Armadillos, Hippopotamuses and Biopolitics in *The Sound of Things Falling* by Juan Gabriel Vásquez

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Abstract

The Sound of Things Falling (2011), a novel by Colombian author Juan Gabriel Vásquez, explores the relationship between humans and animals within a society traumatized by violence. In this article I briefly discuss human/animal studies in literature; I then outline Giorgio Agamben's theory of biopolitics in the context of human/animal studies. Utilizing Agamben's framework, I offer a biopolitical reading of *The Sound of Things Falling*. I explore how biopolitics illuminates the life of a pet armadillo that appears in the novel, an animal that scholars have ignored in literary criticism. I argue that the armadillo's life reveals the biopolitical system that upholds specious boundaries separating humans and animals. I examine how the armadillo exposes the categories of sovereign power functioning in the novel, particularly as they relate to drug trafficking. I also offer an analysis of the hippopotamuses within the novel, a topic that scholars have discussed at length. I contend that literary criticism has overlooked the character of Ricardo Laverde with respect to his relationship to the hippos. I develop a reading which highlights the connections between Laverde and the hippos, not to interpret the animals merely through an anthropocentric lens as a metaphor for Laverde, but to show the interweaving of their stories as warnings against the violence in biopolitical formations. Through these readings I demonstrate that Vázquez employs animals in the novel to emphasize the vulnerability of all bodies within the biopolitical structures and institutions in Colombian society.

Keywords: Human/animal literary studies, *The Sound of Things Falling*, Juan Gabriel Vásquez, biopolitics.

Resumen

El ruido de las cosas al caer (2011), la novela del colombiano Juan Gabriel Vásquez, explora la relación entre los humanos y los animales en una sociedad traumatizada por la violencia. En este artículo examino brevemente la teoría crítica de los estudios de los humanos/animales en la literatura; luego, resumo la teoría de Giorgio Agamben sobre la biopolítica en el contexto de los estudios de los humanos/animales. Utilizando el enfoque crítico de Agamben, propongo una lectura biopolítica de *El ruido de las cosas al caer.* Investigo cómo la biopolítica ilumina la vida de un armadillo que es mascota en la novela, un animal que los académicos han ignorado en la crítica literaria. Planteo que la vida del armadillo revela el sistema biopolítico que mantiene la barrera especiosa que separan a humanos y animales. Examino cómo el armadillo expone las categorías de poder soberano que funcionan en la novela, especialmente con respecto a su relación con el narcotráfico. También formulo un análisis de los hipopótamos dentro de la narrativa, un tema que ya se ha abordado. Sostengo que la crítica literaria ha subestimado el personaje de Ricardo Laverde con respecto a los hipopótamos. Desarrollo una lectura que resalta las conexiones entre Laverde y esos animales, no para interpretarlos desde el antropocentrismo como metáfora de la vida de Laverde, sino para demostrar cómo se entrecruzan sus historias para advertir contra la violencia que ocurre en las formaciones biopolíticas. A través de estas lecturas, demuestro que Vásquez emplea los animales en la novela para enfatizar la vulnerabilidad de todos los cuerpos dentro de las estructuras e instituciones biopolíticas en Colombia.

Palabras clave: Estudios humanos/animales, *El ruido de las cosas al caer*, Juan Gabriel Vásquez, biopolítica.

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In recent years, human/animal studies have blossomed in literary theory, posing questions such as, in what ways does cultural production portray the relationship between humans and animals? [1] What are the assumptions about the power dynamics between our species and others? How can literary studies challenge normative modes of analyzing relationships between humans and other species? *The Sound of Things Falling* by Colombian author Juan Gabriel Vásquez is a novel that lends itself to a fruitful discussion about humans and animals in literature. While the novel focuses on the trauma that plagued a generation of Colombians due to drug trafficking violence, human relationships with animals are a central building block in the enunciation of that trauma and its effects. I will first briefly discuss human/animal studies in literature and then discuss Giorgio Agamben's related ideas. Utilizing this framework, I will offer a reading of *The Sound of Things Falling* in which I consider an armadillo within the novel, a subject unexplored in literary criticism. I will then revisit the more conventional discussion about the hippopotamuses in the narrative, a topic that has been studied in more depth. I will highlight concepts about sovereign power and vulnerable bodies from biopolitics to examine how Vásquez employs animals to emphasize the vulnerability of all bodies within Colombian society.

