Anthropocenic Futures and Precarious Bodies
A Reading of *Mugre rosa* (2020) by Fernanda Trías

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Abstract

Mugre rosa (2020), by Uruguayan author Fernanda Trías, depicts a near-future Montevideo, where the population is confronted with climatic disaster and the propagation of a devastating disease. In this article, I explore the representation of bodily precarity in the context of environmental catastrophe, arguing that this vulnerability constitutes a point of resistance from which to rethink human identity. On the one hand, exposure to an anthropogenic environment is interpreted as instrumental to late capitalist biopolitics. This is revealed through the cartographies of precarity emerging from the novel, which reflect not only the chasm between Global North and Global South but also local inequalities. On the other hand, this corporeal exposure constitutes a challenge to traditional representations of the human. Through the analysis of the depiction of illness, I discuss how this deconstruction of the body favours the emergence of a new, interconnected identity. Ultimately, I suggest that a destabilising age such as the Anthropocene constitutes not only a profound moment of crisis but also a privileged space to rethink human subjectivity and its modes of representation.

Keywords: Precarious bodies, Anthropocene, illness, Fernanda Trías, *Mugre rosa.*

Resumen

Mugre rosa (2020), de la autora uruguaya Fernanda Trías, describe un Montevideo en un futuro cercano, en el que la población se enfrenta al desastre climático y a la propagación de una enfermedad devastadora. Este artículo explora la representación de la precariedad corporal en el contexto de la catástrofe medioambiental, argumentando que esta vulnerabilidad constituye un punto de resistencia desde el que repensar la identidad humana. Por un lado, la exposición a un entorno antropogénico puede interpretarse como instrumental a las biopolíticas del capitalismo tardío. Esto se hace patente a través de las cartografías de la precariedad que surgen de la novela, que reflejan no sólo el abismo entre el Norte Global y el Sur Global, sino también las desigualdades locales. Por otro lado, esta exposición corpórea constituye un desafío a las representaciones tradicionales de lo humano. A través del análisis de la representación de la enfermedad, discuto cómo esta deconstrucción del cuerpo favorece la emergencia de una nueva identidad fundamentada en la interconexión. En definitiva, sugiero que una época desestabilizadora como el Antropoceno constituye no sólo un profundo momento de crisis, sino también un espacio privilegiado para repensar la subjetividad humana y sus modos de representación.

Palabras clave: Cuerpos precarios, Antropoceno, enfermedad, Fernanda Trías, *Mugre rosa*

All animals are equal but some animals
are more equal than others
Orwell 90

In the virtual roundtable that preceded the publication of a special issue on precarity and performance, Judith Butler insisted on the importance of precarity as a way of rethinking relationality and interconnectedness (Puar 170). On the one hand, all lives can be considered precarious, due to their unavoidable social dimension. Indeed, corporeality constitutes a fundamental aspect in the definition of our interconnected existence, as the body exposes the human to the other in multiple, differing ways (Butler, "Precarious Life" 141). On the other hand, although all lives are precarious, some are more precarious than others: our mutual dependency, and the possibility of being injured by the other varies around the globe and is indissociably dependent on those mechanisms which regulate political, economic, and social relationships. Here lies the essential distinction between precariousness, the ontological human condition of susceptibility to injury, and precarity, the unequally distributed state of vulnerability distinctive of late capitalism (Kasmir 2). Nowadays, the consequences of this inequitable allocation of vulnerability are inscribed in the materiality of the bodies themselves, which are converted into objects of knowledge (Butler, *Precarious Life* xii), a living register of the increasing disparity between lives that must be protected and lives that can be left to die.

"More" precarious lives are those, for example, inhabiting the Global South. "Latin America is the region of open veins," wrote Eduardo Galeano (2) in the introduction of his well-known account of the history of colonisation and exploitation of the continent. Latin America is represented as a land with bleeding veins, whose flow of (natural and human) resources keeps nourishing the markets of the Global North.[1] The impelling process of development, undertaken in the name of progress, supports an irrational system and increases the inequalities already existing in those countries (4). Nevertheless, the "open veins" are not only an incisive metaphor to represent colonisation's legacy but also allude to the tangible wounds left on the flesh of the victims of said circumstances.

Today, the notion of precarity can be extended to those bodies that are subjected to environmental disaster. As Rob Nixon notes, exposure to the harmful effects of ecological catastrophe is not equally distributed across the globe; rather, analogously to precarity in a strict sense, it depends on geographical, social, and economic factors (46). The consequences of climate crisis, which appear in the Global North as a nefarious prophecy, are inscribed in the bodies of those who are left out the discourses of wealth and progress. To live "the dark side of modernity" (Mignolo 109) also entails the concrete experience of the ongoing destruction caused by late capitalist forms of exploitation. That said, the current ecological crisis not only represents a consequence of extractivist practices inherent to Western narratives of

[1] This image is echoed in Gloria Anzaldúa's description of the border between Mexico and the United States which is "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (25).

progress but also constitutes the result of a progressive colonisation of knowledge, wherein local values and cosmologies have been supplanted by the hegemonic perspectives (Huggan and Tiffin 6).

