

New Worlds Collide: Science Fiction's *Novela de la Selva* in Gioconda Belli and Santiago Páez

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As the first scene opens in director Fred Wilcox's 1956 sci-fi classic, *Forbidden Planet*, Commander J.J. Adams and his crew have just completed a two-year, light-speed voyage through deep space. Peering through their spaceship's viewing screen, Adams and his lieutenant stand awestruck at the first sight of the land they were seeking—a blue and peaceful-looking planet called Altair IV. “Lord sure makes some beautiful worlds,” the lieutenant says. Indeed, Altair IV is as Edenic and nearly-deserted as Shakespeare's fantastic isle in *The Tempest*, inhabited only by a shipwrecked professor, his beautiful daughter, their androgynous servant (Ariel here replaced by Robby the Robot), and what appears to be a ferocious monster indigenous to the planet. Although it might seem comically irreverent for Shakespeare to feature as source material for one of the American movie industry's first smash-hit sci-fi thrillers, science fiction has long drawn influence from various narrative traditions of New World discovery. Altair IV is merely one among science fiction's uncountable plurality of strange New Worlds. As critic Miguel López-Lozano has noted, science fiction like that of the 1950s American pulp genre invokes the “modern literary utopia that envisioned the New World as the earthly paradise,” much as Shakespeare did when he borrowed elements from those same travel narratives in constructing his fantastic island (López-Lozano 2).

In this essay I will look at two Spanish American works that situate themselves critically within these travel narrative traditions of exploration and encounter in the New World: “Uriel” (2006), a novella by Ecuadorian Santiago Páez, and *Waslala* (1996), by Nicaraguan novelist Gioconda Belli. The particular science fiction form adopted by Páez and Belli—a form that so often spins tales of exploration and conquest in distant reaches of the galaxy—draws the rudiments of its literary structure from early colonial travel narratives. It not only bears strong traces of what Mary Louise Pratt terms the “rhetoric of discovery,” but also employs narrative structures and tropes directly or indirectly inherited from these colonial chronicles (Pratt 148). However, this particular science fiction form has been associated largely with the United States, and demonstrates either critical or complacent awareness of its enunciation by a nation which has historically invoked and triumphantly repeated colonial travel narratives in the construction of national imaginaries. In Central and South America, conversely, the *novela de la selva*—the other clear structural source for Páez and Belli, and a literary form equally indebted to early *crónicas*—remains conscious of its enunciation as a postcolonial form critical of its colonial narrative sources. While the *novela de la selva*, then, shares a literary taproot with sci-fi narratives of futuristic exploration, it maintains

its postcolonial critique in "Uriel" and *Waslala* by remaining just as critical of science fiction's own ties to colonial discourse. The purpose of this essay is to examine the effect when these two forms collide. I argue here that in recreating the *novela de la selva* within narratives of science fiction, Páez and Belli utilize the science fiction genre to update and reactivate the *novella de la selva's* critique of an imperialist legacy by exploiting tensions that arise between these two disparate literary forms whose central tropes nevertheless so often coincide.

As with any genre, both the *novela de la selva* and science fiction, taken as generic entities, are constituted not through a set formula but rather an agglomeration of commonly repeated elements. Among those tropes common to both forms are the moment of encounter with the alien "other" whose humanity, inhumanity, or post-humanity exists in counterpoint to that of the encountering subject; an effort toward expansion of official national territory; a focus on technological progress; and the invocation of blank spaces on the map subsequently to be explored and mapped once more. This essay, however, focuses primarily on two other tropes that are nevertheless related: the activation of the hypothetical through the trope of time travel, and an attendant destabilization of conceptions of barbarism in colonial narratives of New World exploration.