Regarding the topic of human/animal studies, Annalisa Colombino and Paolo Palladino claim that, "One of the obligations of life in this age is to think about human existence as the existence of the human as animal, and so much so that the relationship between human and non-human animals must become the defining existential problematization" (168). Many recent literary philosophers have taken up the mantle of exploring the relationship between humans and animals, such as Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Haraway, and Plumwood, among others. One prominent scholar in human/animal studies, Cary Wolfe, argues for a posthumanistic approach to the field.[2] He claims that

> the questions that occupy (human)-animal studies can be addressed adequately only if we confront them on not just one level but two: not just the level of content, thematics, and the object of knowledge (the 'animal' studied by animal studies) but also the level of theoretical and methodological approach (*how* animal studies studies 'the animal'). (99; emphasis in original)

Wolfe cautions scholars not to assume that merely studying animals overcomes humanism's anthropocentrism; rather, we must move past schemas that uphold the binary division of human versus animal through interdisciplinary work.

[1] I will utilize the terms "humans" and "animals" for brevity's sake. According to Laura Brown, "'Non-human animal' and 'other animal' have become the appropriate phrases to refer to other-than-human-animal-species" (2). However, Brown proposes that "animal" and "animal-kind" are acceptable shorthand for these terms.

[2] Francesca Ferrando clarifies the term posthumanism in the context of human/animal studies. Differentiating it from transhumanism (when humans transcend their humanity via science and technology), posthumanism emphasizes an approach which eschews the anthropocentrism of the past and its dualistic interpretative practices (29).

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While there are many branches of human/animal studies, I will focus on one specific subset: the question of biopolitics and the role of the sovereign power in defining who lives and who dies. Biopolitics is closely related to this field since, as Wolfe argues, "for biopolitical theory, the animality of the human becomes a central problem—perhaps *the* central problem—to be produced, controlled, or regulated for politics in its distinctly modern form" (100). Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel agrees with this method of research, asserting, "a biopolitical approach […] is attentive to practices and relations of power that shape human and animal interactions and is particularly interested in how power is consumed by the regulation of biological life as a governing rationality" (86). One of the main thinkers who examines biopolitics as well as its relationship to human/animal studies is Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Below I will articulate his theories to flesh out the relationship between humans and animals in Vásquez's work.

Biopolitics, Armadillos, and Drug Trafficking

The Sound of Things Falling heavily features animals in its narrative and is a rich text for engaging in biopolitical discussions. Published in 2011 and winner of the Alfaguara Novel Prize the same year, many critics have deemed this work Juan Gabriel Vásquez's most influential novel to date. The narrative charts the exploration of a Colombian man attempting to find meaning in a world of senseless violence. Antonio Yammara, the narrator, recounts an important period of his life starting around 1996, when he meets Ricardo Laverde through their mutual hobby of billiards. Yammara describes how Laverde remains a mysterious figure throughout their acquaintance, but the narrator is too self-absorbed to delve deeper. One evening while the two are walking on the street, Yammara gets caught in the crossfire of a shooting aimed at Laverde. Yammara survives the assassination attempt, but Laverde dies. For months Yammara faces the physical and emotional consequences of the incident, which also causes intimacy issues between him and his partner, Aura. To make sense of his post-traumatic stress symptoms, as well as to understand the person who inspired the shooting, Yammara undertakes a journey to a rural area of Colombia, leaving behind Aura and their toddler. He initiates this trip at the request of Laverde's daughter, Maya, who wishes to meet him. Yammara and Maya spend the weekend discussing Laverde's life as well as that of Maya's mother, Elaine Fritts, a Peace Corps volunteer who met and married Laverde during her service in Colombia. Yammara discovers that Laverde was a pilot for the drug trafficking trade at the beginning of its heyday and was arrested for smuggling cocaine to the United States and sent to prison for twenty years. As the two delve into Elaine and Laverde's life stories, Yammara and Maya also process their own generational trauma as adolescents living through the worst of the war between Pablo Escobar and the Colombian state.

To understand more clearly the relationship between humans and animals in the novel, I highlight Giorgio Agamben's discussion on human/animal studies and biopolitics. As he posits in his book, *The Open: Man and Animal*, humanity has always

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understood the human/animal divide through the lens of what he labels, "the anthropological machine." Agamben argues that there are two periods of the anthropological machine: the modern and pre-modern forms. According to his argument, the modern version "functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human: *Homo alalus*, or the ape-man" (*The Open* 37). The pre-modern anthropological machine functions conversely to the latter by humanizing animals. In Agamben's assessment, however, both modes of this machine are dangerous ways of conceiving the boundary between humans and animals. Instead, Agamben proposes a less binary way of conceiving of humans and animals.

This call to reform the division between humans and animals is related to his discussion of biopolitics in *Homo Sacer* where Agamben argues that bare life (*zoe*), which in the past was situated at the margins of the political order, now coincides with the political order and is part of an irreducible, indistinct zone with politics and particular life (*bios*) (*Homo sacer* 9). Agamben's biopolitical exploration centers on the notion that modern political power increasingly governs through control over life itself. In this construction, the governing power is granted authority to control the biological existence of its citizens, in addition to their political lives. This power is allowed to kill with impunity under the law; Agamben labels this governmental exemption "the state of exception." Agamben's concern is that in this current organization of society, biopolitics places all those considered incapable of exercising subjectivity in great jeopardy. This includes both animals and humans since both are subject to regimes of control and exploitation, as he argues in *The Open*. The crux of Agamben's theory about the relationship between the human/animal distinction and biopolitics is that in the present configuration of politics, both humans and animals are at risk of violence perpetuated by the state of the exception, which can deem any life disposable.

