitfalls? Spence and Seaford suggest, and I agree, that Morris has failed to avoid these pitfalls, and that his ideal types obscure more than they reveal.

There is not sufficient space here to summarize the entire dialogue between Morris and his respondents, including Christine Korsgaard’s critique of his theory of values and Margaret Atwood’s discussion of the future of energy capture, but I do want to touch on one other point raised in the exchange, involving the question of ideology. Seaford argues that Morris is effectively naturalizing the ideologies of late capitalism through his uncritical assumption that competition and the maximizing of efficiency are the processes that drive all forms of cultural evolution, and that his arguments are thus “closer to the ideas of our ruling class than to the thought that our age needs” (178). Morris responds by dismissing the charge,

equating critiques of ideology to Dorothy searching for a manipulative wizard behind the curtain in Oz, and then asserting that this wizard is “a figment of modern academics’ imaginations” (249). Denying that ideology plays any substantial role in shaping societies, Morris argues instead for the transhistorical primacy of “common sense,” which he defines first as “the ability to learn from experience” (249) and later explicitly equates with “embrac[ing] markets and wage labor” (251). Readers will have to judge this response for themselves, but it seems to me to reveal a penchant for reductive reasoning that extends beyond the construction of theoretical models to inform—and limit—both Morris’s willingness to engage with his critics and his insights into contemporary politics.

Another troubling aspect of Morris’s argument is that despite its grand scope—he claims that his framework describes the values of “the overwhelming majority (probably 95 percent) of all the people who have ever lived” (10)—it fails to treat contemporary fossil fuel society as a truly global phenomenon. This failure is evident in an anecdote Morris offers as an illustration of his thesis. On a research trip to Kenya, Morris relates, he and his travel companion “took our full-blown fossil-fuel graduate-student values with us, and were particularly keen not to be like the colonialist anthropologists of yesteryear, with staffs of underpaid locals carrying their belongings around” (14); once on the ground, however, they found that they were unable to fend for themselves, and hired local women to fetch their water and cook. Morris argues that this proves the truth of his argument that “each age gets the thought it needs”: in Kenya, a farming society, he was obliged to accept and value social hierarchy, and to discard the ideas about social equality he had learned to value in the fossil-fuel society of England. But Kenya and England do not belong to different ages. Kenya and the rest of the “developing world” are integral parts of the fossil fuel economy: resources extracted from the global south fuel the industrialized global north. If a coherent set of “fossil fuel values” have evolved to allow us to cope with the material realities of the fossil fuel age, then this value system must, like the global economy that shapes it, be a complex and ambiguous thing that articulates itself differently depending on where in the system one is standing. Morris’s values did not change in Kenya as a result of movement from one social system to another; rather, his awareness of the complexity of those values changed as he moved around inside of the heterogeneous, globalized network of contemporary fossil fuel society. Both in England and in Kenya he lived in ways that involved an at least tacit acceptance of global social inequalities, in which the inhabitants of poor, colonially exploited nations labor on his behalf. This aspect of his fossil fuel values was simply rendered more immediate and thus more visible by his trip to Africa. To be clear, I am not challenging the premise that values are shaped by material circumstances, but simply suggesting that Morris’s development of this premise into a universalizing and deterministic account of world history is shallow and unconvincing: his descriptions lack nuance and his conclusions are hobbled by a blindness to the realities of contemporary global society.

These limitations become more clearly visible if we compare *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* to another study of energy regimes, Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* (2011). Like Morris, Mitchell argues that changes in energy capture practices drive broader changes in social organization and social thought; he introduces *Carbon Democracy* as a study of “democracy as oil—as a form of politics whose mechanisms on multiple levels involve the processes of producing and using carbon energy” (5; italics original). But where Morris outlines a generalized account of cultural evolution from pre-history to the present, Mitchell focuses on the specifics of modern fossil fuel production—how and where coal mines, oil wells, pipelines, and refineries were built in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—and asks how these differences affected power struggles between the owners of energy production systems, the laborers who work in energy production facilities, and the communities that depend upon this infrastructure. This attention to the details of historically specific material and social circumstances allows Mitchell to provide a nuanced account of coal and oil production as practices that have shaped two centuries of world politics, including concrete insights into European democracies' evolving relationships with Middle Eastern autocracies. Morris's transhistorical, generalizing approach, in contrast, offers nothing more concrete than the claim that “everyone who lived in the ten thousand years before AD 1800” valued social inequality and was intolerant of violence.

*Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* is ambitious, lucidly written, and exhaustively researched, and its argument-and-response format, which allows readers to see not only the product but the process of scholarly debate, is stimulating and productive. Moreover, the project Morris sets for himself is an exciting one; a study of moral values that does not center on human subjects producing themselves autonomously against a passive background but rather takes the material situatedness of culture seriously is precisely the kind of theoretical work called for by our present moment of crisis. An account of the evolution of values organized around a history of energy regimes would be a valuable contribution to ecocriticism generally and to the energy humanities specifically, and would be particularly useful to anyone interested in the relationship between social values and the practices of energy production driving anthropogenic climate change. But Morris's book does not rise to the potential of its project. It loses more to the abstraction demanded by its macro-historical approach than it gains in argumentative clarity; worse, Morris's simplistic and uncritical engagement with evolutionary theory and contemporary globalized capitalism give to his project the distinct and unpleasant flavor of an apologia for power.

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Book Review: Axel H. Goodbody and Carmen Flys Junquera, eds., *Sense of Place: Transatlantic Perspectives / Sentido del arraigo: perspectivas transatlánticas* (Instituto Franklin de Estudios Norteamericanos - Universidad de Alcalá: Servicio de Publicaciones UAH, 2016), 231 pp.