In this article, I study the representation of precariousness in the novel *Mugre rosa* (2020) by Uruguayan author Fernanda Trías, exploring how fictional portrayals of catastrophe as an inhabited space favour the reconsideration of contemporary issues related to precarity, inequality, and identity. Specifically, I argue that catastrophe exposes the human to its intrinsic vulnerability, transforming the materiality of the body both into a space of repression and a point of resistance from which to rethink human identity and its relational existence in more equitable and sustainable ways. While capitalism thrives on instability, the destabilising experience of catastrophe—here identified as the Anthropocene—reveals instead the artificiality of contemporary cultural constructions and ways of life, encouraging a revaluation of currents definitions of the human, its modes of representation, and the relationship with the planet and its inhabitants.

The scope of this article is twofold. Firstly, I describe how precarity emerges as an effect of the contact between the human and catastrophe. Particularly, I read exposure to an anthropocenic environment as a fundamental instrument of late capitalist biopolitics, since the control over bodies and the determination of whom to make live and whom to let die are realised through the decision to leave all expendable lives at the mercy of ecological disaster. Secondly, I consider the destabilising challenge of the Anthropocene to the current representation of the human, examining how the corporeal vulnerability experienced in a time of catastrophe entails a potential for resistance and transgression. Especially, I analyse how bodily descriptions of the illness afflicting those who are exposed to climate disaster challenge cultural constructions of the human, pointing toward a reconsideration of our interconnected identity.

This bipartition is mirrored in the theoretical influences that characterise my methodological approach, whereby formal and aesthetic analyses specific to literary criticism are combined with the discussion of cultural and political aspects illustrated in the text. Indeed, a thorough analysis of literary figurations of catastrophe and the intersection of environmental disaster and other forms of vulnerability must integrate contributions from political philosophy and sociology, such as Bauman's work on "wasted lives," and Nixon's monograph on "slow violence". Moreover, as this novel engages with the questioning of contemporary discourses on the human and its modes of representation, reflections from feminist posthumanism and ecofeminism (Alaimo; Braidotti) prove fundamental in rethinking the positioning of the human in the midst of catastrophe and conceiving new, possible relations to the planet and its inhabitants. The two sections will be brought together in the conclusive remarks, to reiterate the potential of precarity in rethinking our relationship with the other in an anthropocenic context.

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This article seeks to shed new light on a novel that has been analysed from numerous, different perspectives.[2] Specifically, this study engages in dialogue with contemporary discourses concerning the problematic relationship between humankind and the planet, focusing on how global issues are integrated within literature that originates "at the margins" of existing centres (of power, of knowledge, of culture). Taking a decolonial stance on fictional depictions of catastrophe and precarity may contribute to a revision of Western conceptual frames which structure current representations of the human (see Heffes 34).

Precarity in the Time of Environmental Crisis

Mugre rosa constitutes a paradigmatic example of the biopolitics of precarity in the context of impending climate change. The novel is set in Montevideo—a possible Montevideo, as the author herself explains in an interview (Trías and Medina)—where the population is confronted with the devastating consequences of environmental catastrophe.[3] While toxic red algae proliferate in the river, causing the death of all native species, the city's inhabitants suffer the consequences of climate disaster, represented in the text as incessant deadly winds. In this catastrophic scenario, the novel follows the everyday struggles of the protagonist narrator, a young woman who decides to stay in her hometown to take care of her ex-husband Max, a survivor of the red wind, and Mauro, a child suffering from a terrible disorder (identified extra-diegetically as the Prader-Willi syndrome). Fragments of her life in contact with environmental disaster and its manifestations are alternated with oneiric atmospheres and parentheses of remembrance of a past that now seems distant and elusive. This entanglement of different temporalities constructs the image of a restless individual, who obstinately searches for explanations for an ominous present and an increasingly uncertain future.

In an uncanny coincidence, the publication of *Mugre rosa* in early 2020 coincided with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the amplification of discourses related to the escalating environmental disaster. From the very beginning, the novel has been read against the background of anthropocenic dynamics that distinguish contemporary reality, offering an exhaustive depiction of an era marked by environmental deterioration and illness, thus drawing attention to the vulnerability of the bodies entangled within the network of power relationships

[2] Mackey analyses the text from the perspective of rioplatense ecogothic, incorporating concepts like *anthropogenic fiction* (Trexler) and *ecosickness* (Houser) into her discussion. Amaro and Barrero Bernal, instead, articulate their studies—respectively on monstrous childhood and hunger as a metaphor for social disease—on the dystopian component of the novel. Some of these aspects are further developed by Vázquez-Medina ("Vibrancy"), whose analysis of Trías's style casts new light on the relationship between the environmental catastrophe and the possibilities of language to articulate the complex dynamics of the Anthropocene.