Ultimately, I argue that these works not only denounce neo-imperialist political and ecological exploitation, but also critique its implication in science fiction's uses of New World encounter narratives. By adapting the ecologically aware New World imaginary peculiar to the *novela de la selva*, in which positivist ambitions of national expansion are checked by a forest that nevertheless becomes part of a national imaginary, Páez and Belli fundamentally alter the New World imaginary that underwrites science fiction narratives of exploration and expansion. While I place emphasis on selected ways in which the science fiction and *novela de la selva* genres adapt narratives of encounter between Europe and the Americas, I focus primarily on the encounter between disparate "New World" narratives. This is what happens when New Worlds collide.

Beyond the Speculative

As "Uriel" opens, Ferrán Puigvalls and Joaquim Carneiro, two officials from the High Command of Transnational Security, look down at the shadow their space station casts on the Earth. They are discussing the fate of a ruined country once called Ecuador. Now owned by a handful of transnational corporations, the world has decided to use this small South American territory as a testing ground for its latest technology. As a political and economic entity, Ecuador does not figure into this distant future.

"Uriel," the fourth and final novella in the collection *Crónicas del breve reino*, is the most recent of Páez's various excursions into science fiction. As Pascale Casanova argues in her often cited (and widely translated) *World Republic of Letters*, literary publication, sales, translation, and sheer availability operate according to their own

system of literary capital, and as such it comes as little surprise that the Spanish science fiction of Santiago Páez remains virtually unknown outside of his native Ecuador. That his work retains a consciousness of this is painfully clear, as he places his own narrative at the margins of science fiction's celebrated spaces. Nevertheless, in his attention to the genre he joins at least one widely published fellow Ecuadorian, Alicia Yanez Cossio, as well as a number of others from the Andean region, perhaps the most well known of them being the Bolivian Edmundo Paz Soldán.

If "Uriel" can be classified as science fiction, it also invokes a literary tradition in which Ecuador has figured prominently—that of the *novela de la selva*. Juan León Mera's *Cumandá*, published in 1879, was among the first and most influential examples of the genre. Like most examples of the *novela de la selva* that followed it, *Cumandá* tracks a band of travelers through the Amazon region in their ultimately fateful quest to reassert the nation's boundaries and its industrial interests in a wildly unwelcoming and untamed jungle. Although the narrative of "Uriel" is set among the mountains of Quito, Páez allows the ecology and political history of various other regions of the country—namely, the Amazonian forests—to figure in the work. When "Uriel" was first published in 2006 as one novella among four others in the collection *Crónicas del breve reino*, Ecuador already had waited thirteen years in a still-ongoing legal battle with foreign oil companies over extensive environmental damage in the Amazon river basin. Taking this catastrophe as a point of departure, Páez posits an Ecuador in which petroleum finally has run out, leaving the land useful only as a testing site for the development of potentially hazardous technologies. Like many of the first *novelas de la selva*, "Uriel" combines criticism of a nationalist industrial project with one of foreign incursion. The novella's small band of travelers, including the strapping young eponymous hero, journey into the Ecuadorian wilds on a quest to destroy the North American Waslain Esterhazy, whose corporation has been culling the local Ecuadorian population in search of test subjects. As with many examples of the *novela de la selva*, the landscape in "Uriel" functions as a protagonist, leaving the characters themselves as a sort of narrative backdrop, a pretense for navigating the surroundings. The ruined city of Quito becomes more dynamic, pathetic, and detailed than most of the men and women who populate the book.

In Gioconda Belli's *Waslala*, tropical expanses of the Central American forest occupy a similarly central position in the narrative. *Waslala's* young protagonist, Melisandra, leaves her grandfather's home to set off downriver into the undeveloped jungle, searching for the lost utopian commune from which her parents have never returned. As a work centrally concerned with issues of utopia, ecology, and gender, *Waslala* joins a growing body of ecofeminist fiction. Belli, a Nicaraguan author of Northern Italian descent, joins writers like Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia Butler, whose utopian and dystopian fiction stands among the most widely known examples of ecofeminism. *Waslala* is Belli's third novel, published well after she had gained renown at home and abroad as a controversial figure. With the publication in 1972 of her first collection of poetry, *Sobre la grama*, Belli provoked scandal within Nicaragua on account