While the novel never mentions biopolitics specifically, it artfully calls attention to this concept via Yammara's job as a law professor. After his shooting, Yammara is teaching when a conversation arises about the state's authority to control individual life:

> During one of the first classes I taught after going back to work, a student asked me a question about von Ihering's [sic] theories. "Justice," I began to say, "has a double evolutionary base: the struggle of the individual to have his rights respected and that of the state to impose, among its associates, the necessary order." "So," the student asked me, "could we say that the man who reacts, feeling himself threatened or infringed, is the true creator of the law?" and I was going to tell him of the time when all law was incorporated within religion, those remote times when distinctions between morals and hygiene, public and private, were still nonexistent, but I didn't manage to do so. I covered my eyes with my tie and burst into tears. The class was adjourned. (52)[3]

[3] "Durante una de las primeras clases que di después de reincorporarme, un estudiante me hizo una pregunta sobre las teorías de Von Ihering. 'La justicia', comencé a decir, 'Tiene una doble base evolutiva: la lucha del individuo por hacer respetar su derecho y la del Estado por imponer, entre sus coasociados, el orden necesario'. 'Entonces', me preguntó un alumno, '¿Podemos decir que el hombre que reacciona, al sentirse amenazado o violado, es el verdadero creador del Derecho?'. Y yo le iba a

This anecdote is the only time the narrative explicitly references the concept of the state versus the individual in the fight for rights. Moreover, Yammara desires to explain the evolution of a modern state whereby the sovereign rules biological life and has separated biological existence into categories like morals and hygiene, but at this precise moment his trauma paralyzes him. This brief moment in the novel warrants examination, especially regarding the reference to Rudolph von Jhering, a nineteenth century renowned German legal scholar. Here Yammara focuses on von Jhering's ideas about the struggle of an individual and his rights within a state. However, what he leaves unsaid reveals a nod to the overall theme of generational trauma. In the introduction to his most famous treatise, von Jhering describes the violent process which entails developing legal structures: "A long period of peace […] is richly enjoyed, until the first gun dispels the pleasant dream, and another generation takes the place of the one which had enjoyed peace without having to toil for it, another generation which is forced to earn it again by the hard work of war" (4). This nod to the war between individual rights versus state sovereignty highlights the importance of biopolitics in the novel, connecting it to the discussion about vulnerable bodies.

Regarding this discussion, the first animal of importance in my argument is the armadillo in the novel, Maya's pet as a child. Much literary criticism has analyzed the representation of trauma at the individual and generational level in *The Sound of Things Falling*.[4] Additionally, scholars have examined animals in the novel but focused only on the hippopotamuses. These literary conversations have generally explored the hippos as a metaphor for Pablo Escobar or the Colombian people in general. However, no scholarship exists about the armadillo in this story. The armadillo nonetheless gives an entryway for discussing biopolitics, trauma and the relationship of vulnerable bodies. During the weekend visit between Yammara and Maya, many of their conversations focus on their upbringings. In one of their exchanges, Maya narrates the few memories she has of her father as a child before he went to prison for smuggling drugs. She clearly remembers the time Laverde gifted her an armadillo and his diligent efforts to teach her to care for the animal as her pet.

hablar de esos tiempos remotos en que la distinción entre moral, higiene, lo público y lo privado, era todavía inexistente, pero no alcancé a hacerlo. Me cubrí los ojos con la corbata y rompí a llorar. La sesión se suspendió" (59; McLean's translation).

[4] Most academics agree on the central theme of trauma and violence in Colombia in the novel; many disagree about whether the novel proposes that trauma can be processed through narration. For instance, Eric Rojas argues that violence remains irreconcilable in Vásquez's schema (317). Marco Ramírez also concludes that the novel ends in disconnection (153). Juanita C. Aristizábal agrees about the narrator's limitations in processing his suffering but claims that Vásquez achieves moderate success in processing trauma as a representation of his generation via his use of Colombian authors to ground the trauma in literary tradition (43). Paola Fernández Luna argues that the focus on the intimate fears and traumas of ordinary Colombians (i.e. those not directly involved with the drug trafficking industry) enables a remembering of the past that does not cripple the future because it bears testimony to the sentiments of trauma sufferers and proposes the need for resistance to the structures which cause violence (37–8).