In this collection Axel Goodbody and Carmen Flys Junquera bring together twelve eloquent essays that enrich the scholarly dialogue on “sense of place,” place attachment and alienation, and the representation of place in contemporary literature and the arts. As the Preface explains, *Sense of Place* is the third publication in the University of Alcalá’s Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin series dedicated to Culture, Literature and Environment (CLYMA, in Spanish), an editorial endeavor that contributes to internationalize ecocriticism. It is fitting that this volume be included in the CLYMA series, as the ecocritical gaze spotlights the intricacies of how the human world interacts with places. In keeping with this effort to secure a space for ecocriticism in the Spanish-speaking community, *Sense of Place* opens with a bilingual critical introduction translated with precision by Irene Sanz Alonso, and four of its twelve essays are in Spanish.

The study of place is, of course, not new, but in so far as it is driven by the spirit of ecocriticism and designed along the lines of an environmentally inflected place-based education, *Sense of Place* offers fresh perspectives on a concept that stands out for its elusiveness. As the editors explain in their introduction, “sense of place” is “an openness to appreciation of the characteristic features of a place, whose understanding may give insight into how people interact with their environment, and facilitate efforts to make this interaction more sustainable” (17). As this definition suggests, sense of place is intrinsically personal; places mean different things to different people, and their meaning can vary over time. The introduction traces the trajectory of spatial discourse in critical theory, a route that includes the contributions of Yi-Fu Tuan, J. B. Jackson, Setha Low, Axel Goodbody, David Harvey, Edward Soja, Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, Doreen Massey, Val Plumwood, Kate Rigby, Ursula Heise, and Lawrence Buell. Recent scholarship on the study of place and place attachment has questioned the meaning of these concepts, converging on the idea that in a globalized world characterized by mobility, our relationship with place is “unfixed, contested, and multiple” (20). *Sense of Place* thus advocates for a stronger sensitivity to “the different historically and culturally shaped connotations of place and sense of place” (17). This approach informs the construction of *Sense of Place* in two specific ways. First, the



transatlantic focus of the volume brings together academics and a visual artist from Spain, United Kingdom, Portugal, and the US, writing about American, French, Swiss, Spanish, and African literature by men and women, Canadian art, Swedish museum displays, and landscape photography. With this network of authors and topics the volume expertly fulfills its aim to examine the myriad meanings of place and our relationship to it. Second, while the editors acknowledge the complexity of place and place attachment in today's globalized society, they equally recognize sense of place as a local and personal category. By allowing the contributors to probe their own relationship to place if they so wish, the collection as a whole demonstrates that invoking personal experience may very well enrich critical engagement with spatial analysis.

The twelve essays are divided into three sections. The first section is titled "Sense of Place as an Educational Tool" and its three essays are the most theoretical of the volume. Scott Slovic's "Re-Scaling Geo-loyalty: Considering Impressions of Trans-scalar Thinking" delves directly into the local vs. global debate, arguing in favor of thinking about place attachment, or "geo-loyalty," in terms of scale. Drawing on examples from literature, art, and film, Slovic demonstrates that trans-scalar thinking offers a viable model to understand the complexities of life in the twenty-first century. Esther Rey Torrijos expands on place's role in the construction of identity in her essay, "The Pedagogical Quality of Place: Relevance of Place-Based Educational Models in Globalized Societies." Eudora Welty's writing and Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Lacuna* offer Rey Torrijos a platform from which she defends the value of literature as a tool to teach students about place. María José Sueza Espejo's "Amin Maalouf y Jean Marie Le Clézio o el sentido poliédrico de lugar" incorporates the concept of the "other" into spatial discourse, as the experiences of these two French contemporary writers exemplify how place and movement construct identity. Pedagogy has played a central role in the development of ecocriticism, and these opening essays of *Sense of Place* are a welcome resource to develop further this curricular thread.

The five essays that make up Part Two address the treatment of place in literature, and they display most clearly the volume's diversity in terms of geography and gender, even as they build on the theoretical framework shaping the concept of place mapped out in the first section. The poetry of Henry David Thoreau, Dylan Thomas, and Claudio Rodríguez is the subject of María Antonia Mezquita Fernández's study. Framing her reading in a personal reflection on her own experience with place as an identity-shaping force, Mezquita Fernández illuminates the relationship of these poets with New England (US), Wales, and Zamora (Spain), respectively. Novels from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Anglophone Africa are the focus of three essays in this section. Rafael Ruiz Pleguezuelos identifies in the narrative fiction of the Northern English writer Allan Sillitoe a treatment of nature, place, and working-class issues that resonates with his own experience as the son of a miner in democratic Spain. Ruiz Pleguezuelos

reads Sillitoe's fiction as a case study in how the characters perceive the landscape and interact with it. Likewise, Isabel María Fernandes Alves traces how the characters of Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* demonstrate distinct senses of place, namely attachment to and escape from the Mid-West prairie, thereby making this an ideal work of fiction to be included in a curriculum based on the issue of place. Guided by her own experiences in rural Zimbabwe, Bibian Pérez Ruiz explores the treatment of place, space bonding, and movement, especially by female characters, in Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Condition*, a landmark novel in fiction by African women writers. Finally, the concept of *espace vécu* organizes Montserrat López Mújica's analysis in Spanish of the representation of French-speaking Switzerland by C.F. Ramuz, Maurice Chappaz and Corinna Bille, thereby expanding the critical framework of *Sense of Place*.