of the book's open and celebratory treatment of women's sexuality, and in 1975 she was exiled to Mexico for her participation in the Sandinista struggle against the Somoza regime. Nevertheless, Belli also has drawn criticism within various feminist circles for her treatment of women's sexuality. Patricia Murray, for example, in *Knives and Angels: Women Writers in Latin America*, accuses Belli's poetry of following male heterosexual desire. As a work of ecofeminist fiction, *Waslala* remains equally problematic but nevertheless critical in its treatment of utopian discourse. This essay will return to Belli's treatment of gender, but focuses primarily on the way in which *Waslala* parodies and appropriates tropes from narratives of New World discovery, critiquing the particular travel narrative structure so often adopted by science fiction works like *Forbidden Planet*.

Soon after Melisandra's search for the utopic Waslala gets under way, Filemón, one of the oarsmen working to row the company upriver, entertains them with a story he claims to be a first-hand account. Shipwrecked and thrown onto an island in the river, he says, he found himself face-to-face with a man dressed in white leggings, a wide cummerbund, and a hat shaped like an upside-down ship. He demands that the man identify himself:

"'First Viscount Horatio Nelson, Baron of the Nile and Burnham-Thorpe, admiral of the British Royal Navy,' he told me."

"'With a name like that, I don't see what business you have sulking around here so far from home,' I told him."

"'Only as far as my soul permits me. You, poor fool, would surely be ignorant of my works. [...] In death I've had to hide myself here from that aristocratic midget. Imagine (. . .) him following me, century after century,' the ghost said, fuming." (79)¹

Filemón says he has come across the ghost of none other than Horatio Nelson, whose death in the battle with Napoleon at Trafalgar in 1805 won him status as an English military hero. Here, however, he is evoked not as a celebrated historical figure but as merely one among legions of foreign privateers to have passed imperiously through Central America. The specter of this English military icon, who spearheaded British economic interests in Central America, now haunts the landscape he helped to colonize. While the novel treats the colonial moment of Columbus as one that is past, it suggests that its legacy remains in ongoing imperialist incursion. More subtly, the novel also points toward the currency of imperialism in narrative circulation. After all, while Filemón presents his encounter with Nelson as testimony, he also tells it as a ghost story

¹ All translations from Spanish are mine. "—Primer Vizconde Horacio Nelson, Barón del Nilo y de Burhnam-Thorpe, almirante de la Marina Real británica —me dijo."

"—Con un nombre así, no veo qué anda usted haciendo por aquí tan lejos de su tierra —le dije yo."

"—Tan lejos como el alma me lo permite. Usted, pobre ignorante, no sabrá nada de mis hazañas. [...] Ya muerto me ha tocado tener que esconderme aquí de ese enano con ínfulas. Imagínese (. . .) perseguirme a mí, siglo tras siglo—me dijo el fantasma, colérico."

to entertain his companions. Like Belli herself, Filemón plays with the conventions of narratives of colonial encounter, placing himself on the other side of a restaged an encounter between colonizer and colonized.