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The vulnerability of bodies is especially pertinent when we consider the end of the armadillo's life. After Laverde's imprisonment, Elaine Fritts decides to lie to her daughter about his incarceration. She tells Maya that her father died while flying over the ocean. Maya suffers the trauma of thinking that her father drowned in a vast ocean, at an age when she is barely capable of understanding the meaning of this news. Later Maya tells Yammara what eventually happens to the armadillo. When she is around eight years old (a few years after the conversation with her mother about Laverde's supposed oceanic demise), Maya brings the animal to her patio and decides to submerge it in water. As she explains to Yammara,

> I had been told that armadillos could spend a long time underwater. I wanted to see how long [. …] I remember the roughness of his body very well, my hands hurt from the pressure and then they went on hurting, it was like holding a knotty tree trunk in place so the current wouldn't carry it off. What a struggle the creature put up, I remember perfectly. Until he stopped struggling [. …] I was punished. Mom slapped me hard and cut my lip with her ring. Later she asked me why I'd done it and I said: To see how many minutes he could stay under. And Mom answered: Then why didn't you have a watch? I didn't know what to say. And that question hasn't completely gone away, Antonio, it still runs around my head every once in a while, always at the worst moments, when life isn't working out for me. This question appears to me, and I've never been able to answer it. (229-30)[5]

For decades afterwards, Maya questions the significance of this act of violence and is incapable of answering her mother's trenchant query. Maya's inability to articulate her motivations underscores the trauma of her father drowning in the ocean. As a young girl, Maya cannot process her trauma in a conscious or sophisticated way. She expresses her grief in an instinctual way as a desire to act. In this manner, her demonstration of emotion parallels the armadillo's violent shaking, an instinctual impulse to survive its drowning. By acting out her trauma this way, Maya signals how the armadillo's vulnerable corporeal existence can easily be terminated. Maya's powerlessness to answer the question as to why she killed it bestows a compassion toward the actual animal, imbuing its life force with meaning. She feels guilt for the death. Furthermore, her mother's question continually surfaces when she feels insecure. The armadillo was not just an object, but a living being whose life she personally terminated. This event shapes her. When Yammara first arrives at Maya's estate, he learns that her experience has even affected her profession as a beekeeper, in that Maya has adapted her strategies to keep her bees alive because she could not stand to destroy the combs and kill the bees every time that she collected honey.

[5] "Me habían dicho que los armadillos podían pasar mucho tiempo dentro del agua. Yo quería ver cuánto tiempo [. …] Recuerdo muy bien la rugosidad de su cuerpo, las manos me dolían por la presión y luego me siguieron doliendo, era como mantener en su sitio un tronco espinoso para que no se lo lleve la corriente. Qué manera de sacudirse la del bicho ese, me acuerdo perfectamente. Hasta que ya no se sacudió más [. …] Hubo castigos, mamá me dio una cachetada violenta, me rompió la boca con el anillo. Luego me preguntó por qué lo había hecho y yo dije: Para saber cuántos minutos podía aguantar. Y mamá me contestó: ¿Y entonces por qué no tenías reloj? Yo no supe qué contestar. Y esa pregunta no se ha ido del todo, Antonio, sigue volviendo de vez en cuando, siempre en los malos momentos, cuando la vida no me está funcionando. Se me aparece esa pregunta y nunca he podido contestarla" (221; McLean's translation).

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Maya's guilt for drowning the armadillo echoes in her apiarian career. However, her concern for animals clashes with her position as the sovereign in biopolitical theory, a role she undertakes when she kills the animal. One could overlook the importance of this biopolitical scene since the sovereign wields power over life and death, a reality rarely associated with eight-year-old girls in Colombia. However, the position of sovereign is precisely the one Maya occupies when she, with impunity, kills a creature whose life force she deems disposable. This scene illuminates the anthropological machine which Agamben condemns, demonstrating how the rigid boundaries between human and animal are the result of theoretical divisions between humans and animals that shape our behavior and ethics, granting humans justification to commit violence against "the animal." As Agamben has demonstrated, the animal can be actual non-human animals, or animalized humans. Either way, this binary framework enables the dangerous conditions for all those on the outside of the sovereign power. Maya's guilt indicates her comprehension of her own complicity in this perverse ecosystem of power, underscoring how these rigid boundaries between "the human" and "the animal" are the product of flawed theories which clearly divide the two ideologically.

The vulnerability of the armadillo connects to human vulnerability in the narrative. This connection becomes clear when Maya decides to name her armadillo "Mike," in honor of Mike Barbieri, another Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia. The portrayal of Barbieri in the novel has clear implications for American culpability in the nascent drug trade during the 1960s and 1970s. As the novel progresses, Elaine Fritts discovers that it is Mike who contrived to hire Laverde as a pilot to traffic marijuana between borders; on the night when Laverde is caught smuggling cocaine, Barbieri visits Elaine but never reveals that he knows that Laverde is in trouble. Mike Barbieri's drug trade connections ultimately lead him to his own violent end: "he showed up dead in La Miel River, shot in the back of the neck, his naked body thrown facedown on the riverbank, water playing with his long hair, his beard wet and reddened with blood" (228).[6] Mike's body, found in the river, mirrors Laverde's supposed drowning in the ocean, connecting them both to Maya's trauma of losing these men at an early age. Though the novel does not reveal whether Maya knew of Barbieri's death as a child, his absence correlates to her father's disappearance, and the armadillo's drowning demonstrates how all three are susceptible to violence at the hands of the sovereign power.