[3] Several spatial and cultural elements favour a referential reading of the novel, according to which the fictional city coincides with Montevideo. Although this possibility is only hinted at in the text, the resulting interpretation is particularly interesting as it allows for a discussion of the intersection between global and local dynamics in the context of catastrophe.

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characteristic of late capitalist biopolitics (Barrero Bernal 16). In this section, I discuss how the fictional representation of catastrophe exposes the profound correlation between precarity, neoliberal technologies and climate disaster, revealing not only the intersection between different forms of inequality but also the oppressive effects of such unfair distribution of vulnerability.

First, it is worth noting that the causes of the climate disaster portrayed in the plot are never explicitly disclosed by the author; rather, "the reader is invited to infer that the interrelated environmental crises in *Mugre rosa* […] are all a product of incremental and longstanding forms of harm inflicted by humans" (Vázquez-Medina, "Vibrancy" 8). In fact, both Mackey (269) and Vázquez-Medina ("Vibrancy" 4) understand this catastrophic scenario as a consequence of the anthropogenic shaping of the planet and especially of what Nixon calls "slow violence," i.e. "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Within the plot, this incremental violence is embedded in the intrinsic behaviour of a capitalist society, based on extractivism, pollution and toxicity, disregard for other living species, excessive production, rapid consumption, and waste accumulation (Vázquez-Medina, "Vibrancy" 16).[4] In this context, precarity can be understood as the living condition of those who are subjected to this form of hidden violence, which can also manifest itself as the nefarious effects of environmental degradation.

In its depiction of catastrophe, the novel focuses on two defining characteristics of the contemporary neoliberal order as presented by Nixon, which are demonstrative of present forms of biopolitics based on an uneven distribution of vulnerability and harm. Firstly, the narration exposes the growing gap among people facing different degrees of precarity, both on a global level and within the same local reality. Moreover, the account of this fictional catastrophe brings to light "the attendant burden of unsustainable ecological degradation that impacts the health and livelihood of the poor most directly" (46), emphasising how precarity today must be understood as the complex intersection of different forms of vulnerability. Even the experience of environmental disaster is shaped by other forms of precarity such as gender, race, or social class.

Furthermore, the unequal distribution of precarity and exposure to environmental disaster emphasise the geographical character of the Anthropocene: what in certain regions is merely perceived as a future risk, in other places is a reality. Our actions as a species have a profound impact on the planet, and some of them have already irreversibly damaged entire ecosystems, turning them inhospitable and dangerous. Therefore, I suggest a reading of Anthropocene that surpasses conventional teleological temporalities—which organise narratives of catastrophe in terms of a "before" and an "after" the disaster—favouring instead a geographical

[4] These issues emerge, for instance, in the sudden death of fish and birds, the toxic river, the obscure but fundamental role of the meat factory (which inevitably alludes to intensive livestock farming and its dramatic effects on the environment) or the uncontrollable generation of waste.

configuration.[5] The scenario depicted in the novel emphasises the geographical dimension of anthropocenic disasters, revealing that the consequences of contemporary catastrophes are already inscribed in the bodies of those who have remained outside the discourses of wealth and progress.

The first configuration of precarity lies on the global level and is indicative of the allocation of power, resources, and labour in times of modernity. In fact, vulnerability is greatest in places that have historically been regarded and exploited as sources of raw materials or have been used as the landfill of modernity. The possibility that the novel is set in Montevideo and the environmental catastrophe is confined to certain parts of Uruguay (thus posing no danger whatsoever to wealthier nations) can be interpreted precisely in the light of the chasm between Global North and Global South. This unbalanced allocation of vulnerability favours the separation between lives regarded as worthier or more grievable and lives considered disposable, that can be abandoned at the mercy of climate disaster.

People inhabiting the Global South are often considered "wasted humans" (Bauman 5) or "lesser humans" (Mignolo 153), who have fallen behind in the race for development and can therefore be left to their fate. This association between waste and the inhabitants of Montevideo appears textually in some of the narrator's remarks on her life in contact with climate calamity. In the first paragraph of the novel, in which the narrator describes the gradual deterioration of the city, she notes: "[e]verything was rotting, including us" (Trías 13).[6][7] Like any other organic matter, the people living in Montevideo also suffer a slow process of putrefaction, to the point of almost being deprived of their humanity.[8] This observation is reiterated a few lines later, as the narrator lingers on the excessive amount of rubbish accumulated in the streets. She observes: "I don't know where all that rubbish was coming from. It was as if it was digesting and excreting itself, and who's to say that the waste isn't us, Max might have said" (13-14).[9] Not only has the Global South been considered the world's dumpsite for the inconvenient remnants of modernity; from the narrator's perspective, the proximity to pollution is not just physical but has also a transformative effect on the inhabitants, which are incorporated into the garbage abandoned around the city.[10]