In *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, John Rieder identifies what he calls a critical reversal of the colonial situation, whereby the prevalent schemas of colonizer and colonized, or civilization and barbarism, are turned on their heads. By way of example, he cites H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, in which imperial Victorian England is invaded by a technologically superior alien species. The futuristic work of Páez and Belli, however, instead of similarly exploiting science fiction's trope of the hypothetical in order to reverse a perceived status quo, extrapolates and exaggerates the sordid state of things. In "Uriel," an Ecuador once unstable and suffering at the hands of foreign corporate incursion has stepped into its own nightmare. Its capital city is little more than a landfill and its national government a forgotten joke. Adopting the *novela de la selva's* delineation of center and periphery, both *Waslala* and "Uriel" create a future in which South and Central American nations, now economically reduced to nonfunctioning entities and politically not even placed on the map, become the stripmines and garbage dumps of stronger economies. As in the *novela de la selva*, tension between developed and underdeveloped regions remains a central narrative technique and means of criticism. Central and South America here have become mere curiosities, points of extraction for material resources and narcotics. For example, as Scott DeVries argues, *Waslala* presents a vision of "environmental neo-imperialist anti-development," whereby globally mandated conservation of the Central American *selva* forces this region into a role as oxygen-producing nations (DeVries 44). In turn, the distant world of technology and progress sends its "deshechos:" broken-down automobiles, outdated electronics, and antiquated firearms still capable of killing.

In both *Waslala* and "Uriel," neoliberal exploitation reaches its limits—the total erasure of the nations in question. It is not just a single, but a double, erasure. *Waslala*, for example, creates the fictional Faguas, which corresponds in its history and geography with Gioconda Belli's native Nicaragua. Within a narrative that allows the continued existence of historically imperial nations such as England, Nicaragua simply does not exist. Similarly, the Ecuador of "Uriel" is described by the novella's authorial voice as a fictional country—one that does not exist, and never has. Within their respective narratives, Ecuador and Faguas suffer additional erasure as political entities. Faguas is not to be found on any map, and the only glimpse allowed of Ecuador's head of state reveals an overweight man passed out in his own vomit. The first iterations of the *novela de la selva*, contextualized historically by a gradual end to the Amazonian rubber boom, posit the South American state's failure to expand productively into the forest while simultaneously attempting to reaffirm the integrity of its national boundaries against foreign incursion. "Uriel" and *Waslala* extrapolate that failure toward total political implosion.

If Fredric Jameson, in *Archaeologies of the Future*, can posit a "Utopian formalism" whereby it is not primarily "the social and historical raw materials of the Utopian

construct" which become important but rather "the representational relations established between them," Belli and Páez make that gesture of withholding direct referentiality as conspicuous as possible, forming it into the nucleus of their own literary dystopias (Jameson xiii). Like Jameson, these authors emphasize the politically charged nature (both historically and formally) of sci-fi's narrative materials, here drawing attention to their *abstention* from what Jameson identifies as Utopia's "historical and collective wish-fulfillment" (Jameson xiii). In *Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe*, Mary Baine Campbell shows the importance of palimpsest in colonial travel narratives as the colonizer seeks to conjure up blank spaces on the map. Páez and Belli pick up on this travel narrative trope to reveal that if there is in fact a narrative wish-fulfillment in the creation of the cartographical blanks of Faguas and Ecuador, it is imposed from without.

"Uriel" and *Waslala*, showing the dark side of the free market's fantasy, posit a further distancing of those who have and those who have not. Importantly, though, this is not simply "speculative fiction;" it is a self-conscious critique of its own narrative sources. While *Waslala* and "Uriel" adopt the formulaic sci-fi premise of a coupled technological and temporal leap forward, they do so in order to cast the value of that progress in doubt. The science fiction dream of space stations and bionic body parts becomes complicit with the imperial impulse to dominate and exploit. In "Uriel," the *novela de la selva's* failed rubber trade is replaced by a depletion of petroleum reserves, condemning Ecuador to a status as an "un-integrated Zone," a forgotten swath of wasteland on the periphery. After its first few pages, the narrative descends from a space station, lands in the ruins of Quito, and stays there. Fantastic tales of interstellar travel are referenced, but are replaced by an overland trek by foot through a broken city and the dense foliage slowly overtaking it. The high-powered world of technology remains as distant for the majority of the narrative as it is for the Ecuadorian future it imagines. Like Belli's Faguas, Páez's Ecuador remains caught between the *novela de la selva's* time travel backward to the Conquest, and science fiction's time travel forward, trapped in "tiempo estancado"—stagnant time, as Belli writes (102).