In 'Place as Landscape and Nation,' the final section of the volume, the editors put together a dynamic collage of essays that incorporate photography, landscape painting, museum displays, and bilingual poetry into the study of sense of place. In these distinct formats the artists studied project their relationship with place and, by extension, they develop a narrative of the connections between place and identity, both personal and national. Captivated by the indigenous communities of the Pacific Northwest Coast, Emily Carr produced a collection of paintings that foreground the issues of place, nature, and identity, as María Luz González Rodríguez examines in "Sense of Self, Sense of Place: The Female Body as Canadian Landscape in Emily Carr's Art". Similar themes are traced in Christopher Oscarson's study of the display of the natural world in Stockholm's Biological Museum upon its opening in the final years of the nineteenth century. Carma Casulá's own photography projects prove to be a useful way for her to explore sense of place, rootedness, and belonging. The section, as well as the volume as a whole, closes with Terry Gifford's "Towards a New Multi-dimensional Ecopoetics of Place," an essay that takes as its point of departure the author's own intent to apprehend a foreign space [Spain] through his own language [English] in a collection of poems about place and his experience as a resident of Alicante (Spain). Gifford's "reflection on a failed experiment" highlights how culture and language shape the perception of place, one of the central arguments elaborated throughout the volume (215). This section brings out the interdisciplinarity of the concept of "sense of place," and reinforces the volume's pedagogical component.

With its reading of literature and art in spatial terms, *Sense of Place* will be an important resource for teaching and research on the topics of place and place attachment. Moreover, it will lead many readers to reflect on their attachment to the places they come into contact with in their own lives. If one were to point out any weaknesses, it would be that an equal distribution of essays in Spanish and English would have strengthened this already excellent collection. The most lasting contribution of this volume lies in its successful reconstitution of the category of

place as a crucial element in the study of contemporary society and its literary and artistic traditions.

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Book Review: Hubert Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 301 pp.



Hubert Zapf's *Literature as Cultural Ecology* is the first monograph addressed at an Anglophone audience that deals explicitly with literature and cultural ecology. Zapf's succinct definition of cultural ecology for those not yet familiar with this new paradigm is that it "looks at the interaction and living interrelationship between culture and nature" (3), and the vehicle for this investigation here is specifically literature. Looking at the above definition, it is obvious that cultural ecology is clearly a part of "ecocritical thought" (39) and indeed, in the *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* that was also published in 2016 Zapf notes the close affinities between the two. Cultural ecology when it is specifically concerned with literature is thus, perhaps, best seen as a new and powerful method for ecocritics to engage in literary criticism. Zapf offers a very strong thesis statement of cultural ecology in this present volume: "imaginative literature *acts like an ecological force* within the larger system of culture and of cultural discourses" (27, emphasis in the original). Literature is here understood as an ecological force that has the power to create "counter-discourses" (27) that challenge current unsustainable societal and economic practices, and it can thus operate as a "medium of radical civilizational critique" (28). Throughout, Zapf uses canonical authors such as Margaret Atwood, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe to illustrate the sometimes-surprising transformative potential of literature.

*Literature as Cultural Ecology* is part of Bloomsbury's "Environmental Cultures" book series which makes its publications available online in open access format. The series aims to be very inclusive in its target audience, and even this book, though at times rather dense in its language, is suited for a variety of scholars from advanced undergraduates upwards. From a practical scholarly perspective, the "triadic functional model" (7) of literature, for example, is explained so well that it can also be applied by junior scholars not yet experts in the field. Compared to another recent ecocritical publication, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (2014) edited by Louise Westling, one special benefit of the current volume is precisely the concrete, practical tools it offers for environmental literary analysis. Zapf's volume may not be quite as accessible and activist-oriented as, for example, Serenella Iovino's *Ecocriticism and Italy*, another early offering in Bloomsbury's series, but for literary scholars

interested in the most recent developments in the field, his book is highly relevant. *Literature as Cultural Ecology* is divided into four parts that each address distinct “methodological steps” (6) and serve to conceptualize cultural ecology, place it within the wider ecocritical context, give concrete examples of cultural ecology “in action,” and also engage fields beyond the environmental humanities.

The first part, “Cultural Ecology and Literary Studies,” gives readers the grounding they need to follow the argument later on in the book. Zapf explains the project of cultural ecology as being both a “functional model” of the essential attributes of literary texts and a “scholarly project” with ethical and practical implications (30). For instance, the particular aesthetic force of an Emily Dickinson poem can awaken in the reader an affective response that initiates intellectual investigations into the validity of long taken-for-granted “culture-nature binaries” (32). From a cultural ecology viewpoint, understanding humanity’s coexistence with the nonhuman world as a “mutual relationship” instead of seeing the nonhuman merely in “utilitarian” (35) ways is one particular function of sustainable texts.

In the second part, “Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology,” the place of cultural ecology within the larger ecocritical field is made clear. Zapf briefly outlines the history of ecocriticism and notes how modern ecocriticism has discarded its past antagonisms towards cultural studies and critical theory and how current ecocriticism’s embrace of especially poststructuralism and phenomenology has led to vastly diversified theoretical developments within ecocriticism. Zapf also stresses how instead of being merely “escapist fantasy” (59), literature has a crucial role in forming values and imagining alternative, sustainable futures, that the environmental humanities in general are vital in this imagining, and that they therefore need to be part of finding solutions for societal and environmental problems.

Part III makes the case for the transformative power of literature as cultural ecology and presents a convincing case for the use of cultural ecology as a new theory and method in literary studies. This third part of the book contains two overwhelmingly important aspects of cultural ecology: first, the close ties to material ecocriticism (which in many ways serves as the theoretical basis for literary cultural ecology) and, second, the triadic functional model of literature (which forms the most important methodological apparatus of literary cultural ecology). Zapf draws on recent theory on material ecocriticism by Bennett, Iovino, and Oppermann and acknowledges the important insights gained especially on nonhuman agency. However, he argues against a “radicalized material ecocriticism” (87) that he sees as potentially eradicating the ethical responsibility of individual human agents. The triadic functional model of literature, on the other hand, offers a functional method of literary analysis that is partially based on previous triadic models by Hegel, Pierce, and Iser, but arguably differs from them in placing more emphasis on recognizing the ambiguity of agency while at the same time being easily applicable to a variety of texts. Zapf’s triadic model has



three functions: as “*culture-critical metadiscourse*” it challenges rigid thought patterns; as “*imaginative counter-discourse*” it empowers alternatives; and as “*reintegrative interdiscourse*” it disposes of unsustainable cultural binaries (95).