[5] See also John Berger's emblematic pronouncement: "[p]rophecy now involves a geographical rather than a historical projection; it is space and not time that hides consequences from us. To prophesy today is only necessary to know men [and women] as they are throughout the world in all their inequality" (40).
[6] "Todo se pudría, también nosotros" (Trías 13).
[7] All translations from *Mugre Rosa* are mine.
[8] See the comment on the people living in the crumbling hotel, which left the sign on to remember that they were alive (Trías 13), or the correlation between the inhabitants and the figure of the ghost (Trías 249).
[9] "No sé de dónde salía tanta basura. Era como si se digiriera y se excretara a sí misma. ¿Y quién te dice que los desechos no seamos nosotros?, algo así podría haber dicho Max" (Trías 13-14).
[10] Armiero identifies the limitless production of waste as a defining feature of the present era. The emphasis on trash as the prime signifier of our times shifts the focus to the modes of consumption of contemporary societies, which has led us to live on a finite planet according to the dictates of a narrative of infinite progress.

That said, the distribution of vulnerability is further problematised in the novel, where intra-regional inequalities are added to the North/South divide. Precarity not only opposes different nations but also exacerbates local divisions, leading to the creation of new forms of injustice (McCormack and Salmenniemi 7). The Uruguayan territory is fractured into several risk zones, where precarious bodies are affected by climate disaster differently: city dwellers experience the red winds and environmental degradation first-hand, while those living in more rural regions of the country follow the catastrophe from afar. As the narrator observes, "[p]eople living inland watched the phenomenon on TV, saw the numbers of sick people rising and feared that all those people would one day move back to their clean and safe cities" (Trías 30).[11] Therefore, the population is split between those who are completely exposed, those who are safe, and those who have managed to reach the immune zones (Barrero Bernal 18; Mackey 269). The flow of migration to peripheral regions precisely represents this heterogeneous distribution of vulnerability, which, however, does not remain constant in either time or space: "the red wind that the Prince's phenomenon had brought was so powerful that it was already beginning to reach the first cities of the interior" (Trías 112).[12]

The different economic means of Montevideo's inhabitants also have a considerable impact on their ability to escape environmental disasters. In fact, fleeing the city is experienced differently by people pertaining to separate economic classes: this is evident in the narrator's description of Uruguayan citizens, some of them "buried far from the sea, the rich in their *estancias* or mansions on the hills, the poor overflowing the cities of the interior, the same ones we used to mock as empty, scarce, obtuse" (21).[13] A similar remark appears in the account of the first wave of the red wind, after which "[t]he upper echelons of the state built their houses on the slopes of some tiny hill in the flat, eternal countryside, and from there they began to issue orders" (204).[14] As explained by Barrero Bernal, the first people to be saved from the spread of environmental disasters are those who have the material means to do so, while all the others are left behind (19). Therefore, the chronicle of the desperate exodus of people fleeing Montevideo is a manifestation of how environmental catastrophe interacts with poverty and other pre-existing forms of vulnerability.[15]

Emblematic in this respect is the media coverage of the fire that burns down the meat processing plant, narrated in the last chapters of the story: "We all lose, they said on TV, but I knew better. There were the ones who lost and there were the ones

[11] "Los de adentro miraban el fenómeno por televisión, veían subir las cifras de enfermos y temían que toda esa gente se mudara algún día a sus ciudades limpias y seguras" (Trías 30).
[12] "El viento rojo que había traído el fenómeno del Príncipe era tan potente que ya empezaba a llegar a las primeras ciudades de adentro" (Trías 112).
[13] "sepultados lejos del mar, los ricos en sus estancias o casonas sobre las colinas, los pobres desbordando las ciudades del interior, aquellas mismas de las que antes nos burlábamos por vacías, escasas, obtusas" (Trías 21).
[14] "Los altos mandos del Estado construyeron sus casas en las laderas de alguna diminuta colina del campo chato y eterno, y desde allá comenzaron a dar órdenes" (Trías 204).
[15] See, as a further example, the insistence of the narrator's mother on knowing whether she has earned the money necessary to leave the city (Trías 27; 140).

who could always make it work" (Trías 240-241).[16] Even when an unexpected accident seems to show that every life is precarious and affected by external events, the narrator insists that such vulnerability does not but maintain pre-existing inequalities. Indeed, the novel exhibits examples of wealthy people who manage to increase their profits at the expense of the most defenceless. For instance, the agronomist travels to the city "only to recruit hordes of desperate people in the port and other neighbourhoods, cheap labour that was trucked in" (28).[17] Another example lies in the allusion to a possible waste trade: "I didn't try to guess what could be hidden behind the rubbish business, but I did think of the city as a huge, free zone subject to an ever-changing and mysterious economy" (213).[18]