This temporal limbo in *Waslala* and "Uriel" is a projection of an ambivalence already inscribed into the *novela de la selva*. As Jorge Marccone points out, the *novela de la selva* presents a temporally charged return to the natural simultaneous with a desire for state-driven modernization. In Páez's Ecuador and Belli's Faguas, modernization becomes not a project stalled but rather one that has turned against these territories as it advances, forcing them backward even as the narrative projects them forward into the future. If George Handley, citing the "nostalgia for terrestrial paradises" typical of imperialist discourses, points to the way in which such discourses construct their encountered natural spaces as either "prior to [or] after human history," Páez and Belli parodically bring both extremes together (Handley 202). Faguas and Ecuador present post-apocalyptic spaces that simultaneously invoke the pre-lapsarian rhetoric of New World discovery.

Civilization and Barbarism

Faguas and Ecuador, perched at the periphery of worlds defined by their centers, have been erased. In their place the jungle creeps in. "Uriel," for example, plays with the trope of the untamed jungle. Not only does it bring the Amazon into the mountainous surroundings of a ruined Quito, populating it with wolves, ocelots and pumas, but it carries the forest wilderness to extremes inconceivable in the original iterations of the *novela de la selva*. If the landscape of Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* and José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine* was strange and alien, then the jungle regions of this temporally distant Earth are doubly strange. In *Waslala* the wild forest surroundings of Faguas are equally hyperbolic in their constructed wild brutality, traced with a blood-red stretch of river, violent rapids that threaten to swallow men whole and, in a trope previously repeated in *La vorágine*, even a whirlpool reminiscent of the *Odyssey's* Charybdis. Páez and Belli utilize hyperbole in much the same way that Lesley Wylie finds it employed in Eustasio Rivera and Carpentier, terrible yet steeped in "oxymoronic delight" (Wylie 107). As Wylie argues in her essay, "Hearts of Darkness: The Celebration of Otherness in the Latin American *Novela de la Selva*," this comes as both a parody and an appropriation of the colonial travel narrative's construction of the forest's voracious and violent nature.

But Wylie's analysis of the *novela de la selva* as a postcolonial form that parodies and appropriates colonial discourse must be qualified. Wylie portrays the *novela de la selva* as a genre that criticizes both European colonial discourse and United States imperialism, but she does not indicate any clear difference between the two types of critique. In *Waslala* and "Uriel," this distinction—drawn, for example, by Jürgen Osterhammel in *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*—becomes important in the adaptation of narrative forms. According to Osterhammel, the early stages of European expansion represent colonialism without imperialism. Imperialism, by contrast, is in his view necessarily global and transcolonial in scope, no longer concerned with "the virtues of rightful acquisition, permanence, and responsibility" toward those "entrusted" to the colonizing power (Osterhammel 22). While the historical *novela de la selva* took an anti-imperialist stance in denouncing the transnational capitalist exploitation of natural resources, the genre's proposed alternative was its own version of nationalist colonialism. That is, it invoked colonialist narratives in the expansion and fortification of national boundaries, and did so in the name of asserting sovereignty against foreign incursion.

In the current climate of environmental politics in the Amazon region, "anti-colonial" and "anti-imperialist" stances are claimed by opposing factions. Anti-colonial activists advocate for state control of natural resources and industrial extraction; anti-imperialists oppose both domestic and foreign privatization of resources and unsustainable extraction. Páez and Belli fall firmly within this second category. While the first *novelas de la selva* criticized narrative tropes of colonial travel, *Waslala* and "Uriel" critique the use of these tropes in science fiction, associating the genre with the

distant, economic exploitation of present-day imperialism. The formal techniques of parody and hyperbole that Wylie discusses as critique of colonial tropes are redirected toward the imperialist discourse that so often shapes science fiction narratives of exploration and encounter.