The question of sovereign power becomes important when recognizing that Laverde and Barbieri are both linked to the drug trafficking industry; their assassinations denote the interplay of biopolitics in the novel. Biopolitics is complicated because it is so often associated with the state power to eliminate life within the framework of the law. Indeed, Laverde and Barbieri both die at the hands of criminal elements, so how can they be vulnerable bodies within biopolitical

[6] "apareció muerto de un tiro en la nuca en el río La Miel, el cuerpo desnudo tirado boca abajo en la ribera, el agua de la corriente jugando con el pelo largo, la barba mojada y enrojecida por la sangre" (219; McLean's translation).

frameworks? Related to the way Maya occupies the position of the sovereign when she kills the armadillo, biopolitical structures are not limited to established, "legitimate" states. Legitimate and illegitimate powers are differentiated by collective will through defining legal structures: society decides what is legitimate and what is not. However, both types of power exercise control over others and view bodies as disposable.

In his analysis of drug cartels, Hector A. Reyes-Zaga uses theory from authors Hardt and Negri to support the importance of drug-traffickers as holders of the sovereign right to decide who lives and who dies. Hardt and Negri argue that in our current globalized society, the list of organizations that exert mass-scale control over the population has expanded beyond just the nation state. Reyes-Zaga summarizes their argument, claiming that with the advent of global neoliberalism, legal and illegal economic elites have emerged and that the elite with the greatest biopolitical potential "is undoubtedly the drug trafficking industry" (194). Considering this illegal elite biopolitical power, the deaths of Barbieri and Laverde are set against the backdrop of an overarching war between drug lords and the Colombian state. The state (legitimate power) and the drug trafficking industry (illegitimate elite) dispose of life as they see fit. For those who become the objects of their focus, life becomes even more dangerous when the two groups are at odds. The war between drug traffickers and the state imperils vulnerable bodies, making Agamben's concerns about biopolitics more convincing.

The armadillo, Barbieri, and Laverde share a story of vulnerability; all suffer within a system that views their biological life as objects to control and ultimately destroy. Agamben's theory about the dubious binary between humans and animals points to the construction of a society featuring another dubious binary between sovereign power and disposable bodies. Within these stories, Agamben's concerns illuminate the spurious categories of separation between humans and animals which result in violence against vulnerable bodies. Closely related, I will now examine Agamben's ideas and how they connect to hippopotamuses, another important animal in the book. The conversation about this species of animals in *The Sound of Things Falling* has been heavily explored in scholarly discussions. Most of these discussions identify hippos as a metaphor for Pablo Escobar and/or the generation of Colombians who suffered from the violence between Escobar and the Colombian state. However, I will now consider how the character of Ricardo Laverde should have a more significant role in these discussions. Scholars have overlooked the emphasis of the narrative on the parallels between Laverde's character and the hippopotamuses; I argue that this connection fortifies a biopolitical reading of the novel by further illuminating the disposable nature of all bodies under the sovereign exception.

Hippos and Vulnerable Bodies

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Hippopotamuses are significant in the novel from the very first line of the book: "The first hippopotamus, a male the color of black pearls, weighing a ton and a half, was shot dead in the middle of 2009" (3).[7] The presence of hippos in Colombia recalls how the species was introduced to the continent: infamous drug kingpin Pablo Escobar imported four hippopotamuses in the early 1980s to populate Zoológico Nápoles, his own personal zoo. After the Colombian government killed Escobar in December 1993, the hippos escaped, resulting in a population explosion of the species in the Magdalena River area. The macabre opening in Vásquez's novel represents a real event in history when the Colombian military killed one of Pablo Escobar's escaped hippos, "Pepe," in 2009. Many literary critics have analyzed both this scene as well as its importance within *The Sound of Things Falling.*

In his article, Fermín A. Rodríguez analyzes the art installation "Bloque de búsqueda" by Camilo Restrepo Zapata, which depicts this famous hippo killing. Using this Colombian art piece as one point of reference, Rodríguez argues that animals have returned as focal points in Latin American political and aesthetic imagination. Discussing the biopolitical shift to exercise complete control over biological life in the public sphere, Rodríguez demonstrates how animals signal the characteristic of Latin American power structures to deem certain lives disposable. Rodríguez's most pertinent point comes from his interpretation of the significance of Restrepo's representation. For Rodríguez, the hippo's cadaver symbolizes both Escobar and "false positives," the term for innocent civilians murdered by the government, which claimed that these victims were actually guerrilleros or narcotraffickers (193). The imagined importance of the hippo points to the biopolitical dichotomy; it absorbs the villainy of Pablo Escobar's drug smuggling tyranny but also evokes a sympathy for the disposable classes of people fallen prey to the violence of drug trafficking and governmental responses.