The concluding fourth part forms the bulk of the book. It is titled “Transdisciplinary Contexts of a Cultural Ecology of Literature” and aims to clarify cultural ecology’s place within the wider environmental and ecocritical discussions to both illustrate its current place and “differentiate its transdisciplinary potential” (123). The method for doing this entails using a dualistic model that sets up several seemingly contradictory concepts such as “Order and Chaos,” “Matter and Mind,” and “Local and Global,” and through these dialectical opposites shows the reader the full potential of cultural ecology. Zapf argues that ecologically minded humanists need to engage with the life sciences while at the same time maintaining a critical attitude towards the “quantifying, causal-empirical, and objectifying methodology” (125) that they often employ. This discussion draws on the preceding discussion of material ecocriticism and how it has contributed to cultural ecology’s understanding of the actual concept of “life.” The fourth part also includes a thorough reading (149-158) of Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” which exemplifies the usefulness of the triadic functional model of cultural ecology. The lucidity of this part alone makes the book worthwhile especially for beginning literary scholars.

Overall, the book successfully realizes its aims. It offers the reader a theory of literature, new directions both in the fields of ecocriticism and literary studies, as well as practical tools for ecological literary analysis. To nitpick on an arguably minor issue, some more careful editing would have avoided the seemingly interchangeable use of “man” and “human.” Throughout, the book seems to explore “the relationship between man and elemental nature” (197), with “man” supplanted by “human” only when it is stylistically convenient, as when Zapf discussed “the kinship between human and nonhuman nature” (197). This is certainly only an issue of linguistic convention, but nevertheless something that could potentially be remedied in future editions.

This reviewer also wishes that more space had been devoted to art forms other than literature, or to non-canonical texts in different formats. In the *Handbook* (2016) Zapf asserts that ecocriticism should not focus exclusively on literary texts but instead more widely “explore the cultural ecosystems of language, literature, and other art forms” (Zapf 4). Zapf defends his use of exclusively literary texts in the present volume as not implying any sort of “cultural elitism” but as instead affirming “the aesthetic as a vital mode of ecological knowledge” (5). As Zapf acknowledges, other artistic genres, including visual media, can exhibit similar high aesthetic force. So one cannot but eagerly await new applications of this paradigm to a wide variety of cultural artifacts.

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Book Review: Chia-ju Chang and Scott Slovic, eds., *Ecocriticism in Taiwan: Identity, Environment, and the Arts* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 238 pp.



In the West, ecocriticism has been well-established for more than two decades. In Asia, on the other hand, it only began to attract wider attention during the late 1990s, producing a growing body of scholarship which addresses environmental issues in the region. *Ecocriticism in Taiwan: Identity, Environment, and the Arts*, is the first English language book in the field which focuses on Taiwan. Located on westernmost edge of the Pacific Rim, this small island country is characterized by considerable ecological diversity and a varied geography. It was these features that led the Portuguese, the first Europeans to discover the island, to name it “Ilha Formosa”—beautiful island. However, this beauty has been fast disappearing since the island entered a period of a rapid industrialization and economic growth in the 1960s. Like many developing countries, Taiwan chose to sacrifice the integrity of its ecological environment in order to pursue an “economic miracle,” as people referred to the subsequent decades until the turn of the millennium. It is this experience of an extraordinarily fast transformation from a traditional agricultural society into a modern, industrialized country which distinguishes Taiwan from most Western nations. It also lent a distinct cast to the way in which environmental issues play out, which is reflected in ecocritical scholarship.

*Ecocriticism in Taiwan* collects fifteen essays covering a wide range of issues, and grouped into three sections. The first of these is called “Island Identities, Eco-Postcolonial Historiography, and Alter(native) Strategies,” and contains five essays which focus on the complex colonial history of Taiwan, the environmental legacy of this history, and how these are linked to issues of identity formation. The island’s aboriginal inhabitants are Austronesian peoples, who probably arrived thousands of years BCE. The continuing importance of their culture is the subject of Ming-tu Yang’s essay “Going Back into a Future of Simplicity,” which discusses how Taiwanese indigenous people utilize natural resources and maintain sustainable life styles from generation to generation, as well as of “(W)ri(gh)ting Climate Change in Neqou Soqluman’s Work,” in which Hsinya Huang analyzes a flood myth of the Bunun tribe in relation to climate change, showing how it provides an alternative to apocalyptic or romanticized perceptions of the latter.

The island’s first European colonizers were the Dutch, who in the mid-seventeenth century began to bring in Han settlers from China as agricultural

laborers, only to be displaced by the Qing Empire at the century's close. From 1895 to 1945, Taiwan was the most important colony of Japan, supplying its imperial overlords with important raw materials such as timber and coal. During this period, the Japanese laid train tracks into the mountains to develop the logging industry, built dams, and generally opened the natural resources of the island for economic development. After the arrival of the Chinese nationalist government in 1945, the rapid growth of industrial manufacturing further polluted the rivers. It is during this phase that a new literature of nature arose in Taiwan which was driven by concern for a disappearing nature, and stands in sharp contrast to the image of nature in traditional Chinese literature. Peter Huang's essay "Taiwanese Mountain and River Literature from a Postcolonial Perspective" focuses on this development, building largely on Ming-Yi Wu's seminal (and thus far untranslated) monograph *Taiwanese Nature Writing*. Following Wu, Huang argues that the traumatic experience of environmental destruction, and the transition from a colonial extractive economy to a neo-colonial industrial one, are central features of Taiwan's post-colonial condition. The process of Taiwanese identity formation and its relationship to ecological issues are also the subject of Shu-fen Tsai's essay, "Taiwan Is a Whale", which focuses on Wang Chia-hsiang's 2005 historical novel *Daofeng neihai* (Dao-feng Inland Sea), and of Hannes Bergthaller's "Agrarian Origin Stories, National Imaginaries, and the Ironies of Modern Environmentalism: On Chi Po-lin's *Kanjian Taiwan*."