In "Uriel" and *Waslala*, Páez and Belli replace the untouched, "savage" wilderness of the *novela de la selva* with a post-development *selva* that has become even more vicious. As if attempting to counterbalance their chronological leap forward, *Waslala* and "Uriel" replace contemporary social geography with a hyperbolically alien jungle of the sort generally reserved for imaginative recreations of the prehistoric. What Wylie describes as a landscape that parodies colonial discourse here becomes a pointed appropriation of what Páez and Belli characterize as an imperialist rhetoric--a binary opposition between civilization and a backward, degenerative barbarism.

Earl E. Fitz, in *Rediscovering the New World*, claims that such a binary opposition between the civilized and the barbaric figures among New World literature's most recurrent themes, and he highlights it in the work of authors ranging from Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Euclides da Cunha to Margaret Atwood and William Faulkner.² Both Páez and Belli, true to the *novela de la selva* form, reclaim barbarism as a structuring trope. However, they do so by first holding that rhetoric at a distance. Toward the beginning of "Uriel," for example, a mid-level official with the High Command of Transnational Security bemoans the failure of Sarmiento's vision of civilization in the region: "Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, a forgotten Argentine essayist who hoped that civilization--in our countries--would triumph over barbarism: he was wrong, we all were wrong; it was not reason, but rather blind nature, that triumphed" (387).³ This perspective exacerbates Sarmiento's vision of barbarism as a degenerative force. Developing nations degrade into post-development wasteland. Sarmiento saw foreign influence as the path to civilization, but Páez and Belli turn that vision on its head: the supposedly civilizing force becomes purely extractive rather than constructive.

In its critique of Sarmiento's binary, Páez's and Belli's treatment of the *selva* bears resemblance to the "environmental double consciousness" that Rob Nixon, in "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism," uses to describe his coined "postcolonial pastoral" (Nixon 239). For Nixon, the postcolonial pastoral breaks the closed confines of the English garden with an awareness of what its caretakers ignore: that such a garden is made possible by human and environmental exploitation in overseas colonies. Páez and Belli, in turn, inhabit and rupture the colonial vision of the *selva*, both in its original iterations and as it was adapted by Sarmiento in the 19th century. Exaggerating the degenerative force that Sarmiento describes, they dial the clock back even further to present the hyperbolized antipode of the pastoral--the untamed tract of jungle as its first European colonizers conceived of it. Through the science fiction medium, they confront

² For an in-depth discussion, see Fitz's chapter, "The Conflict between Civilization and Barbarism."

³ "Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, un olvidado ensayista argentino quien esperaba que la civilización--en nuestros países--se impusiera sobre la barbarie: se equivocó, todos se equivocaron; no fue la razón, sino la ciega naturaleza la que triunfó."

the colonial travel narrative with an exaggeration of its own vision of the untamed forest.

In a novelistic universe threatened at every point and on every planet by mechanization, effective resistance emanates only from ruined cities buried in impenetrable forests. The *selva* is the point at which the tools of progress break down. Cutting-edge technological weaponry, useless in the jungle setting, is tossed aside in favor of the same machete wielded in works by Alejo Carpentier, Rómulo Gallegos, and Horacio Quiroga. At the end of "Uriel," after the characters have completed their trek through the overgrown remnants of Quito, they find Esterhazy's machine and destroy it not with high-tech weaponry, but with an antique axe they have found in the ruins of a museum, destabilizing a teleology of progress and progression. Technological society watches its dream darken as its emissary in Ecuador, the North American Esterhazy, merges with his fantastic machine, distended into a grayed, decaying caricature whose comic-book scheme is to rule the continent. The vanguard of supposed civilization is carried by monstrosities previously unimaginable, and against this is set an untamable expanse of tropical *desierto*. "Uriel," through an Ecuador erased from all official maps, annuls, reclaims and resituates the trope of the forest's barbarous force, just as the *novela de la selva* once did. To disappear from the map finally becomes a position of empowerment rather than helpless erasure.