Other authors have also analyzed how the dead hippo is a metaphor for Escobar as well as his victims. Rory O'Bryen explores this history, briefly referencing *The Sound of Things Falling*. O'Bryen postulates that the media equated the dead hippo with Escobar, which led to a range of opinions about his meaning and legacy. "For some this *Behemoth*, like its former owner, stood as an index of Colombia's slippery return to a state of nature: the embodiment of a voracious hunger for power and pleasure unchecked by state intervention, and of a total disregard for property and the law, all of which called for the sovereign intervention of a more powerful *Leviathan*" (240). During this discussion O'Bryen references *The Sound of Things Falling* only once. He states, "the fall of the hippo serves as a catalyst for the protagonist's belated efforts to give closure to his traumatic memories of the drug wars of the 1990s" (240). While O'Bryen only briefly discusses Vásquez's work, he continues his argument on the importance of the dead hippo by stating, "other commentators, however, saw the slain hippopotamus not only as a symbol of

[7] "El primero de los hipopótamos, un macho del color de las perlas negras y tonelada y media de peso, cayó muerto a mediados de 2009" (13; McLean's translation).

environmental damage and of the drug-traffic's transformation of Colombia's landscape, but also as a symptom of the devaluation of life in general" (240). Here O'Bryen makes the jump to the topic of biopolitics, demonstrating the connection between the dead hippo and theories about how biological life has become the center of political strategies. In his assessment,

> [T]hat Pepe should be exterminated as a 'foreign body' in order to protect human life in the region no doubt demands an extension of biopolitics to include the reinvention of nature at the intersection of debates about public health, the environment, science and domestic policy. Yet it also confirms once more the entry of human life and its once animal counterpart into the modern zone of indistinction described by Agamben (1998), wherein the Classical political opposition between *zoe* (raw biological life) and *bios* (the individual or group's social or political existence) becomes so blurred that we can *all* be reduced to 'bare life' as the result of a sovereign state decision. (241–2)

Similarly to O'Bryen, Daniel Hernández discusses mediatic representations of Pepe's killing, but he focuses on how the hippos enabled people to imagine Pablo Escobar and drug traffickers as monstrous figures. Hernández explores the representation of this event in two novels by Vásquez, including *The Sound of Things Falling.* He argues, "in the eyes of Vásquez, the death of Pepe indexes the event of Escobar's death" (131). Cornelia Ruhe examines the hippo in Vásquez's work by proposing that the opening scene parallels the governmental hunt and killing of Pablo Escobar as well as represents his helpless victims. "The hippo can be seen as a paradigmatic representative of a whole generation of Colombians – of which Vásquez himself is a member" (102). Hyeryung Hwang also mentions the role of hippopotamuses in the novel and focuses on the symbolism of their meaning, arguing that they represent the shared fate of Colombians (188). All these authors analyze the importance of the hippopotamuses, but none of them mention a key aspect of the hippo anecdote, its intertwining relationship to Ricardo Laverde and his vulnerability in the novel.

The novel portrays a clear connection between Laverde and the hippo throughout the text. The narrator's introduction sets the stage for the plight of the animals and connects them to Laverde:

> I also learned that the hippopotamus had not escaped alone: at the time of his flight he'd been accompanied by his mate and their baby—or what, in the sentimental version of the less scrupulous newspapers, were his mate and their baby—whose whereabouts were now unknown, and the search for whom took on a flavor of media tragedy, the persecution of innocent creatures by a heartless system […] I found myself remembering a man who'd been out of my thoughts for a long while, in spite of the fact that there had been a time when nothing interested me as much as the mystery of his life. (3-4)[8]

[8] "Supe también que el hipopótamo no había escapado solo: en el momento de la fuga lo acompañaban su pareja y su cría — o los que, en la versión sentimental de los periódicos menos escrupulosos, eran su pareja y su cría —, cuyo paradero se desconocía ahora y cuya búsqueda tomó de inmediato un sabor de tragedia mediática, la persecución de unas criaturas inocentes por parte de un sistema desalmado […] me descubrí recordando a un hombre que llevaba mucho tiempo sin ser parte de mis pensamientos, a pesar de que en una época nada me interesó tanto como el misterio de vida" (13–14; McLean's translation).