Not only does *Mugre rosa* distinguish between those who can build a safe new home and those who must hastily abandon their own, but it also mentions the existence of a small group of desperate people who are condemned to live in contact with environmental catastrophe. Abandoned to the effects of catastrophe are those lives deemed expendables, like those of suicides—who "chose to die this way, contaminated, exposed to nameless diseases that did not promise a quick death either" (15)—or homeless people who are simply erased from the urban landscape (211).[19] Indeed, not all bodies are equally vulnerable and there can be forms of wasted lives among those who have already been marginalised. As the novel illustrates, in times of catastrophe the management of environmental disaster and the consequent exposure to toxicity may become a form of biopolitical control. Different degrees of vulnerability emerge even among those who can be considered as the most precarious bodies in the story: those who have been infected by the toxic winds. Of the different types of patients—acute, terminal, chronic—the latter receive special treatment precisely because of their rarity and potential for medical research. As the narrator explains, "according to the ministry, all sick people were worth the same (*Every life is unique*, the new slogan said), but doctors wanted the chronically ill alive much more than the acutely ill or those in quarantine. The chronically ill kept the secret of the algae in them" (Trías 38).[20]

Therefore, the novel illustrates the close interaction between exposure to environmental disaster and other existing forms of vulnerability, delineating an elaborate cartography of catastrophe and precarity. As Barrero Bernal suggests, the narration reveals the ways in which the proliferation of disease determines new

[16] "Todos perdemos, decían en la tele, pero yo sabía que no. Estaban los que perdían y estaban los que siempre podrían arreglarse" (Trías 240-41).
[17] "solo para reclutar hordas de desesperados en el puerto y otros barrios, mano de obra barata que se llevaba en camiones para adentro" (Trías 28).
[18] "no intenté adivinar qué cosa podía esconderse detrás del negocio de la basura, pero sí pensé en la ciudad como una inmensa zona franca sujeta a una economía siempre cambiante y misteriosa" (Trías 213).
[19] "elegían morir así, contaminados, expuestos a enfermedades sin nombre que tampoco auguraban una muerte rápida" (Trías 15).
[20] "Según el ministerio, todos los enfermos valían lo mismo (*Cada vida es única,* decía el nuevo slogan), pero los médicos querían vivos a los crónicos mucho más que a los agudos o a los de cuarentena. Los crónicos guardaban en ellos el secreto de las algas" (Trías 38).

social categories according to the possibilities of immunisation, also portraying the tragic fate of those who try to resist and eventually become residual, abnormal bodies (18). Nonetheless, the true added value of this novel resides precisely in the possibilities offered by a referential reading and the unsettling interplay between reality and fiction. Once again, literature becomes an excellent space to critically observe the present, inscribing contemporary concerns in the fictional realm. Particularly, in *Mugre rosa* Trías incorporates global issues such as environmental disaster and inequality but combines them with the specific local context of Uruguayan social and cultural landscape, emphasising, for instance, the gap between the urban setting and the rural regions, or the nation's problematic dependency on the meat industry—represented here as a monstrous mother (Trías 113). In this way, the novel proposes a change of perspective, situating the point of enunciation at the margins of contemporary centres of power and culture, but precisely in the middle of catastrophe. Digging right into the core of disaster, this displacement exposes the failure of discourses and practices inherent to late capitalism, bringing forward the urgency of rethinking human relationships with others in more ethical, sustainable ways.

Although precarity is mainly portrayed as a systematic form of oppressive control or the abandonment at the mercy of environmental disaster, in this space of vulnerability also lies the potential for resistance and transgression. Trías undertakes this project in ways that surpass the scope of this article, for example in the representation of the narrator's network of relationships. Even though social dynamics echo Hobbesian *homo homini lupus*, and the narrator's familial bonds are mostly dysfunctional, the evolution in the relationship with Mauro suggests a glimmer of hope. As McCormack and Salmenniemi propose, "[b]ringing together precarity and biopolitics raises questions around care for the self and responsibility for others" (10). What was at first seen as a mere job by the narrator becomes with time almost a vocation: behind the unconditional care also lies an attempt to rehumanise a child elsewhere perceived as monstrous. Although this possibility is not realised within the novel itself, as the dramatic ending shows, the complex relationship with Mauro emphasises the importance of mutual care within a system that thrives on precarity, suggesting that in such an alienating society the lack of language or affection may blur the boundaries of the human (Amaro 24). Relationality, as McCormack and Salmenniemi argue, is not "about our humanness as such, but about how ethical responsibility can be thought through our inter- and intra-relationality with human, environmental and animal others, and other others" (6).