By unsettling binaries of civilization and barbarism while allowing their traditional temporalities to collide, "Uriel" also works to ensure that this narrative space refuses to fit neatly into science fiction's distinction of utopia and dystopia. "Uriel" critiques the traditional narrative codes from which this opposition derives. The *novelas de la selva* of Rivera and Quiroga depicted a landscape that resisted its modern industrial understanding as a passive source for raw materials. But "Uriel" also points toward the complicity of this exploitative imaginary with earlier dreams of the New World as a sentient and beneficent landscape. The colonial tales of encounter that prove a narrative source for both the *novela de la selva* and for much science fiction were among the first texts to cast the New World as a living garden of Eden. As Miguel López-Lozano argues in *Utopian Dreams, Apocalyptic Nightmares: Globalization in Recent Mexican and Chicano Narrative*, the epistemological frameworks of European Enlightenment "replaced the view of the world as an organic being with the image of the earth functioning like a machine" (López-Lozano 16), but "Uriel," like *Waslala*, foregrounds how both of these discourses dangerously cohere. As demonstrated so often by the science fiction genre that "Uriel" critiques, the construction of the New World as nurturing mother and as passive material to be exploited are not mutually exclusive. Even dystopian science fiction, when it opposes an innocent natural sphere to functionalist industrialism, tends toward a reductionism that ends up being equally exploitative of the spaces and people conceived of as outside modernity, just as *Forbidden Planet* was quick to create a natural space both pristine and ready for extraction.

The Ecuador of "Uriel," by the end of the novella, is neither a pastoral nor a passive industrial hinterland. Andreas Huyssen has argued against what he calls a

“discourse of the end of utopia,” claiming that the utopian project has not ended but has merely shifted its look forward to a look backward (Huysen 92). “Uriel” suggests that these conflicting utopian imaginaries have long coexisted, even as they have claimed to be mutually exclusive. In “Uriel” the narrative begins at the moment in which these utopian constructs lose their renewal as myth. Here, a telluric landscape races both forward and backward in time while the city loses its privilege as the site of futurity. By combining a science fiction framework with the *novela de la selva*'s conception of the natural, which itself first emerged in response to national industrial expansion projects, “Uriel” aims to question the conception of the natural-as-Edenic as employed in utopian and dystopian fiction alike.

In *Waslala*, the protagonists similarly come to own and occupy a resituated barbarism opposed to an oppressive and distant civilization. But if Páez's novella exaggerates the violence of the telluric, *Waslala* romanticizes it in problematic ways. Like previous literature termed ecofeminist, *Waslala* highlights an essentializing tendency to align women with the natural, though at times the novel falls short in its critique. Expanding the *novela de la selva*'s parody of colonial discovery narratives, *Waslala* hyperbolizes the misogynistic and essentializing rhetoric adopted by proponents of 19th century industrial expansion into the Amazon, but the narrative achieves mixed results in its sporadic attempts to reclaim a binarized rhetoric of barbarism and civilization as empowering. For example, both Melisandra and Engracia, the two female protagonists of the novel, are constantly described as *amazonas*, wild fantastical beings bred by the forest itself. The novel frequently draws parallels between the jungle's refusal to be tamed and Melisandra's femininity, constructing the untamed as uncomplicatedly sensual and free. Toward the end of the novel, Melisandra catches a glimpse of two volcanoes rising above the forest and likens them to “two gigantic breasts” (114).