The second section of the book, titled "Slow Violence, Creative Activism, and Environmental Movements," includes six essays which take up contemporary issues of environmental justice and activism. Robin Chen-hsing Tsai's "Toxic Objects, Slow Violence, and the Ethics of Transcorporeality in Chi Wen-Chang's *Zhebi de tiankong* (The Poisoned Sky)" addresses the hidden costs of thermal power generation as they are discussed in Chi's 2009 documentary film. Both Rose Hsiu-li Juan and Kathryn Yalan Chang focus on the 2013 novel *Fuyan ren* (The Man with the Compound Eyes) by the already mentioned Ming-yi Wu. Juan's "Imagining the Pacific Trash Vortex and the Spectacle of Environmental Disaster" analyzes the novel's take on oceanic pollution. Chang, on the other hand, interprets Wu's works from an ecofeminist perspective. Huei-chu Chu's "After the Catastrophe" considers another kind of human-made disaster: her essay examines the representation of a fictional accident in one of Taiwan's three operating nuclear plants in Egoyan Zheng's novel *Ling didian* (*Ground Zero*, also published in 2013). In "Pre-Texts for Tree-Texts, Deforestation in Taiwan, and *The Rain in the Trees*," Iris Ralph emphasizes the connections of Eastern and Western ecocritical work by bringing insights from W. S. Merwin's poetry to bear on local environmental issues. In the last essay of this section, "The Wild Hunt," Shiuuhuah Serena Chou takes up the recent trend of urban foraging.

The third section is titled "Animal Fiction, Avant-garde Art, and Posthumanist Ecoaesthetics" and extends the purview beyond literary fiction and film. The first essay in this section, Iping Liang's "What's in a Plant?," examines

Ola Pehrson's 1999 art installation "Yucca Invest Trading Plant" in the light of Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality. As the title suggests, Yu-lin Lee's "Becoming-Animal" takes Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming animal" as its theoretical starting point for his discussion of the bird novels of Kexiang Liu, one of the most prominent contemporary Taiwanese nature writers, arguing that Liu's mixture of fictional and factual elements, based on empirical observation, demonstrates his ethical concern for animals and extends the structure of the real. Dean Anthony Brink's "Aesthetic Configurations and Qualia in Environmental Consciousness in Contemporary Taiwanese Poetry and Installation Art" turns to the work of Taiwanese visual artists and poets, while Joy Shih-yi Huang's "Utopia in Theatre" analyses the recent avant-garde play "Mulian Rescues Mother Earth" (2014), which reformulates a traditional Buddhist tale (Mulian Rescues his Mother) in accordance with contemporary environmental concerns.

All in all, *Ecocriticism in Taiwan: Identity, Environment, and the Arts* demonstrates not only the vibrancy of the island's ecocritical community, but also the importance of a transnational, hybrid perspective in ecocriticism more broadly. It will be of value not only to those with an express interest in Taiwan or East Asia, but to all ecocritical scholars who recognize that we must grasp environmental issues from a global perspective if we are to understand them properly. Taiwan's political situation and geographical location make it not only unique, but also exemplary for how ecological problems are inextricably entangled with issues of modernization, indigeneity, colonialism, and cultural diversity.



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Book Review: Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 197 pp.



Although half a decade has passed since its publication, this collection of *Interviews & Cartographies* remains useful, tracing the blossoming and thickening of *New Materialism's* initial years: from continental philosophy and identity politics to the more recent posthumanist- and media and technology-focused outgrowths. In their brief introduction, two veteran new materialist scholars—Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin—note that new materialist publications have been increasing steadily over the last 15 years or so, and especially as it has become more familiar outside of continental academia (in U.K. and U.S.). This trend has, of course, continued unabated. The book's project is to map out a metaphysics for the new materialism which goes beyond the inherited materialist critiques of Marx by French Marxists such as Althusser. Their goal in doing this is to help catalyze a reorientation of all thought, rather than to add new theories of critique based on ever more categories of difference. If this sounds grandiose, their mission is to be understood less as a totalizing effort and more as a positioning of their work at the ground level, born of a desire to rebuild the basis for academic thought around a new materialist paradigm: matter both distant from and entangled in the representational aesthetics or meaning post-structuralist cultural theorists hold so dear.

As one may have discerned from their title, this volume is concerned with mapping a *cartography* of the field both with and through *interviews* with key scholars in this emergent field. These interviews are not meant to be “representative,” but are rather to serve as *sites* of material-discursive entanglement in their own right, having drawn their work from the core philosophical predecessors of new materialism, as well as being *transversally* in conversation with each other's work, and their work of other colleges and disciplines. The essays which follow these interviews provide additional conceptual explanation and extended genealogical information about the history and directions the new materialism has taken and continues to take, but I will take the lead of Dolphijn and van der Tuin's methodological and philosophical directive and focus my own review on the more creative part of the project: the interviews themselves.

This “transversal” relation between chapters mirrors the subjective and ontological emphasis of new materialism itself (14). Part of their project of

creating a book that charts a landscape that cannot be (efficiently) consumed, is to open up the possibilities of the field, rather than enclose it within finite parameters. That the essay-style chapters refer back to the interviews through both resonances and dissonances, as the interviews did among themselves, manifests the practice of what one of the interviewees, Karen Barad, calls—via Donna Haraway—“diffractive” reading, which is central to many new materialist methodologies. What is most unique about this book, therefore, is the opportunity it provides for the reader to become immersed (dare I say entangled?) in the philosophical practice of the text – with all the difficulties that come from starting *in medias res*. Akin to the Heideggerian *Dasein* which is defined by its “thrownness” (though all of these theorists depart from Heideggerian phenomenology), readers are asked to follow into what for most will be partially uncharted territories (as the book does not claim to provide new information such as a new directions of new materialism volume might, and therefore presupposes an audience less familiar to the area, though necessarily familiar enough with post-structuralist and other continental philosophical traditions). Our understanding of new terms is built up through a networking and accrual of meaning which mimics the entanglement of matter and meaning at the core of new materialist philosophies.