The man whose mystery fascinated Yammara is Laverde, a detail that not only opens the book but also links him in an intriguing way to animals. At first Yammara does not indicate why the mammals remind him of his acquaintance, but throughout the novel it becomes clear that the narrator ideologically links Laverde to the hippos and the Zoológico Nápoles. One aspect of Laverde's connection to animals is obvious. The first words that Yammara hears the older man express are comments of compassion for the animals in the zoo that had been left to their own devices after Escobar's death: "'Well, let's see what they do with the animals,' he said. 'Poor things are starving to death and nobody cares.' Someone asked him what animals he was talking about. The man just said: 'It's not their fault, anyway'" (10).[9] Clearly, Laverde himself takes an interest in the animals. The juxtaposition of the story of the massacred hippo at the beginning of the novel with Laverde's empathy for the abandoned animals emphasizes the nuanced relationship between Laverde and the hippo.

Laverde's empathy for the hippos connects the conversation to questions of compassion, affect, and guilt in a way that most critics have addressed. However, few critics have recognized the importance of Laverde himself. Regarding the question of innocence in this novel, Sophie Esch examines the multiple angles the narrative explores, briefly touching on Laverde. In her summary she points out how those who knew Laverde always blamed his death on his culpability. "Algo habrá hecho" [he must have done something] is a common refrain in the novel about his assassination. Per Esch, "Within the context of the drug wars, suffering a violent attack is seen as proof of involvement in the drug trade, and often no further inquiry is made into the death (cementing thus a regime of impunity). To be a victim makes one a presumptive perpetrator, and the violence one suffered is always justified" (190). Esch also argues that the hippos are the only innocent creatures in the drug trade and therefore "through the animal it is possible to frame the drug war not only in legal and moral terms but also in affective and political terms" (191). She then makes the assertion that innocence, pity, and compassion are reserved only for animals, which ultimately "calls into question the dehumanizing logic of the drug war" (191). Esch's assumption that innocence is reserved only for animals, while grounded in her examples, does not recognize the way the novel weaves Laverde and his struggles into the narrative.

I argue that the death of the hippo represents a moment of kinship between the animal and Laverde. A traditional reading of the relationship between Laverde and the hippo might fall into the trap of emphasizing how the hippo serves as a metaphor for the man. Indeed, as Aaron Gross has noted, across time and cultures, "animal subjects and ideas about them are critical sites through which [humans] imagine ourselves" (4). However, this falls into the anthropocentric trap that Cary Wolfe warns against in literary studies. Instead, I posit that while the two share similarities in their lives and deaths, the hippo is not merely a metaphor for Laverde's plight. Rather, the narrative links the stories together, fleshing out the importance of

[9] "'A ver qué van a hacer con los animales', dijo. 'Los pobres se están muriendo de hambre y a nadie le importa.' Alguien preguntó a qué animales se refería. El hombre sólo dijo: 'Qué culpa tienen ellos de nada'" (20; McLean's translation).

how the biopolitical forces at work rob both beings of their agency. The threads of the novel conceal the immediacy of this connection due both to narrative strategies and plot differences. The hippo's fall occurs at the beginning of the novel while Laverde's takes place later in the story, many years before the hippo's demise, in an analepsis utilized by Yammara to recall his past. Furthermore, in terms of similarities, their deaths and their fatherhood are their only ostensible links. As Esch argues, Laverde seems culpable since he is targeted by an illegitimate power for some (never revealed) wrongdoing. The hippo, as Laverde so aptly indicates, is innocent; its only crime is its presence within a state unwilling to grant its protection. Still, the way both die reveals the biopolitical structures at work: the death of the father-figure hippo correlates to the death of the human-figure father in that both are casualties of the war to control bodies to garner power for the organizing system. For Laverde, it is the organized criminals who shoot him to exercise their sovereignty over his body. For the hippo, it is the government that shoots the creature to protect the beings that it deems more worthy of life (i.e., humans).

Similarly to the armadillo's story, in this parallel, there is a blending of agency in which the specious categories of "human" and "animal" break down. As per Agamben, the power to decide who lives and who dies traps the creatures into the category of the object of sovereign power. Both the animals and Laverde live this circumstance in their stories. Furthermore, the importation of the hippopotamuses demonstrates another complicated layer of biopolitics that leaves the animals vulnerable. They are a non-native species in Colombia, capable of causing environmental changes and disruption; some even call them "an invasive species." By labeling the hippopotamuses as a "non-native" or an "invasive" species, the sovereign power utilizes a rhetorical strategy to differentiate beings who "belong" in a certain location. However, this is a static way of envisioning environmental conditions and spaces which are always changing and transient. By controlling the language around the hippopotamuses and the way they are denominated, the sovereign power justifies its decision to dispose of them, marking them as capable of being sacrificed in the interests of the sovereign power.