Most problematic in *Waslala*'s parody and appropriation of colonial discourse is its treatment—or, more often, its elision—of the indigenous presence as a component of an essentialist rhetoric of nature. Like the first *novelas de la selva*, Belli's work follows explicitly non-indigenous protagonists, but its geography and narrative center around indigeneity. When Melisandra's grandfather attempts to return to the *Waslala* he left, he finds only the local official, an old farmer, who originally apportioned land to the utopian commune. Though the old man has never belonged to the community, it is his mythology that is used to describe the way in which the *ceibos*, or cockspur coral trees, function to anchor *Waslala* in the physical terrain: “In their mythology, which comes from Mayan and Aztec roots, the cockspur coral tree is sacred, the tree that supports the world; if the cockspur coral disappears, the world disappears with it” (57-58).⁴ Melisandra and her fellow travelers are all explicitly described as non-indigenous, and yet they root their utopia in Maya and Aztec lore. The critique of colonialism not only falls short at utopia's doorstep, but shuts the door behind itself. As the book ends, this mythological utopia, no

⁴ “En su mitología, que proviene de raíces mayas y aztecas, la ceiba es un árbol sagrado, el árbol que sostiene el mundo; si desaparece la ceiba, el mundo que sostiene desaparece con ella.”

longer merely a point from which to resist imperialism, becomes the means of reestablishing Faguas as a commercial presence. The commune is advertised as an international tourist attraction, and "visitors from all over the world began to arrive in Faguas and ventured into its depths in search of Waslala" (339).⁵ Waslala—whose name, we are told, comes from a Carib word meaning "river of golden waters"—not only becomes the centerpoint of a burgeoning tourist industry, but also reestablishes Faguas as a territory ready for reintegration into the free market. Ángel Rama, a foundational voice among theorists of the urban in South American literature, has argued that the modern utopian project of urban space in the New World has "exploit[ed] the preexisting indigenous networks to its benefit" (Rama 16), building upon those already existing infrastructures and imaginaries. *Waslala* follows this pattern.

Return to the Natural

Waslala and "Uriel" both conclude with what Jorge Marcone has termed the *novela de la selva's* "return to the natural" (Marcone 3), although they do so in different ways. In Belli's novel, Melisandra and her company return Faguas with its forests to global circuits of commerce, though it is no longer simply a point of extraction for raw materials. The narrative, like its characters, participates in the construction of utopian imaginaries but does so only on its own terms. By reactivating the *novela de la selva's* critique of industrial capitalism, *Waslala* renegotiates science fiction's approach to the natural, even if this project ultimately proves problematically romantic. True to the model of many of the first *novelas de la selva*, this return to the natural, as Marcone describes it, does not necessarily oppose all development, but rather helps to conceive of it differently. The conclusion of "Uriel" departs more radically from this model in that Páez simply sends his characters deeper into the expansive forest tracts of León Mera's *Cumandá*, away from the urban ruins that have framed the novella. Páez rejects the set imaginaries that provide the framework for contemporary utopian and dystopian science fiction.

As Lawrence Buell has noted, the evolution of a homeland myth of a distinctive national territory is not a process "hermetically sealed like a laboratory experiment but syncretic and porous," allowing for the interpenetration of various imaginaries (Buell 229). Páez and Belli exploit this porosity, variously inhabiting and parodying the foreignness that is attributed to the *selva* from without. Turning the *novela de la selva's* critique of colonial travel narratives into a critique of science fiction's reliance on such narrative structures, *Waslala* and "Uriel" combine different versions of the New World encountered in these narratives. The look backward in *Waslala* and "Uriel" is also a look forward, although the treatment of the future that these works bring to the science fiction genre is unique. Unlike purely "speculative" fiction, they hardly present projected visions of what might be; rather they provide another perspective onto imagined futures

⁵ "[V]isitantes de todo el mundo empezaron a llegar a Faguas y se internaron en sus paisajes en búsqueda de Waslala."

that have long been familiar. The future itself, these sci-fi works suggest, is a territory already bristling with national flags. It is a land of the literary imaginary that has already been claimed, but one that is nevertheless still very much in dispute.

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The logo for Ecozon, featuring a stylized green leaf-like symbol above the word "Ecozon" in a bold, sans-serif font.

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