Dolphijn and van der Tuin’s interview of Rosi Braidotti circulates around cultivating a genealogy for a feminist brand of new materialism, which she argues is always already situated in matter, but needs to move away from a sole emphasis on critique towards a dual approach including the production of visionary alternatives and more effective critique of sexual difference, which implies loosening the hegemony of gender as a privileged paradigmatic marker. This combination of creation and critique is what, according to Braidotti, makes feminist new materialism a radical ethical response to the failures of post-structuralist and postmodernist critiques and identity politics. Braidotti closes by reminding us that while it is important to critique our situation, “creativity is unimaginable without some visionary fuel.” To create change in our present, we must therefore think the future in a way that “honours our obligations to the generations to come” (36). Though Braidotti’s work focuses on ethics and identity, she illuminates several key points about temporality that will be picked up by others—particularly Karen Barad.

Dolphijn and van der Tuin ask Manuel DeLanda how he incorporates a notion of the geologic beyond language in addressing the morphogenetic changes of the real (38). For DeLanda, it is important to underscore the existence of the material world, which seems to have been neglected by post-structuralists. In his new materialist approach, he takes this real work to be created by synthesis through historical processes of consolidation. Despite the turn away from linguistic hegemony, as they call it, this geology works as well with the accrual of linguistic or other semiotic material (39). His work strives to save new materialism from

becoming *a priori*, while simultaneously evoking and problematizing Marx, as others do as well (40), removing its anthropocentric bent, i.e. its emphasis on human labor as the only source of value (41).

DeLanda is the only interviewee who directly engages with ecology, which is, in this reviewer's opinion, the materialist process par excellence. DeLanda believes that an ecology-based philosophy can help critics move beyond the limitations of a Marxist political economy insofar as it accounts for a spectrum of values beyond the humanist focus on market value. His approach pivots on the notion of "assemblage theory" wherein "movement makes emergent wholes" that are not unified *a priori* (42), and emphasizes the irreducible social complexity of the world. Assemblages allow scholars to resist the dualisms of traditional philosophy (a core project of all iterations of new materialism), creating a new ontology which imagines non-linear forms of causality (42). Like the overlap which Braidotti introduced in the intersectional embodiment of a subject—social, symbolic, and physical—DeLanda hones in on this important site as a more accurate delineation of subjectivity. He cites that gender norms and sexual binaries overlap statistically (in what I would call the demographic version of an ecotone), and modernist dualities come from ignoring these zones of overlap and reifying the averages (45). The (Kantian) privileging of conceptually structured human experience dehistoricizes the human species which was social without language longer than with it. Stating that critique is never enough, and that we also need to offer viable alternatives, DeLanda echoes Braidotti. He calls for a Humeian subjectivity composed of sensual "intensities" "structured" by "habitual action" (46).

Karen Barad's materialist thread is termed "agential realism," which she has described as an "immanent enfolding of matter and meaning," arising out of her reading together of cultural theory and quantum physics to recuperate the material-discursive and performative nature of intra-actions (48-9). Similar to Braidotti and DeLanda, Barad says we no longer need just critique, adding it is not ethical enough. In pushing materialism beyond critique, she focuses on an implicitly linguistic or even literary dynamic—that of reading.

Returning again to temporalities, we find that Barad wants to recuperate a form of "causality" through intra-action (as opposed to interaction, which presupposes separate entities) wherein agency would be coterminous with response-ability, ability to respond, multiple because its location is not fixed (55). Responsibility does not posit a distance such as scientism asserts in its definition of objectivity. Diffractive methodology asks scholars to relate to texts neither by negating nor by affirming them, but by "intra-acting" with them, creating resonances and dissonances (57). (It is safe to say that this book can itself be regarded as an exemplary application of a diffractive methodology.) Her non-representationalist take on "sexual difference" assumes there is "desire" before the individuated subject, and hence that the subject is not *a priori* gendered because

“matter and meaning are always already immanently enfolded and transitional” (58). Furthermore, materiality is always already a “desiring dynamism,” a “reiterative reconfiguration,” “enlivening and enlivened,” and in this sense oriented towards the future (59). The “future is not what will happen” but “past and future are intra-actively reconfigured and enfolded,” “marking time through the world’s ongoing intra-activity” (56). According to Barad’s conception of causality, time is, therefore, “articulated and re-synchronized” through “various material practices” (56). She calls this emergent concept “spacetimemattering,” and asks us to replace the distance and fixity implied by the interstitial placement of objective relations with what she calls “relata,” positing an ethics of how *matter comes to matter* (68-9). Matter matters because it constitutes and mediates subjects’ ways of thinking and being in the world with regards to such idenitarian concepts as gender, race, and so on—both of the self and of perceived others.

In the final interview, Quentin Meillassoux defends what he calls “speculative materialism.” Brushing aside all forms of social constructionism, linguistic idealism, or identity politics, Meillassoux proposes that we focus on the very contingency of nature itself with/in the limitlessness of thought. His focus is on a “correlationism” that implies the foundational building bloc of reality be neither subjective nor objective but rather emerging from the “correlate of subject-object” within which the subject, in contradistinction to Kant, does not possess an existence *a priori* to the world of objects it apprehends (72). In a break with many of his fellow new materialists—a fact underscored by the interview subjects included here—Meillassoux asserts that Deleuze cannot be considered truly materialist because he accords “absolute primacy” to the “unseparated.” In isolating or absolutizing “Life,” Deleuze makes the subject radically independent of the human or individual way of relating to the world (73). In essence, Meillassoux believes that Deleuze advocates a sort of universalism which, although it foregrounds entanglement, reduces the possibility of multiplicity, and therefore undercuts the mathematical enumeration of entanglements which his own notion of correlates as the core of a speculative materialism allows for and even invites. Subjectivity is defined in two competing discourses which contribute to the correlate of speculative materialism: for correlationists, being is thinkable, and for subjectivists being is ontological existence (73).