One of the principal places to see these spurious categories between humans and animals is at the Zoológico Nápoles. At the end of the weekend, Maya and Yammara decide to visit the zoo associated with Escobar and their adolescence.[10] By linking the exploration of meaning to this place, the novel highlights the problematic relationship between humans and animals when zoos are involved. Zoos entrap animals in anthropocentric organizational structures. As Randy Malamud argues, "In zoos, people dominate animals, relegating them to bounded and confined habitats, and contextualizing them in ways that reflect how we overwrite the natural world with our own convenient cultural models and preferences" (57). In this scheme, society allows for animals to become ensnared in human structures, a fact that

[10] Alberto Fonseca proposes that the trip to the ruins of the zoo functions in the text as a culmination of a period of self-recognition and reconstruction of the familial and collective memory of the country (84).

imperils animals. In tandem with this, the scene in which Laverde is captured and sent to prison (reminiscent of the captivity suffered by the hippos at the zoo) evokes a sympathy for the character not normally reserved for those who are guilty. "When the dogs and the second agent found him, Ricardo was lying in a puddle with a broken ankle, his hands black with dirt, his clothes torn and covered in pine gum, and his face disfigured by sadness" (217).[11] The emphasis on Laverde's grief and pain coupled with his broken body harken back to the story of empathy for the hippo who was slaughtered after being caught. The narrator's exploration of Laverde's life draws parallels to the suffering of the hippos that Laverde himself recognized.

The denouement of the hippo story is noteworthy. When Maya and Yammara arrive at the Zoológico Nápoles, they see the zoo in a state of deterioration. They silently peruse the grounds in disarray until it begins to pour. As they sprint to the car, they come face to face with a hippopotamus. In this moment there is a mutual recognition between the animal and hippos: "The hippopotamus […] didn't bat an eyelid; it looked at us, or looked at Maya, who was leaning over the wooden fence and looking at it in turn […] Then the hippopotamus began a heavy movement […] And then I didn't [see it] anymore" (247).[12] The meeting of these gazes signals how the hippopotamuses also see, have their being, and have agency. Maya describes her feelings of sympathy for all the animals and wonders how they will survive; Yammara tells her that Laverde had the same reaction to the plight of the creatures.

> "I can imagine," said Maya. "He worried about animals." "He said they weren't to blame for anything." "And it's true," said Maya. "It's one of the few, very few real memories I have. My dad looking after the horses. My dad stroking my mom's dog. My dad telling me off for not feeding my armadillo. The only real memories. (247-8)[13]

Maya's sympathy for the animals draws back to her guilt over killing the armadillo and highlights the animals' connection to the story of vulnerable bodies in the novel. Once again, the narrative intertwines Laverde with the fate of the animals; he is the champion of treating animals properly and assuring their well-being. In a foreshadowing of his disposal, Laverde understands all too well the system that conceives of a separation between humans and animals, resulting in the mistreatment of both. By recognizing the importance of concern for the animals, Laverde shows his revolt against the same structures that will eventually lead to his own death; these structures protect the lives of humans and animals only if their bodies do not get in the way of what the sovereign power wants. The story of the hippopotamus

[11] "Cuando lo encontraron los perros y el segundo agente […] Ricardo estaba tirado en un charco fresco con un tobillo roto, las manos negras de tierra, las ropas estropeadas con resina de pino y la cara desfigurada por la tristeza" (210; McLean's translation).

[12] "El hipopótamo […] no se inmutaba: nos miraba, o miraba a Maya que se había recostado a la cerca de la madera y lo miraba a su vez […] Entonces el hipopótamo comenzó un movimiento pesado […] y luego no lo vi más" (238; McLean's translation).

[13] "'Me imagino', dijo Maya. 'Los animales le preocupaban.' 'Decía que no tenían la culpa de nada.' 'Y es verdad.' dijo Maya. 'Ése es uno de los pocos, de los poquísimos recuerdos de verdad que tengo. Mi papá cuidando a los caballos. Mi papá acariciando al perro de mamá. Mi papá regañándome por no darle de comer al armadillo. Los únicos recuerdos de verdad'" (238; McLean's translation).

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intertwined with Laverde's is powerful proof of the violence against vulnerable creatures in modern biopolitical hierarchies.

In conclusion, in *The Sound of Things Falling,* the armadillo and hippopotamus stories underscore Giorgio Agamben's thesis on biopolitics, revealing the dangers inherent in maintaining binary conceptual divisions between humans and animals. There is a slight difference in emphasis: the armadillo's life and death call attention to drug trafficking, complicity, and trauma while the hippopotamuses accentuate the underlying biopolitical mechanisms functioning in Colombia during Yammara's narration. Comparing and contrasting their lives to Ricardo Laverde's story underscores the way that the sovereign's right to decide who lives and who dies endangers both vulnerable humans and animals. The novel reveals the unpleasant truth that marginalized animals and humans suffer when bodies are disposable in biopolitical structures.

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