We Are Such Stuff as the Environment is Made of

As I have argued above, precarity in the context of catastrophe not only exposes the human to violence and oppression but also entails the potential for the ethical rethinking of our identity and inter-relationality. Although the novel seems to

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deny any possibility of resistance within the diegesis, this is instead performed on a symbolic level. In this section, I focus on corporeal vulnerability, represented in the novel by the outbreak of a terrible disease, discussing how the apparent destruction of the human body favours the deconstruction of certain pillars of contemporary thought, pointing toward a more responsible coexistence with the environment. As previously stated, the notion of precariousness indicates first and foremost a more physical type of vulnerability, defined by Butler as injurability (*Precarious Life* xii). It is precisely our bodily dimension that is exposed to the other, be it another human, a nonhuman being or a thing. In a culture based on the idea of the individual and Cartesian mind/body dualism, which in turn is reflected in dichotomies such as nature/culture, considering the human in the light of its precariousness challenges the assumptions underlying our self-representation, showing that "there is no human without those networks of life within which human life is but one sort of life" (Puar 173). This change of paradigm requires a shift away from an anthropocentric view, in which the environment constitutes a mere background to human actions or nature is at the service of a superior master, to recognise how being alive means in the first place to be situated in the centre of a web of relationships that exceeds any possible conception of individuality and humanity.

This problematic interconnectedness between human and nonhuman beings emerges as one of the cornerstones of *Mugre rosa*, in which the dramatic dystopian scenario foreshadows a conflicted coexistence with the natural, at least in the forms envisioned within a society based on unrestrained consumption. Such incompatibility appears in the comparison between the fictional catastrophe and the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster, where "there were more animals than ever before, and even endangered ones had reproduced thanks to the absence of humans. My mother did not interpret this as irony, but—again—as the triumph of life over death. –*Human*, Mom. Over human death" (Trías 23).[21] This passage is emblematic in that it underlines how the primacy of the human has disrupted the balanced web of relationships on which life—the life of all beings—is based. Invoking the extreme claims of deep ecology, the narrator's statement encourages a change of perspective, implying that sometimes, precisely because of its destructive impact, it is not human life but life in general that thrives.

At the same time, the mesh in which humans, nonhumans and things are entangled is discovered to be a fundamental part of existence (see Morton 15). In the destroyed city,

> [n]othing could be heard any more. The silence was painful. Who could have imagined the auditory void of a city without insects, without buzzing, but also without horns, without the slow buffeting of a lift or the murmur of distant voices, without everything artificial that—I now understand—was what we called life. (Trías 213)[22]

[21] "había más animales que nunca, y hasta los que estaban en peligro de extinción se habían reproducido gracias a la ausencia de humanos. Mi madre no lo interpretó como una ironía, sino—otra vez—como el triunfo de la vida sobre la muerte. –*Humana,* mamá. Sobre la muerte humana" (Trías 23).
[22] "Nada se oía ya. El silencio era doloroso. Quién podría haber imaginado el hueco auditivo de una ciudad sin insectos, sin zumbidos, pero también sin bocinas, sin el bufido lento de un ascensor o el

Here, life emerges as a dense web of relationships, which involve different forms of materiality, agency and subjectivity, echoing the zoe/geo/techno assemblage described by Braidotti (44). The sudden disappearance of life in its most diverse forms—be it animal, social, or technological—leads to the recognition of the system of relationships that sustains existence on this planet. Thus, the emergence of life and the coexistence of different beings can be described according to an interactionist ontology, comprehensively discussed by Tuana (188). In this sense, Trías's novel constitutes not only a tale about a catastrophic future but also a space to explore "the material, affective, human and nonhuman relationships and interactions that make up the 'mesh' in our troubling times" (Vázquez-Medina, "Vibrancy" 8).

The complex entanglement of forces is also mirrored in the absence of a clear underlying cause of the environmental disaster. The unspecified origin of catastrophe within the storyline can be interpreted through the lens of the essential characteristics of the Anthropocene. What emerges in the novel is the representation of an epoch in which human and nonhuman, social and natural agencies seem to blend. I draw here on Tuana's reading of the Hurricane Katrina tragedy, which also problematises the separation between what is natural and what is provoked by human activity. According to Tuana, "these 'natural phenomena' are result of human activities […] But these activities themselves are fueled by […] a solid belief that economic success and independence is determined in part by access to and consumption of goods" (193). It would be impossible to determine one specific source of the catastrophe, since it is exactly the combination of different forms of agencies which results in a climate disaster.