A correlationist new materialism is a “materialism [wherein] Being is separate and independent of thought [and] Thought can think Being [for] non-thinking actually precedes, or at least may in right precede thought, and exists outside of it” (79). Though it seems paradoxical, it is only in the paradoxical correlation of opposites that Meillassoux feels we can move beyond the strictures placed on us by modernity—a move towards which many theories strive but which all, according to him, have failed to achieve. He chooses instead to develop a “vectorial subject” through the “virtuality” of “Superchaos,” as opposed to the “potentiality” of the “determined world” (80). Expanding his notion of the

contingency of nature to subjects (in a way resembling DeLanda's finite assemblages), he concludes that while nature seems to care about Life, inorganic matter, which is part of our world, does not, so "matter is not identifiable with 'nature'"; rather, it is "a primordial ontological order: it is the fact that there must be something and not nothing—contingent beings as such" (81).

It may already have become apparent that a common denominator of the different versions of new materialism discussed in this book is heightened concern with ethics, counteracting what the authors feel has been lost in the abstractions of a late capitalist, critique-oriented version of Marxist materialism. I would say that this is the primary draw of this book, for scholars feeling disheartened by their lack of efficacy as activists and public intellectuals, and for students who despair over the impossibility of positive change and an ethical existence in this world. If we can situate ourselves in this new materialist landscape—and this invitation is extended to all disciplines and theoretical persuasions—there is hope for real change to be wrought. This seems to offer an effective answer to Hardt and Negri's warning that poststructuralism and the identity politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's opening decade were actually playing right into the hands of capital—reinforcing structures of oppression *through* critique, not in spite of it.

Since this volume has been made available, scholars from across a wide variety of fields have taken up the mantle of new materialism. A thoroughly interdisciplinary endeavor, recent new materialist work emerges at the nexus of such once disparate discourses as politics, art, sociology, new media, economics, technology, medicine, literature, philosophy, and ecology. Especially within the emergent field of the environmental humanities, new materialist approaches are in the ascendancy, signaled by the work of scholars such as Jeffrey Cohen, Stephanie LeMenager, Stacy Alaimo, Serpil Opperman, Serenella Iovino, or Claire Colebrook, who, each in their own way, have continued Braidotti and Barad's work on feminist new materialism. What this volume offers is an exceptionally stimulating synopsis of the philosophical, ethical, and political concerns which set this remarkable development into motion, presented in a dialogic, "call and response" form which, although the interview continues to be ranked below the monograph or the scholarly essay, is uniquely suited to the style of thought which the new materialists wish to advance. It will surely remain a touchstone for new materialist scholarship.



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Book Review: Catrin Gersdorf and Juliane Braun, eds., *America after Nature: Democracy, Culture, Environment* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016), 485 pp.



Catrin Gersdorf and Juliane Braun's edited collection *America After Nature: Democracy, Culture, Environment* is a welcome addition to the present conversations within American studies and the environmental humanities. While Anglophone literature still seems to lead discussions within ecocriticism generally, and while the focus of this collection is on contemporary American cultural developments, this wide-ranging anthology contains a number of strong essays by international contributors. The collection is the product of the sixty-first Annual Conference of the German Association for American Studies which took place in Würzburg in 2014. Ambitious, competent, and comprehensive, *America After Nature* will appeal to those working in interdisciplinary American studies in a broad sense, and especially those interested in the places where American culture and issues of the environment meet, overlap, or converge.

In the introduction to the book, Gersdorf and Braun highlight the end of the Cold War as an essential catalyst for ensuing democratic processes, and for opening up discussion of environmental change. Drawing on the transcendental legacy of Emerson and Thoreau, the editors emphasize early American connections to the potentials and power of culture and art to project environmentalist understandings. The key questions the collection is concerned with are the state of American culture now, with the present understanding of environmental crisis, and what happens to American identity when the material reality of the present ecological predicament becomes clear. Gersdorf and Braun discuss the ways in which late twentieth-century culture "de-emphasized the significance of nature . . . as a liberatory instrument," and instead saw nature as a concept to legitimize "the ideologies of racism and sexism" (16). This is a point of contention, and I wonder why the significant environmental contributions of underground agents of cultural resistance such as the Beat Generation are not discussed. While Allen Ginsberg's coining of the term "flower power" may seem a mere historical footnote, it also helped establish the nature-underground resistance of late twentieth-century American culture, a legacy that continues to this day. Moreover, acknowledgement of the many simultaneous and contradictory developments in the context of cultural developments and environmental thinking would have been welcome. In other words, perhaps the development of American cultural and environmental

thinking is not nearly as linear as the introduction to this collection might suggest. Having said that, the structure of the book is logical and the presentation is excellent throughout.

The volume is divided into thematic sections. The introduction provides background and rationale for the publication of the book. This is followed by a section of papers from the conference keynote speakers. The subsequent sections are concerned with the politics of nature, ecology and urban environments, and visualizing nature. The final part discusses lasting questions in the environmental humanities, including the concepts of risk culture, posthumanist considerations, as well as the links between digital cultures and ecological discourse. While each of the sections is distinct in scope and focus, taken together, they provide an effective overview of the state of environmental discourse in contemporary American culture. While there is not enough space to go into every essay included in the collection here, discussion of a few notable papers should help establish the scope and success of the collection.

The section comprising the keynote lectures was for me was the strongest of the collection, and invites the reader to consider intriguing questions about culture and climate change today. Frank Zelko's "Natural Wonders: Ecological Enchantment in a Secular Age" starts by engaging with the idea of enchantment, and more specifically the common notion that the contemporary world is somehow disenchanted. He discusses recent scholarship on re-enchantment and the ways it centers on "the disenchantment narrative as a soul-searching, at times alarmist discourse" (32). He argues that people have a psychological need for enchantment. His essay delves into historical and philosophical discussions, and closes by suggesting that "disenchanted enchantment" may be a helpful way to think about the modern period (56). John Meyer's "Denialism versus the Resonance Dilemma in the US" responds to the crucial question: "What is the key obstacle to action on climate change and promoting sustainability?" (65) Denialism, and more specifically what he calls the "resonance dilemma," is a promising way to think about the reasons the profound questions raised by climate change remain largely unanswered (69). He ends by suggesting that it is necessary to consider not only the logic of denialism but more importantly the resonance dilemma. Julie Sze's "Environmental Justice and Environmental Humanities in the Anthropocene" argues that culture offers an intriguing window into the "lack of understanding for the most oppressed and disenfranchised" (83; her emphasis). Her paper poses intriguing questions about the form and function of art in an age of unprecedented climate change. She argues that one of the most effective means of combating climate change through art is the refusal to be silent (94): if we speak up, and if we speak loudly enough, society will have to respond. Sylvia Mayer's "Risk Narratives: Climate Change, the American Novel, and the World Risk Society" focuses on what she sees as the largely neglected area of risk theory and its implications for the study of fictional texts. She carries out literary

analyses of what she calls “risk narratives,” drawing on Beck’s concept of the “risk society.” Mayer says that risk narratives “make the risk of climate change more tangible” (108), and therefore offer a didactic response to climate change. She further adds that the focus of risk narratives on future settings allows risk narratives to address the sticky representational challenges of climate change by offering alternative futures to our own situation. She ends by suggesting that discourse on risk narratives problematizes the nature/culture divide.

Beyond the keynote papers, *America after Nature* includes a number of other strong papers. Sascha Pöhlmann’s “Walt Whitman’s Politics of Nature and the Poetic Performance of the Future in ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’” endeavors to answer the question: “How does the translation of principles of nature into political and social concepts work (121)?” He suggests that the answer is that Whitman “made utopian political claims based on a consideration of nature” (121). While this general line of argument is not new, Pöhlmann’s reading of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is. He believes Whitman’s “temporal politics” (138) provides a future orientation that allows for writing to dodge the contradictions of “progress and plenitude” and “manifest destiny or imperialism” (139). Therefore Pöhlmann offers a fresh perspective on the ecological potentials of Whitman’s poetry. Frank Mehring’s essay “Visualizing and Sounding the ‘Walden State of Mind.’ The Urban Matrix in Henry David Thoreau’s Environmental Imagination” also warrants special mention. Mehring asks what city dwellers today can learn from *Walden*, linking Thoreau to the writings of John Cage, which venture “into the sounding of nature” (280). Provocatively, he argues that the “Walden state of mind” should be seen as part of a long urban tradition. Heike Schäfer’s “Nature, Media Culture, and the Transcendentalist Quest for the Real” contemplates the idea of the “transcendentalist conception of nature as emblematic text” (312) before discussing the ways in which photography more specifically helped shape the transcendentalist poetics of both Emerson and Whitman. She concludes by suggesting that both writers recognized the unique potentials of photography, and more specifically the “capacity to record optical reality without distortion,” though Emerson later focused his energies on “a philosophy and poetics of process” (328). However, the development of photography “provided both writers with a terminology and material model that allowed them to theorize processes of perception and signification” (328). Schäfer’s argument that transcendentalist conceptions of nature must be viewed in the context of the contemporaneous emergence of new media is both imaginative and illuminating.

While I fully endorse this book, I do have some minor reservations. For one thing, the title of the collection suggests that democracy is a predominant concern. However, apart from the introduction and a handful of the following essays, there is little in the way of a sustained discussion of the interplay between democracy, nature, and environmental justice. Speaking of justice and the unequal distribution of resources: priced at a hefty €66, the volume appears unlikely to find the wide

readership it deserves. At a time of crisis in the humanities, when library budgets are shrinking almost everywhere, shouldn't ecocritics embrace open access models of academic publishing? Despite these concerns, I find *America after Nature* to be a worthy contribution to the contemporary debate surrounding American culture and environmental change.

## **Mission Statement**

*Ecozon@* is a journal devoted to the relatively new field of literary and cultural criticism called ecocriticism. Ecocriticism can be broadly defined as the study of the representations of nature in cultural texts, and of the relationship between humans with other earth beings and their environment as seen in cultural manifestations. *Ecozon@* is one of the very few academic journals specifically devoted to ecocriticism, an exponentially growing field, akin to the more recently developing area of environmental humanities, and the only one to accept submissions in several languages.

Its principal aim is to further the study, knowledge and public awareness of the connections and relationship between literature, culture and the environment. As a virtual space, it provides a site for dialogue between researchers, theorists, creative writers and artists concerned with and by the environment and its degradation. Its pages are open to contributions on all literatures and cultures, but its special mission is to reflect the cultural, linguistic and natural richness and diversity of the European continent.

Research contributions are subject to double-blind peer review, and are accepted in five languages (English, Spanish, French, German and Italian), in order to increase visibility and broaden the participation of scholars who are not part of the English-speaking world. *Ecozon@*, in addition to publishing original research articles, also publishes creative writing, visual arts and book reviews which are reviewed by the editorial board. Publication is open to scholars and creators interested in ecocriticism from around the world. We recommend membership of EASLCE to our contributors and readers, but it is not a requirement for either.

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