Therefore, even if the actual forces represented in the novel are natural (the waves of red winds, the proliferation of toxic algae or the animal mutations), the catastrophe depicted in *Mugre rosa* reveals the profound interaction between social practices and natural phenomena, which points to the mutual dependency among not-just-human beings and the exposure to forces that are beyond our control. Within the novel, ambiguity becomes a strategic narrative choice illustrative of the ways in which catastrophe enters the literary space not only thematically, but also aesthetically and formally. Specifically, literature must find new ways to depict and inhabit spaces of vulnerability that reflect the insecurity, anxiety, and instability intrinsic to our times. This aspect is evident in the narrator's persistent search for the *comienzo*, the beginning of her own story and the catastrophe. As she admits, "[w]hat we mistake for the beginning is only the moment when we understand that things have changed. One day the fish appeared; that was a beginning" (Trías 45).[23]

In the novel, the possibility of a clear division between the human and the environment is mainly questioned by the textual representation of the ill body. I argue that the disease portrayed in *Mugre rosa* not only underscores corporeal fragility, but

murmullo de voces lejanas, sin todo lo artificial que—ahora entiendo—era lo que llamábamos vida" (Trías 213).

[23] "Lo que confundimos con el comienzo es solo el momento en que entendemos que las cosas han cambiado. Un día aparecieron los peces; ese fue un comienzo" (Trías 45).

also challenges many classic dichotomies which are foundational to the modern conception of the human, such as self/other, outside/inside, human/environment. Analogous to the causes of the environmental disaster, the origin of the disease is not made explicit within the narrative either. What results evident, however, is the predominant role of the wind in the propagation of the disease. Air, one of the elements essential to human existence, becomes in the novel the main factor of its dissolution. The most frightening aspect of this illness is precisely its apparent imperceptible and unpredictable character.

The precarity of the lives of those in contact with the disease is expressed by the narrator herself, as she recalls a particular day she went for a walk along the rambla: "[t]he winds were still calm. How long could the calm last? Every war had its truce, even this one whose enemy was invisible" (Trías 16).[24] Besides being difficult to predict—the citizens of Montevideo live in constant fear of hearing the siren sounding announcing the start of a storm—this danger holds threats because of its immateriality, and thus its ability to infiltrate even through the smallest crack. As the protagonist recounts, "[t]he wind could slip through even the narrowest of cracks and some woke up in the midst of a stinging, acid whirlwind" (81).[25] Moreover, as highlighted by Vázquez-Medina, the wind is depicted in the novel as a material force endowed with its own agency, "reflected in the descriptions of the epidemic's multi-scalar effects—which range from individual bodies to the social, economic, and ecological spheres" ("Vibrancy" 10). Therefore, the precarious bodies described in the novel are subjected to further violence that only exacerbates their vulnerability, making clear the impossibility of controlling nature and the profound connection with the surrounding environment, even when this is invisible and intangible.

Further remarks can be made in relation to an Argentinian novel that, like *Mugre ros*a, explores the interaction between human and non-human in the context of anthropogenic shaping of the planet: *Distancia de rescate* (2014) by Samanta Schweblin. Like Schweblin's, Trías's work reflects on the interconnectedness underpinning our embodied experience, signalling through the representation of illness "the permeability of bodies and consciousness, the continuity between human and nonhuman bodies, and the permeation of conceptual categories" (Vázquez-Medina, "Samanta Schweblin's" 11). The ecosystem depicted in *Mugre rosa* becomes emblematic of what Stacy Alaimo defines as *transcorporeality*, that is the intimate implication of human, non-human or more-than-human bodies in each other's existence (238). In the novel, the breakout of an uncontrollable disease and the involvement of the wind in its propagation display the transcorporeal interconnectedness which exposes us as vulnerable beings. The ubiquitous character of air and its capacity to penetrate our bodies call attention to the fact that nature not only surrounds us but is also inextricably entwined with us. The distinction between

[24] "Los vientos seguían tranquilos. ¿Cuánto podía durar la calma? Toda guerra tenía su tregua, incluso esta cuyo enemigo era invisible" (Trías 16).
[25] "El viento podía colarse hasta por la rendija más angosta y algunos despertaban en medio de un remolino picante y ácido" (Trías 81).

self and other, human and nature, represents a mere illusion since "what constitutes the proper 'me' is already shot through with otherness" (Shildrick 276).

The challenge to the image of the body as a unified and unchanging entity is further intensified by the description of the symptomatology of the disease. The affected bodies of both humans and animals become the visible manifestation of an economic and cultural system grounded on indifference to our essential interconnectedness. Therefore, it is worth examining the numerous accounts of the illness present in the text. As the narrator explains, contact with the toxic wind provokes symptoms like those of common flu—cough, weakness and general discomfort (Trías 81). Furthermore, this illness causes the progressive loss of the skin, which traditionally represents the border between the self and the environment. The segments of the text pertaining to the disease expose this painful process in minute detail, as exemplified by the dialogue between the protagonist and a taxi driver who met a contaminated, flayed man during one of his rides (31).

The main effect of the disaster narrated in the novel is the destruction of human skin, the membrane that supposedly separates the individual from the rest of the world. The depiction of a body deprived of the epidermis is reiterated in the numerous descriptions of Max, who appears in the mind of the protagonist as "skinned, the skin torn, ripped, splitting open to expose the flesh" (32) and "prostrate and emaciated, the skin limp and yellow" (35).[26] These disturbing images exemplify the vulnerability of the human and their unconditional exposure to the other. Furthermore, the complete disintegration of the most external layer of the body represents momentaneous access to a different form of relationship with what surrounds us. The destruction of the skin allows those who have been infected to feel everything "a flor de piel" (32), an expression commonly used to denote an increased sensibility. Despite the pain caused by the disease, the progressive loss of skin represents a radical change in the perception of the world, in which humans and the environment come into contact in an unmediated manner.

Such corporeal exposure makes explicit that human bodies are not autonomous and impermeable, but rather porous and variable. The erosion of skin caused by the wind exposes our mutual vulnerability and instantiates the encounter between "my flesh and the flesh of the world" (Tuana 199). Rethinking the limits of the human body resonates in the conception of skin as a place of encounter and not as a site of division, which is illustrated in the narrator's memories related to her ex-husband. As she recounts,

> [Max] could walk on thistles, withstand mosquito bites without scratching, and stand still in the sun until his shoulders turned purple. Then his back would peel, and I would peel off the transparent layers of skin, revealing another, newer, redder skin. I would say to him: do you realise that this skin never touched the air? My fingers, my own skin was what I was touching for the first time. (Trías 122)[27]

[26] "despellejado, la piel desgarrada, hendida, abriéndose para exponer la carne" (Trías 32) and "prostrado y enflaquecido, la piel floja y amarilla" (Trías 35).

[27] "[Max] podía caminar sobre abrojos, soportar sin rascarse la picadura de los mosquitos y quedarse quieto bajo el sol hasta que los hombros se le ponían morados. Después la espalda se le pelaba y yo arrancaba las capas de piel transparentes que dejaban al descubierto otra, más nueva y más roja. Le

Again, the partial loss of skin and the exposure to the other—be it the narrator's hand or the gentle touch of air—manifest the vulnerability of human existence and its constant interaction with other forms of life. This quotation also echoes Haraway's question "Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" (75), which claims a new representation of the human and underscores fundamental aspects as porosity, interconnectedness, and vulnerability. While the novel depicts a dystopian future where the human will hardly find any form of salvation or redemption, its potential is disclosed through the apocalyptic dimension, where the end of the world (as we know it) entails an unsettling revelation. The progressive destruction of the body will not save the human trapped in the diegetic world, since the progressive loss of skin will eventually lead to the dead of those who have been infected. It invites, however, to a drastic rethinking of the boundaries and ideas that sustain the concept of the human, pointing toward a posthuman, inter-relational identity.

Conclusions

In *Mugre rosa*, the portrayal of a catastrophic future provides the framework for reflection on a series of dynamics specific to our times, in which exposure to environmental disaster has become a further tool within the biopolitics of precariousness. The novel comprehensively illustrates how precarity is not evenly distributed, but rather traces existing inequalities, exacerbating the vulnerable condition of those who are already precarious. Especially, a critical reading in which the fictional city is identified with Montevideo offers numerous, fruitful insights to discuss contemporary forms of inequality and vulnerability. First, the cartography of catastrophe that emerges from the story illustrates the gap between those countries where environmental disaster is a dire, future prospect and those where it is already a reality, emphasising how the consequences of late capitalist practices do not only affect supposedly modern and developed countries, but also all those places that have been exploited and abandoned to themselves. Moreover, the novel reveals how global issues always interact with specifically local dynamics and other forms of precarity, problematising the experience of catastrophe *in* and *from* the margins.

Through this displacement of perspective in the experience of precarity and exposure to environmental disaster, *Mugre rosa* offers a fictional space where to inhabit vulnerability and insecurity, while stressing the urgency of reconsidering our relationship with the planet and its inhabitants in more equitable and sustainable ways. Indeed, the vulnerability experienced in a time such as the Anthropocene not only constitutes a moment of profound crisis and instability, but also offers an excellent space from which to enquire into this precarious situation, to propose alternative, dissident, non-hegemonic ways of thinking our identity and our position

decía: ¿te das cuenta de que esta piel nunca tocó el aire? Mis dedos, mi propia piel eran lo que tocaba por primera vez" (Trías 122).

in the world. Although the novel offers an ambiguous and desolate narrative, which ends with the protagonist abandoning her city, *Mugre rosa* carries an important provocation. Through the portrayal of a disease that slowly erodes the skin of the city's dwellers, Trías inscribes in the materiality of the bodies themselves a critique of Western conceptions of the human and contemporary representations of their embodied experience. The textual depiction of illness brings forward the idea that there are no distinct bodies; rather, we are all connected regardless of our will. The dissolution of skin—the barrier separating the human from his surroundings—calls for a reconsideration of the discourses that have placed the individual at the centre of the cosmos, foregrounding instead the inescapable web of relationships that connects and sustains every form of life.

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